

# Teaching Other Tongues

## *Addressing the Problem of “Other” Languages in the Library*

---

Emily Drabinski

---

### Abstract

How do we teach students to successfully navigate library language systems (e.g., our Boolean syntax, controlled vocabularies, and Aristotelian classification schemes) without simultaneously re-inscribing the notion that some languages (ours) are right while other languages (theirs) are wrong? Drawing on contact zone theory and work on language equity in Composition Studies, this article suggests a reorientation of library instruction away from teaching the particulars of library language and toward teaching library research as a process of struggle and translation at the site of the database search interface. As advocates for equitable access to information, such an approach promises to invite users into our discourse without the accompanying demand that they abandon their own discursive realities at our classroom doors.

Language — the words we use, our syntax and our grammar — is always deployed in a context. We might refer to a collective group as *y'all* in one context (casually, among friends) but simply as *you* in another. When students enter our library instruction classrooms, they also enter a new discursive context, this one marked by Boolean syntax, arcane controlled vocabularies, and Aristotelian classification structures that divide the universe of knowledge in ways foreign to the naïve user. For example, nothing about using Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) or SocINDEX database descriptors is natural, nor is the use of *and* and *or* as formal structures. Students who seek use of



---

Journal of Information Ethics / DOI: 10.3172/JIE.20.2.42 / Volume 20, Number 2 /  
Fall 2011 / pp. 42–55 / ISSN 1061-9321 (Print) / ISSN 1941-2894 (Online) /  
© 2011 McFarland & Company, Inc.

---

library resources inevitably must learn to navigate these strange new linguistic worlds.

Library instructors must balance the demand to teach students how to search successfully in these formal linguistic contexts against a desire to respect the languages and modes of thought students bring from elsewhere into the classroom. As advocates for equity of access to materials, librarians must negotiate the realities of dominant, standard structures of language and organization—often our discursive homes—with the diversity of linguistic and cognitive approaches of our students. These politically and ethically impelled negotiations require us to teach library research as a context in which language struggles take place, rather than as an arena where some words and phrases are simply and acontextually *correct*. Indeed, when students are taught that only one language variety is “correct,” instructors consciously and unconsciously reinscribe systems of linguistic dominance that allocate access, opportunity, and reward unevenly among social groups.

Composition Studies has long explored this difficult balancing act. In the pages that follow, this article articulates the work done by composition scholars to understand and politicize the problem of multiple discourses in the classroom, as well as conceptualize a potential solution. Rather than arguing for or against the use of different language varieties, Composition Studies has used the concept of the contact zone to imagine the classroom as a space of dialogic struggle where no single language is “better” or “correct.” Instead, the classroom and the blank page become sites of interpretive struggle for meaning.

Following this discussion of the contact zone in the writing classroom, I suggest that teaching librarians might re-conceptualize the contact zone in our own field. Library advocacy work on the problem of standardized language has primarily worked to perfect and change that standard language so that it better reflects a pluralist embrace of the language of our users. While a vital part of an ethical linguistic practice, the focus on “correcting” library language reinscribes the idea that any language can ever be “correct” outside the context of its use. Curiously, the library field has paid less attention to conceptualizing the concrete spaces in which these linguistic struggles take place: the search boxes inside our databases and OPACs. Particularly when we teach students to grapple with their own vocabulary and the controlled vocabularies of library resources, we are already teaching in a contact zone. By articulating and conceptualizing a concept of the database search interface as a contact zone, this article suggests that teaching librarians might work to interrupt the power of dominant language and knowledge schemes rather than re-inscribe them as correct through our teaching practice. In deploying a critical approach to the contact zone, library instruction can be a site of productive struggle between our users and the dominant discursive systems we might all seek to change.

## Language Varieties in the College Classroom

Students entering college for the first time are entering more than just new physical facilities. They also enter new discursive communities. One of the primary roles of college teaching is to introduce students to these particular discourses. As David Bartholomae writes in "Inventing the University," "the student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community" (3). These habits of reading, writing, and thinking in the academy require competence and no small ease with Standard English, the language of the contemporary United States classroom.

