

# PADLOCKS ON LITERACY: LANGUAGE VS. VERNACULAR MEANING

STEVEN WANG

From a young age, language was the tool of my trade, and I spent much of my life considering the power it held, the images it created, the emotions it evoked, the ideas it complicated. But before my first day of preschool, my Chinese mother told me something that would forever change my language, my *zhongwen*:

“Teacher at school help you with anything, no say *xiexie*, speak *thank you*. Bite on tongue for ‘th.’ Yes no say *ye-seu*, and *lotion* no say *loo-shin*. I don’t like *meiguo haizhimen* to make fun you.”

I nodded, though soon discovered that this would be easier said than done. The names on the cubbies, the anxious parents, my teacher’s first words in class... I mean, I could barely even understand Marissa’s temper tantrum in the other corner. English (no, *yingwen*) was something so incomprehensible to me, and while I remember other classmates getting teased for the way they spoke, I realized that, at the very least, they understood. They knew *yingwen*, when I knew nothing.

I am now a *University Writing* student, an essayist who is fluent but perhaps a bit ashamed to say that *yingwen* feels closer and closer to English each day. The fingers on my hands transformed from *yi dao shi* to one through ten. Meanwhile, I molded and kneaded myself into “Steven,” since *Luofan* (my real name) was too difficult to pronounce. The very *zhongwen* that inhabited my thoughts was replaced by an understudy I never intended to play the role. But the scary part: he was great at it. He got me friends, he got me grades, he got me into this college. He was *qiangda*, powerful, *mingzhi*, and exceedingly clever. He insidiously weaved his way into my life, as I let him strip my *zhongwen* identity away. But why wouldn’t I? As an American, *yingwen* was the *da’an*: the answer to my isolation.

I write this essay not to denounce *yingwen*’s entry into my life but to explain my response to the persistent debate on linguistic diversity in education. As a quadrilingual son of immigrants and now a linguistics major, I became a staunch supporter of linguistic diversity, despite being infected by *yingwen* throughout the years. While my mother always told me to blend in with the *meiguo haizhimen*, I prayed that someday students like me wouldn’t have to. And given the democratic ethos and liberal politics that inform our educational sphere, most teachers would probably agree, stating that “Yes, we accept everyone!” But in my experience, this is often accompanied by an unspoken caveat: “As long as we enforce *yingwen* over the non-standard.”

However, I begin my commentary with the egalitarian vision in mind: bring linguistic diversity into classrooms and mesh our divisive worlds into one. In part, I

echo what certain scholars have suggested for decades and now refer to as code-meshing, a style of blending vernaculars into standard English in the classroom. In “Casualties of Literacy,” the fifth chapter of his book *Your Average N\*\*\*\*: Performing Race Literacy and Masculinity*, Vershawn Ashanti Young views it as so essential to the success of many Black students he must “ask how *not* code-meshing” (Young 111). To make a case for code-meshing Black English vernacular (BEV) with standard English (Young’s *yingwen*), Young recalls a disagreement with a colleague named Diane, a fellow Black instructor in favor of linguistic assimilation. Young explains that Diane not only disagrees with him, but in fact, claims that Young himself is an “an example” (107) of an assimilated Black man who is able to integrate into predominantly white institutions through his use of “formal” English, which she uses to discredit his approach of code-meshing (110). However, Young fervently disagrees with Diane’s use of his example as universal proof that the “traditional best practices” work (110) and rejects “Diane’s belief because it surrenders to prejudice” (108).

