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Ask or aks? How linguistic prejudice perpetuates inequality



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 8 min read

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Teacher and artist [Sunn M'Cheaux](#) has been posting on social media about “linguicism” after a reader asked him about the word “ax”, saying: “Why did we struggle saying ‘ask’? Like when I was little, I always said ‘ax’. Like I couldn’t say the word correctly.”

M'Cheaux’s [response](#) counters the common idea that “ax” (spelled also “aks”) is incorrect: “ax” isn’t a mispronunciation of “ask” but an alternative pronunciation. This is similar to how people might pronounce “economics” variously as “eck-onomics” or “eek-onomics”, for example. Neither of these pronunciations is wrong. They’re just different.

Linguicism is an idea invented by human-rights activist and linguist [Tove Skutnabb-Kangas](#) to describe discrimination based on language or dialect. The prejudice around “aks” is an example of linguicism.

[Decades of research](#) shows that the idea that any variation from [standard English](#) is incorrect (or, worse, unprofessional or uneducated) is a smokescreen for prejudice. Linguicism can have serious consequences by worsening existing socio-economic and racial inequalities.

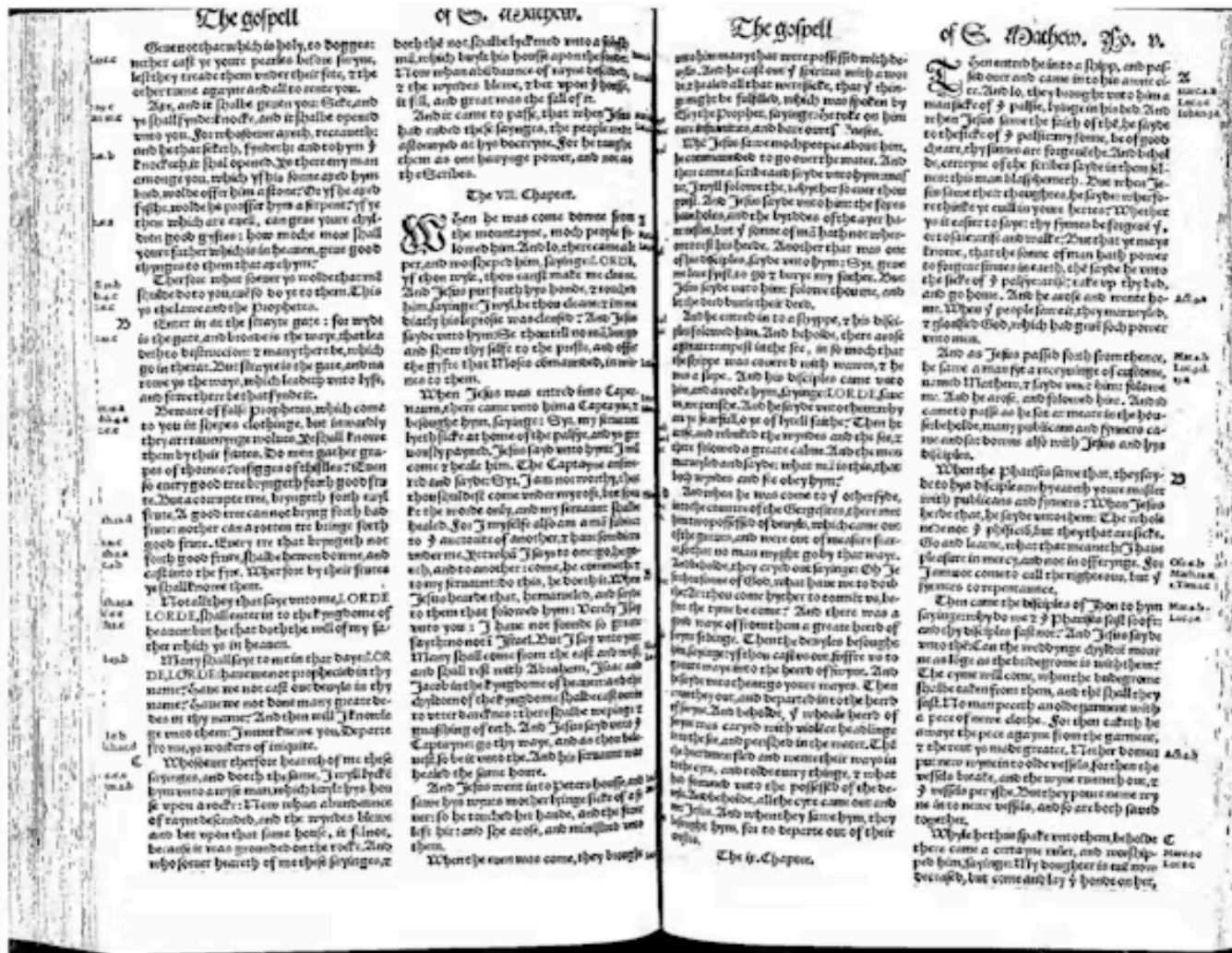


Pegging “ax” as a mark of laziness or ignorance presumes that saying “aks” is easier than saying “ask”. If this were the case, we would – and we never do – hear “desk”, “flask” and “pesky” pronounced “deks”, “flaks” and “peksy”.