All students entering college encounter new discourses. However, for students whose home language is not Standard English, the difficulty of adapting to and engaging in these new discourses can be especially challenging. Not only must students learn the rhetorical strategies Bartholomae identifies, but they must also learn to employ them by using Standard English. While one could certainly know, select, evaluate, report, conclude, or argue in any language, doing so in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or Jamaican Creole will likely meet with some degree of disapprobation from most college teachers. From the standpoint of advocates for language equity across race, class, immigrant status, and geographic location (among other determining factors of the version of English a student might bring to the classroom), languages are not good or bad, better or worse; languages are simply value-neutral constructions that enable communities of people to communicate with one another. For student writing in the college classroom, however, this respect for linguistic diversity is often denied, struck through with the instructor's red pen.

Standard English, a global language of power, is brought to the US classroom most proficiently by students who carry other markers of the dominant power structure: middle- to upper-class, often white, from traditionally well-resourced private and public schools. Their language is heavily rewarded and deemed "correct" while speakers of other varieties of English are taught that their home language is inherently mistaken. Varieties like AAVE are commonly "taught out" of students and symbolically violently erased by teachers who focus on correctness, as seen to be the pure domain of Standard English. Keith Gilyard describes this painful process as one of being "torn between institutions, between value systems" and concludes that "the eradication of one tongue is not prerequisite to the learning of a second" (160).

Composition Studies teachers face a difficult challenge. One can both be an advocate for linguistic diversity and recognize that students must be critically equipped to choose to speak and write Standard English when use of that variety can lead to employment, education, political participation, and other social (and survival) goods meted out according to systems inflected by race, ethnicity,

culture, class, and region. Black students who speak AAVE must also be fluent in Standard English as long as it is the language variety that remains dominant; they must have the option to participate in the language of power. The pedagogy becomes one of teaching Standard English as one variety among many, while retaining respect for the home languages of students. Developing methodologies that teachers can use to carry out this task is a central issue of concern for composition and rhetoric scholars and practitioners.

Composition Studies has made this challenge of respecting home languages while simultaneously teaching Standard English a central pedagogical concern for decades. In 1974, at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the National Council of Teachers of English passed a *Position Statement on Students' Right to Their Own Language* which in part affirmed “the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language — the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style.” This statement was re-affirmed by the organization in 2003, and continues to be part of the core values of the field’s primary professional organization.

This articulated value has also been defended in practice, particularly around issues related to AAVE. The most mediagenic of these struggles to preserve student voice was the attempt by the Oakland School Board to use Ebonics in English language instruction. In 1996, the Oakland School Board passed a resolution requiring its schools to recognize the validity of Ebonics as a language variety and use it as a springboard for teaching Standard English. Sociolinguists like Geneva Smitherman who had researched and identified a stable grammar and syntax that made Ebonics a legitimate language variety, and worked on teaching reading and writing, suggested that starting with a student’s home language was the best way to teach Standard English (Oakland Ebonics Resolution). Working from this research foundation, the school board took an advocacy position, arguing that public education ought to respect the language varieties brought into classrooms. Broadly ridiculed as an effort to teach Ebonics instead of Standard English, the goal of the Oakland teachers was purely to embed respect for home varieties of English in the teaching of the Standard. Despite criticism from many different stakeholders, this effort, part of a multi-pronged strategy to bring African American language systems into the classroom, represents the seriousness of composition instructors’ commitment to valuing student speech.

One of the central ways Composition Studies has framed this challenge (and its potential pedagogical solutions) has been through the concept of the contact zone. By now fairly mainstream thinking in Composition Studies, contact zone theory was introduced by Mary Louise Pratt in a 1991 address to the Modern Language Association annual conference. Pratt offered a way to understand the site of the struggle between students’ home languages and the Standard English of the classroom as a *contact zone*, a space where a student’s language grapples with the language of dominance. Student writing is not a simple tran-

scription of Standard English or a failed attempt at mastery, but instead it represents a negotiation between two language systems. The page becomes one of Pratt's "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (1). We can understand student texts as transcultural autoethnographies, "representations that the so-defined others construct in response to or in dialogue with those texts ... a selective collaboration with and appropriation of idioms of the metropolis or the conquerer" (2).