I read Young’s chapter nodding in agreement with him. Yet at the same time, as a second-generation immigrant and Spanish learner and speaker myself, I hadn’t expected to also relate so profoundly with Richard Rodriguez’s experiences, an author and intellectual Young disagrees with so much that he equates Diane’s conclusions directly to Rodriguez’s. In “Aria,” the first chapter of his autobiography *The Hunger for Memory*, Rodriguez vividly recounts his upbringing as a Spanish-speaking *immigrante Mexicano* in an English-speaking *sociedad blanca* as a critique of bilingual education. Growing up, Rodriguez’s family spoke *Español*, which created a sense of intimacy amidst “the experience of feeling apart from *los gringos*” (Rodriguez 16). He emphasizes how his family’s language *y palabras privadas* held not only textbook definitions but sound *y poder*, emotional “belong[ing]” and “relat[ions]” that made Spanish sacred (18). But most importantly, he illuminates how bringing *el idioma privado* into *el público* “reinforces feelings of public separateness,” and he even cites BEV (34). As opposed to Young, however, Rodriguez advocates assimilating the student in a way that makes him or her feel *enough* for the public. His meticulous use of anecdotes with “*inglés*” and “*los gringos*” surprisingly mirrored my experiences with *yingwen* and the *meiguo haizimen*, making Rodriguez ever more persuasive (13, 16). He left me empathetic and contemplative: *¿Es posible que la asimilación tenga la capacidad de cerrar la fisura entre nuestra nacionalidad y nuestra sangre?*

Now, perhaps the issue arises when I empathize with both Young *and* Rodriguez. Sure, the history of “grotesque caricature[s]” that “evidence black inferiority” during Reconstruction already proves how the weaponization of BEV is incontrovertible and a radical reintegration is necessary (Young 116-117). But the infiltration of “visitors” *públicos* (Rodriguez 21) into *la privada* and the transformation of Rodriguez to “*Road-ree-guess*” (27) also prove how linguistic integration strips a sense of cultural identity. The presence of two opposing yet valid status quos is the scholarly problem that we as readers must undertake, but how might we approach this dissonance?

Victor Villanueva—another scholarly opponent of Richard Rodriguez and author of “Whose Voice is it Anyway?”—provides a new distinction to view this situation. Villanueva differentiates the immigrant, someone who “cho[oses]” to leave a home country, from the minority, someone who was “forcibl[y] displace[d]” and “coloniz[ed]” (18). With this distinction, Villanueva demonstrates that Rodriguez’s argument addresses the immigrant but ignores how “the immigrant could enter where the minority could not” (20). What Villanueva provides us is the possibility to consider Rodriguez as the immigrant and Young as the minority. But what does this mean for Rodriguez and Young linguistically?

My father always believed in the difference between immigrants and minorities. He was an old-fashioned Chinese immigrant who, despite the barrier of *yingwen*, was a studious engineer. But in his first few years in America, my father realized that his coworkers, who were largely Indian, spoke differently from him. Their syllabic rhythms and harsh “d”s and “t”s were prominent, but as minorities colonized by the British, they understood English perfectly, despite an altered vernacular. My father could only laugh: “Us immigrants, *women bu yiyang a* (we’re so different)! My coworkers speak a *fangyan*, a regional variation. We speak something brand new, no need compare, *la*.”

And perhaps I think about that last line a lot: “no need compare.” It reminds me of my first day of preschool, and the Black and brown kids who spoke differently but understood. I think that if my father read these three pieces, he would take Villanueva one step further, claiming that the immigrant and minority also coincide with a difference between language and vernacular. What does this mean? Well, Young argues for a *bi-vernacular* education and Rodriguez against *bilingual* education, so why must we fight head to head? Why are we creating “monolithic solutions” for different concepts (Young 111)? All I can do is laugh with my dad: “*Women bu yiyang a!*” “No need compare.”

I want to emphasize that, for the most part, we ought to praise Young’s side: Vernacular meshing is already a growing practice in modern pedagogy, and, perhaps, it’s working. But we have to realize that Young imports a fallacy into his argument. As a Black man, Young is a master of the BEV experience. What, however, does he really have to say about *la experiencia de un inmigrante Mexicano*? When Young states that “Rodriguez’s claim” is similar to “Diane[’s],” he clashes two worlds, comparing Rodriguez to Diane without considering their important differences (Young 110). This is not to say I fully agree with Rodriguez either. In fact, he imports the same *conflación*. Rodriguez extends his scope to include “black English” as something “inappropriate in classrooms” (33). Similar to Young, he considers the BEV debate in the context of his own *mundo* and attaches harsh labels of “inappropriate[ness]” (Rodriguez 33). This game of back-and-forth between Young and Rodriguez misses the point. Villanueva’s framework emphasizes how the Latino immigrant and Black minority *narrativos* cannot be fairly weighed against each other—and my father would have to agree.