The “s” and “k” being interchanged in “aks” and “ask” is an instance of what linguists call **metathesis** – a process which is very common. For example, wasp used to be pronounced “**waps**” but the former has now become the go-to word. Many of the pronunciations bemoaned as “wrong” are in fact just examples of **language changing**.

“Aks” has origins in Old English and Germanic over a millennium ago, when it was a formal written form. In the first English Bible – the Coverdale Bible, from 1535 – Matthew 7:7 was written as “Axe and it shall be given you”, with royal approval.

Beyond written English, “aks” was also the typical pronunciation in England’s south and in the Midlands. “Ask”, meanwhile, was more prevalent in the north and it is the latter that became the standard pronunciation.



Contemporary prevalence

In North America, “aks” (or “ax”) was widely used in New England and the southern and middle states. In the late 19th century, however, it became stereotyped as exclusive to African American English, in which it remains prevalent. American linguist John McWhorter considers it an “integral part of being a black American”.

Today, “aks” is also found in UK varieties of English, including Multicultural London English. This dialect, spoken mainly by people from ethnic minority backgrounds, came about through contact between different dialects of English and immigrant languages, including Caribbean Creoles, such as Jamaican Creole.

Multicultural London English was initially referred to in the media in a derogatory fashion as “Jafaican”. That label wrongly reduced the dialect to something imitated or used inauthentically.

Other languages have, of course, influenced Multicultural London English. But the English language has been in a constant state of flux for millennia, precisely as a result of contact with other languages. When we talk about “salad”, “beef” or the “government” we are not imitating French, despite the French origin of these words. They have simply become English words. In the same way, Multicultural London English is a fully formed dialect in its own right and “aks”, as with any other pronunciation in this and other English dialects, is in no way wrong.

Linguistic prejudice

Accents or dialects have no logical or scientific claim to “correctness”. Instead, any prestige of which they might boast derives from being spoken by high-status groups.

Many people now wag their finger at the word “ain’t” or at people dropping the “g”, rendering words like “running” as “runnin’”, and “jumping” as “jumpin’”. In, 2020, British home secretary Priti Patel bore the brunt of this mistaken criticism, when journalist Alastair Campbell tweeted, “I don’t want a Home Secretary who can’t pronounce a G at the end of a word.”

Criticisms of “dropping g” exist despite the pronunciation’s origins in Middle English, and not to mention the fact that well into the 20th century, the British upper classes spoke in this way too. This



Now that “dropping g” is stereotyped as working class, however, it is stigmatised as wrong.

[Research shows](#) that linguistic prejudices, however unintentional, against immigrant, non-standard and regional dialects have held back generations of children from achieving their best in school and, of course, beyond it.

Schoolchildren who naturally say “aks” (or any other non-standard form of English) are tasked with the extra burden of distinguishing between how they speak and how they are [expected](#) to write. Conversely, no such barrier is faced by children who grow up speaking standard English at home, which can further entrench inequality. These children are already advantaged in other ways as they tend to come from high-status groups.

The way we speak has real implications in how we are perceived. [Research](#) in south-east England found that young adults from working-class or from ethnic minority backgrounds tend to be judged as [less intelligent](#) than others – a prejudice based solely on the way they spoke. The effect was worsened if the person was from Essex or London, or even if they were thought to have an accent from these places.

The example of “aks” neatly demonstrates the absurdity, the baselessness and, crucially, the pernicious impact of deeming any one form of English to be “correct”. Accent prejudice and linguisticism is a reframing of prejudice towards low-status groups who, simply, speak differently.

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Dr Jeffries is an expert in sociolinguistics, with a particular focus on regional accent variation.

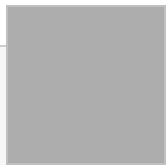
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Professor Patrick's research interests include language variation and change, language testing of asylum seekers, African (American) diaspora languages, and Pidgin and Creole linguistics.

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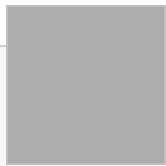


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