In the years since Pratt first outlined her articulation of the contact zone, the concept has come to be a central way that composition studies understands and critiques itself. As William Miller noted in 2007, the essay is included in *Ways of Reading*, a prominent textbook for composition classes; a search for the term "contact zone" in the online database CompPile generates nearly sixty matches. Composition teachers seeking to teach within the contact zone have access to a rich and varied — and conflictual — discourse around this pedagogy. In *Composition Studies*, Pratt's work has been used to articulate new kinds of classrooms and classroom relationships. In her 1991 address, Pratt closed with a description of "safe houses," or "social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogenous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, temporary protection from legacies of oppression" (6). In the contact zone of the classroom, the different languages, perspectives, and experiences of all students are respected and engaged. Conflict is not avoided, but negotiated as multivocal readers and writers encounter each other in classroom discussion and in the production of and response to student writing.

In concrete terms, contact zone theory is enacted through the ways teachers engage student contributions to the classroom, both in discussion and in their writing. Richard E. Miller presented a difficult case in his 1994 critique of the contact zone as a pure abstraction. He discussed the challenge posed by a violently homophobic essay written for a class. Titled "Queers, Bums, and Magic," this student's contribution to the contact zone described a trip he took to "San Fagcisco" to ogle "the queers and the bums" that ended with a severe beating delivered to a homeless man who was left for dead (Miller 392). Miller described two main responses from the teachers who were asked how they would grade such a classroom response. Some respondents indicated that they would report the student to the police and have him immediately removed from the class, even though the content of the essay could easily have been a fantasy that never actually occurred. A second response approach relied on refusal to engage with the writer's ideas — the intellectual content — at all, confining engagement to sentence-level correction. In both cases, argued Miller, the ideal of the contact zone is eroded. Miller suggested that the ideal of the contact zone can be easily nullified when teachers fail to do the hard work of engaging student materials

directly. It is always easier to expel or simply correct. Doing the work Miller describes of “having ... students interrogate literate practices inside and outside the classroom ... having them work with challenging essays that speak about issues of difference from a range of perspectives” (407), and then doing the same difficult interrogative work with the student texts themselves, is a much more challenging prospect.

Contact zone theory critically changes the way instructors can think and talk about student language. When language becomes about negotiation and translation, the focus shifts away from fixed ideas about correctness and toward recognition that language lives and moves, and thus is best understood in the context of particular rhetorical situations. Advocates can and do argue for pedagogies that simultaneously respect the integrity of home languages and recognize the power and privilege given Standard English. Language instruction becomes about critically teaching students to navigate social, cultural, and political spaces using the variety of negotiated language forms appropriate in a given context.

## Teaching Library Language

While contact zone theory has been central to the development of pedagogy in composition courses, library instruction has failed to engage the concept with any sustained rigor or depth. In the second part of this essay, I suggest that libraries are in fact ideal contexts in which to articulate a theory of the contact zone. Such an articulation promises a strategy for librarian advocates who are sympathetic to a cultural diversity and the politics of language inclusion. At the same time, the transparency and ease of imagining the contact zone via library instruction holds the potential for reinvigorating contact zone theory in Composition Studies.

The neglect of the contact zone in library instruction is due at least in part to the profession’s halting steps toward centering pedagogy in the first place. Where composition and rhetoric have been constituted as fields for theoretical research and pedagogical practice rooted in teachings in ancient Greece, library instruction is a relatively new field, gaining prominence as part of the “job” for academic librarians only in the 1970s (Kapitzke 3). The shallow theoretical and pedagogical research that has emerged since then has focused on correction, seeking ways of efficiently depositing library language into the brains of students whose home languages, approaches, and skills go unremarked. As James Elmborg notes, library instruction research and pedagogy have been focused primarily on “identify[ing] deep underlying universal structures which can be named, described, and perhaps most importantly, replicated in all contexts for all students” (2006, 194). Library literature that does engage issues around teaching students who bring other languages into the library classroom focuses

on simplifying material to make it easier for students to acquire (Roselle 2009).