We've made it this far, but how do we apply this distinction to how we educate? As an emerging linguist and *yingwen*-speaker, I have long pondered how we shift the paradigm. For Young, it seems easy: "Why should we expect anything different than hybrid speech and writing that mixes dialects anyway?" (121). We allow students to bring their mutually intelligible vernacular to the table, acknowledging how it has communicative power and *liliang* in its own right. This is the easier step. But we know it's *not* and *cannot* be the same for all languages. We cannot just blindly throw *Español* or *zhongwen* into the classroom and have educators learn them both. There is simply not enough time in the day. Even Villanueva agrees with Rodriguez that, in many ways, "bilingualism [or multilingualism] in the classroom [is] impractical" (20). But we can't segregate either; that "speaks of who's right and who's wrong, who holds the power" (Villanueva 21). Rather, we need to realize that language meshing cannot be integrated so easily but still can be through training and techniques from educators.

What does this look like? Well, one goal as an educator is to create a space where a non-English background does not inculcate a sense of original sin, where we don't "refash[ion] [students] into what" "the 'marketplace' demands" (Young 112). We have to take active steps to give power to *las diferencias*. We can't make assimilation about the replacement of language anymore. I personally relate to Rodriguez because, as a child, I wanted to fit in so badly that I misconstrued my dwindling *zhongwen* as a noble sacrifice. "There [was] more to assimilati[on] than learning the language," but a hijacking of my brain (Villanueva 19). I grew up within the rigidity of standard English, unable to even imagine that I would write a bilingual text such as this essay. But, we need to teach coexistence on the page, where we don't omit Gloria Anzaldúa or Amy Tan from the curriculum, and where *effective* language meshing is not swept under the formalisms of academia.

For monolingual educators, vernacular meshing might be within reach, but language meshing appears a daunting task. But rather than building a curriculum that teaches students how to speak and write their family's linguistic codes, all we want is for educators to teach how to investigate these codes to challenge hierarchies of power. And they don't need to be multilingual to do this.

Educators must not assume in us a deficiency in *yingwen* but encourage and recognize how we already engage in different linguistic codes, especially those disenfranchised by the standard. While Villanueva notes that Rodriguez wants "to be sensitive" and "forget about doing anything special," we can't just "sensitiv[ely]" stop in our tracks (Villanueva 17). It is not practical to give in to "inevitable pain" and allow *yingwen* to infect our lives the way it did in my youth (Rodriguez 27). For language, it's not about giving students "pen and paper" nor naïvely conflating it with vernacular as Young and Rodriguez do; rather, it is encouraging *y* providing examples of writing where we all understand-*nos* in *tebiede* and profoundly various ways, where our linguistic *diferencias no expanden* but guide our *shengyin*, our voices, to display the rich and *shenkede* backgrounds they contain (Villanueva 21). At first, it might sound a little crooked. It

might even seem a bit messy. But it's time for more educators to extend these theories to practice: It's time to remove the padlocks on our literacy.

---

## WORKS CITED

- Rodriguez, Richard, and Richard Rodriguez. "Aria." *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*. David R. Godine, Boston, MA, 1982, pp. 11–40.
- Villanueva, Victor. "Whose Voice Is It Anyway? Rodriguez' Speech in Retrospect." *The English Journal*, vol. 76, no. 8, 1987, pp. 17–21, <https://doi.org/10.2307/819404>.
- Young, Vershawn Ashanti. "Casualties of Literacy." *Your Average N\*\*\*\*: Performing Race, Literacy, and Masculinity*. Edited by Vershawn Ashanti Young. Wayne State University Press, Detroit, MI, 2007, pp. 105–123.

---

**STEVEN WANG '25CC** is studying both Computer Science and Linguistics. Growing up as the only son of Chinese immigrants in suburban Minneapolis, he is passionate about foreign language learning and the intersections between technology and language. Wang is an associate developer of the engineering team at the *Columbia Daily Spectator* and works part-time at the *Columbia Law Review*. He can speak Mandarin Chinese, Spanish, Korean, and a bit of Czech.