Pratt's work, as Miller noted, "received next to no attention within librarianship" (1), despite its potential for informing our instruction practices. Searches of the phrases "contact zone" and "Mary Louise Pratt" in the primary scholarly databases related to library and information science (*LISTA*, *LISA*, Wilson Web's *Library Literature* and *Library Literature Retrospective*) generate only two hits, one of them Miller's plea to the profession to engage more directly in contact zone discourse. This glaring neglect is surprising, considering the broad influence of Pratt's thinking in the composition field, as well as the rich zone represented by student engagement with library search interfaces that require the use of standardized vocabularies and search syntax.

When students enter the academic library, their home language encounters the highly organized, exceedingly standardized language of the library research process. While we cannot term library "research-speak" a full-fledged language variety, it does employ several aspects of language systems, including the use of a specific vocabulary and a knowledge of correct syntax, required to structure queries correctly inside library databases and catalogs. An inability to competently deploy both of these aspects can result in frustration and failure, especially since the distance between "library-speak" and any variety of English — including the Standard — is not often acknowledged. If competence in a language is, as Ronald Wardhaugh defined it, "knowing what is in the language and what is not; knowing both what it is possible to say and what it is not possible to say" (2), library instruction should focus on ensuring that all students can tell the difference.

Library vocabularies are highly standardized, a somewhat paradoxical aspect of a structure built to house extraordinary diversity. Libraries have a core commitment to providing materials "for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves," and collections should "provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues" (Library Bill of Rights). In its Core Values Statement, the American Library Association frames "Access" as a primary value of librarianship: "All information resources that are provided directly or indirectly by the library, regardless of technology, format, or methods of delivery, should be readily, equally, and equitably accessible to all library users" (Core Values Statement). As a profession, librarianship takes very seriously diversity of collections and provision of access. A central thrust of the responsibility of librarians, then, is to ensure that our materials are accessible to multilingual users, including those who speak different varieties of the Standard English that constitutes most of the texts in our collections, particularly in academic libraries.

The failure to account for linguistic difference manifests most clearly — and, perhaps, inescapably — in the process of cataloging. Regardless of the diver-

sity represented by texts or other library objects, many (not all — e.g., in some instances genre paperbacks) materials are submitted to the disciplining process of cataloging and/or indexing. Using a set of controlled vocabulary terms (LCSH in library catalogs; descriptors in most library databases), works are fixed in the classification scheme according to the vocabulary of librarians. As James Elmborg notes,

...the library, a space where divergent views are philosophically accommodated and the collection is a polyphonic, even discordant, accumulation of voices. The library's collection, indeed, is marked by meeting, clashing, and grappling. All these voices are, however, brought under the control and direction of one dominant, monologic voice, the voice of the Library of Congress Classification System, or the voice of the Dewey Decimal System [60].

While keyword searching has broadened the vocabulary available to researchers, the controlled language still functions as a central point of entry, particularly in fields with mature, standardized vocabulary, especially the natural and social sciences.

These vocabularies mean that students must learn to translate their natural language into the language used by the library to describe their research areas. As Sanford Berman has been arguing for more than four decades with regard to LCSH, these library languages are not neutral. Like Standard English, they reflect the bias of power: “the LC list can only ‘satisfy’ parochial, jingoistic Europeans and North Americans, white-hued, at least nominally Christian (and preferably Protestant) in faith, comfortably situated in the middle- and higher-income brackets, largely domiciled in suburbia, fundamentally loyal to the Established Order, and heavily imbued with the transcendent, incomparable glory of Western civilization” (15). Students encountering this language for the first time must engage in a process of translation. For example, students might be interested in exploring and writing about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the language of the library, this conflict does not exist. Palestine is a historical-geographical construct lacking the status of “state.” In the language of the library, Palestine cannot exist as a specific entity until it is a state, which means that the essential root of the conflict with Israel makes the conflict un-searchable in the common language students bring to the catalog. Searching for articles about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a library database like *Academic Search Premiere* or the library catalog will usually result in one of two problems. Students will either retrieve no results (because Palestine is not a standardized subject heading assigned to works about the contemporary conflict) or too many results that are not germane to the topic (because the search phrase appears as a keyword across many records, but lacks the correlative power of standardized library descriptors). Learning to translate *Israeli-Palestinian conflict* into *Arab-Israeli conflict* or *Gaza Strip* or *Israel-Arab War, 1967 — Occupied Territories* can provide students with exponentially better results.

The structure of queries is a second aspect of library language use that can be particularly difficult — and essential — for students to master. Just as natural languages have syntax, or the ordering of elements in a sentence, library research requires that queries be structured according to a strict Boolean logic. In other words, the natural phrase searching students might use in Google must be translated into a Boolean search string using appropriate AND, OR, or NOT connectors. For example, a student searching for materials about *race relations at work* will need to re-structure that clause as *race relations* AND *work*. Because *work* is not a subject heading, the student will next need to translate workplace into appropriate keyword synonyms (e.g., *work, job, employment, corporation*) or subject heading, a dialogic struggle that will depend a lot on what the student actually means.

Looking at classification and cataloging as language problems that signify the power of naming (irresponsibly and responsibly) is not new. Much advocacy effort has been expended on fixing subject headings, particularly through the work of Sanford Berman and the radical librarians who follow in his footsteps. Scholars like Hope Olson and Susan Gold Smith, and librarians like Edgardo Civallero (who has served on the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Multicultural Services Committee) have advocated for local catalogs that use categories and subject headings organic to the particular users of a collection (2006). These efforts to “fix” the problems with hegemonic languages are laudable, but I want to suggest that they fail to unsettle the apparent fixity of language itself. Advocacy efforts might instead work towards making the active negotiation and struggle that subtends library research as well as communication writ large better; they can be powerful components of efforts around language equity and linguistic access to our collections.

And here is where teaching librarians might usefully put contact zone theory into practice. Unlike composition instructors, librarians deal with a much narrower swath of student linguistic performance. Where Miller and others in composition engage students in a contact zone that spans entire semesters and multiple texts and the expanse of the page, librarians meet students for one or perhaps two sessions, teach at the will of teaching faculty, and work in the tiny confined space of the database interface. As Cathy Eisenhower and Dolsy Smith have pointed out, “our engagement (with pedagogy) is not given but must be wrested from situations that would reduce such engagement to the motives of efficiency” (316). We are usually deployed in the classroom to meet specific instructional targets, teaching students to find the two or three scholarly articles necessary to complete their research assignment, or the primary source that will serve as a text for the “safe house” of some other teacher’s contact zone. In the fifty or seventy-five minutes we are usually allotted, the work of teaching skills like wrestling and negotiating and translating are often supplanted by a need to simply indicate to students the location of search boxes, thesauri, and

do some practice in using the “correct” language for the database. Our primary concern becomes transmitting the information necessary for students to complete another professor’s assignments.

As advocates for diversity and equitable access to information, our attention must turn from the assignment to the student who seeks to complete it. Instead of placing primary emphasis on subject headings and descriptors as correct and student language as incorrect, we might attend instead to the space where those languages do work: the database search box. After all, as the analysis above suggests, language is never right or wrong except in the context of the speaking or writing act. An emphasis on this contact zone requires us to acknowledge that some language varieties will work better than others in the database — not only library vocabulary and syntax, but also correctly-spelled Standard English. At the same time, it allows us to speak quite clearly about the ways that different language varieties “work” to produce success while others inevitably fail in a given system. Library databases and OPACs are the rare system where these kinds of direct links can be easily made visible, and therefore present a compelling springboard for conversations about language, knowledge, and power that extend beyond the library classroom.

Theorizing web-based interfaces as a contact zone is not new; scholars working on multimodal composition as an emergent subfield of Composition Studies have long articulated digital spaces as sites where the self writes itself against the digital system. Students increasingly participate in textual production in disintermediated spaces like blogs, wikis, Twitter, and Facebook. In these spaces, they experience dialogue and feedback, though in ways perhaps unrecognizable to Pratt and those implementing the contact zone in classrooms twenty years ago. As students traverse the web, writing and reading and re-writing as they engage in writing ranging from searches in Google to self-fashioning in Facebook, they experience what Tom Lavazzi has framed as “interactive event[s] reverberating back from the ‘machine’ through the immediate audience/participants” (126). In other words, working on the web involves speaking within an interface, experiencing that interface speaking back, and then speaking again in a kind of dialogue. Students are in dialogue with the machine in the contact zone of the Facebook status update that is “liked” by friends, a Tweet that is then re-Tweeted, their Google search modified by the machine that auto-suggests what they *really* seek as they type their query letter by letter, character by character.

The research process inside library databases works in a similar way, though we often fail to focus on the process as much as the need to get library search strategies “right.” When users interact with social tools, the stakes of the linguistic engagement are low. The stuff of the web is written in an enormous range of language varieties, and users will usually retrieve at least something regardless of their spelling, syntax, or grammar. Library databases and OPACs, on the other hand, function in an entirely different discourse, one that rewards

knowledge of the particular “third language” of academic library research. Success demands proficiency in the language of the database.

But this proficiency comes when students engage the dialogic process of library research: we enter keywords, see how the database responds, and negotiate the distance between our language variety and that of the database itself. When the database “speaks back,” successful students engage that language, allow it to reach their own, and begin to do the difficult work of representing ideas in the language of the dominant knowledge system. This is perhaps how many of us are schooled in doing research — we throw our keywords into a relevant database, see what results come back, and consult their bibliographic record to see what controlled vocabulary is used by the system to describe our idea. This process, familiar to most experienced researchers, is a concrete manifestation of contact zone theory.

This classroom strategy requires acknowledging — and teaching — the language of power in the database: controlled subject headings. Many advocates for access to information suggest that we ought to teach this dominant language *less*, not more. For James Elmborg, the desire to respect linguistic difference in the (limited) contact zone of the library classroom requires us to abandon teaching controlled library language altogether. He has argued that teaching controlled library language “will alienate many students. As effective as controlled language may be as a search strategy, its use may be more appropriate for students who have declared academic majors and are embarking on the journey toward academic specialization with its accompanying specialized language” (60).

Elmborg’s argument is a reminder that advocates in the classroom must respect the language varieties (including indigenous languages) that students bring to the classroom — and these are rarely, if ever, the rarefied language of library database searching (often because the makers of these commercial tools and the ideologies they inherently embed in them are not representative of the diversity in our local, regional, national, international, and transnational communities). But I would like to suggest that this universally alienating quality is actually what makes teaching controlled vocabularies in the contact zone of the interface most potentially ethically productive for teachers who want to advocate for diversity and access across varieties of English. After all, the rewards for mastering searching by controlled vocabulary are many. As Elmborg further notes, “to use the library, students and faculty must use the language of the library and of librarians—a language evolved precisely to reflect the white, middle-class construction of knowledge that education has always presumed to create and reflect. If students attempt to use any other kinds of language in subject searching — language that would be perfectly reasonable given their backgrounds — they will fail” (60). In refocusing library instruction on the space where that failure occurs, librarians can both teach that dominant language scheme and normalize the struggle that faces any user interacting with any new

discourse for the first time. As Lisa Delpit argues in her 1988 critique of well-meaning, white, liberal teachers, “students must be taught the codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of American life ... they must be allowed the resource of the teacher’s expert knowledge” (296). As librarians, we need to find a way to teach the library language necessary for student success while also respecting the language of student curiosity. Conceptualizing the database interface as a contact zone is a theoretical step in this direction.

## Conclusion

As advocates for both diversity of collections and expansion of access, librarians should take seriously the claim, best articulated in Composition Studies, that respect for multiple varieties of English matters in our classrooms. While we work to inaugurate students into the discourse of library research, we should respect as equally valid the diverse language forms they bring with them when they sit (really or virtually) in our learning labs. While Composition Studies has placed respect for non-dominant varieties of English at the center of their core values, librarianship has paid less attention to language issues. This is partly because our work is not as obviously connected to language learning. After all, none of us speaks in Boolean syntax outside of our interactions with databases and OPACs; the language forms we teach are highly stylized and useful only in the narrow, confined space of the database interface, our contact zone. When librarians talk about language issues, they focus on “correcting” subject headings and thesauri to more accurately reflect the language of our users.

Contact zone theory has been central to how composition teachers have conceptualized ethical pedagogical interventions at the point of conflict between honoring home languages and teaching standard varieties. For writing instructors, the work of articulating and putting into practice an idea of the contact zone is conceived quite broadly—the zone can be theorized as the page, the syllabus, or the classroom itself. For librarians, often working both with less time and with less access to students, the contact zone can be considered much more concisely: the space of linguistic struggle constituted by the keyword search box.

Learning to emphasize the zone of the database search box points to a third way for library instructors wary both of instrumentally teaching descriptors and subject headings as “correct,” and of failing to teach about controlled vocabularies at all. Thinking and teaching the site of negotiation and translation allows us to respect students’ home languages and the struggle all of them will engage as they attempt to interact meaningfully with the structured, standardized language of our systems. Such a shift also poses a potential site for intercultural information ethics discussion and collaboration with our peers in

writing centers and composition programs. In libraries, the failure of non-standard languages is concrete and happens fast, and is felt universally. Unlike the conflicts that happen between varieties like African American Vernacular and Standard English, these failures carry very little cultural, social, political, philosophical, ideological, geo-political, or historical weight. Negotiation is normal. In our work as teachers and advocates in these controlled and contested spaces, we might find new ways to discuss the problem of other languages across the academy and more broadly in the teaching and learning discourses of global and intercultural information ethics.

### Works Cited

- Baker, Judith. "Trilingualism." *The Skin That We Speak: Thoughts on Language and Culture in the Classroom*. Eds. Lisa Delpit and Joanne Kilgour Dowdy. New York: The New Press, 2002. 49–61. Print.
- Bartholomae, David. "Inventing the University." *Teaching Composition*. Ed. T.R. Johnson. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008. 2–31. Print.
- Berman, Sanford. *Prejudices and Antipathies: A Tract on the LC Subject Heads Concerning People*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1993 (1971). Print.
- Core Values of Librarianship*. American Library Association. Ala.org. Web. 11 Jan. 2011.
- Delpit, Lisa D. "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children." *Harvard Educational Review* 58.3 (1988): 280–298. Electronic.
- Eisenhower, Cathy and Dolsy Smith. "The Library as 'Stuck Place': Critical Pedagogy in the Corporate University." *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*. Eds. Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier. Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2010. 305–317. Print.
- Elmborg, James. "Libraries In the Contact Zone: On the Creation of Educational Space." *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 46.1 (2006): 56–64. Electronic.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Critical Information Literacy: Implications for Instructional Practice." *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 32.2 (2006): 192–199. Electronic.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2005.12.004>
- Gilyard, Keith. *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State UP, 1991. Print.
- Lavazzi, Tom. "Communication On(the)line." *South Atlantic Review* 66.1 (2001): 126–144. Electronic. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3202032>
- Library Bill of Rights*. American Library Association. Ala.org. Web. 29 Apr. 2010.
- Miller, Richard E. "Fault Lines in the Contact Zone." *College English* 56.4 (1994): 389–408. Electronic. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/378334>
- Miller, William. "Reference, Cultural Values, and the Contact Zone." *The Reference Librarian*, 47.2 (2007): 2, 1–3.
- "The Oakland Ebonics Resolution." *The Real Ebonics Debate: Power, Language, and the Education of African-American Children*. Eds. Theresa Perry and Lisa Delpit. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998. 143–145. Print.
- Olson, Hope A. and Susan Gold Smith. "Transgressive Tools: The Liberating Power of Classification." *Women and Environments*, 72/73 (2006): 38–40.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the Contact Zone." From *Profession 91*. New York: MLA, 1991. Web. 29 April 2010. [http://www.class.uidaho.edu/thomas/English\\_506/Arts\\_of\\_the\\_Contact\\_Zone.pdf](http://www.class.uidaho.edu/thomas/English_506/Arts_of_the_Contact_Zone.pdf).

- “Resolution on Affirming the CCCC Students’ Right to Their Own Language.” *NCTE Position Statement*. NCTE.org. Web. 29 Apr. 2010.
- Smitherman, Geneva. “Black English/Ebonics: *What It Be Like?*” *The Real Ebonics Debate: Power, Language, and the Education of African-American Children*. Eds. Theresa Perry and Lisa Delpit. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998. 29–37. Print.
- Wardhaugh, Ronald. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. 6th ed. Oxford, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. Print.

---

**Emily Drabinski** is an electronic resources and instruction librarian at Long Island University, Brooklyn. 993 President Street #4D, Brooklyn, NY 11225. <emily.drabinski@gmail.com>