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Reed-Kellogg Diagramming and Vernacular Speech: 'Telling It Slant' in the Introductory Classroom [post-print]

Lucy Ferris
Trinity College, lucy.ferriss@trincoll.edu

TEACHING AMERICAN SPEECH

REED-KELLOGG DIAGRAMMING AND VERNACULAR SPEECH: "TELLING IT SLANT" IN THE INTRODUCTORY CLASSROOM

LUCY FERRISS, *Trinity College*

This article describes an unexpected encounter with bigotry in a classroom devoted to the learning and deployment of Reed-Kellogg (RK) sentence diagramming. Like many courses that teach basic skills—introductory language courses, for instance—my course in RK diagramming, Constructing Thought, does not aim explicitly to take on any of the social issues that both enliven and bedevil the contemporary liberal arts classroom, such as race, class, and gender. When these issues do slip into discussion in such a classroom, the following narrative may illustrate a useful strategy to engage students with questions they may have "tuned out" elsewhere.

What Chavez-Reyes (2012, 44) calls critical social dialogue—overt discussions of difference—can forge, in her words, "the beginnings of a multicultural and social justice intellectual frame." But as Chavez-Reyes (2012) and Heinze (2008, 9) have also observed, students directly confronted with subjects like class differences or race-based preconceptions can also engage in complicated forms of resistance. In my own classroom, such resistance often takes the form of politically correct answers that evade the complexities of the issue or the student's own response. It may be as effective, if not more so, to use examples that initially appear devoid of political content rather than placing such content front and center. When issues of class or race become germane to a discussion of, say, the systematicity of nonstandard English, the examples at hand can then open up a fresh area of reflection, including self-reflection, for students.

BACKGROUND. Developed in 1877, the RK system is considered by linguists to be outmoded, and it has been replaced in many classrooms by X-bar theory. I am not a linguist but a professor of literature and writing. My course in RK diagramming was conceived and built at the request of students who had heard of the system and wanted to see if mastering it would help them write more clearly. I titled the course Constructing Thought to clarify its focus: not on grammar per se, but on the relationship between the employment of syntax and the expression, or even formulation, of ideas. In more theoretical form, this link between syntax and written thought emerges in Tufte's

Artful Sentences (2006) and in recent work among high school students accomplished by Judith Hochman at the Windward School and at New Dorp High School, as profiled in *The Atlantic* (Tyre 2012). Constructing Thought has proved surprisingly popular among Trinity College undergraduates, including many students of English as a second language; I now cap enrollment at 25 students, usually turning away a dozen or more.

The first half of Constructing Thought is devoted to the acquisition of diagramming skills, as demonstrated in Moutoux's book *Diagramming Step by Step* (2007), and to the questions of grammar and syntax that naturally arise as students learn these skills. As students learn to indicate predicate constructions, for instance, by a slash rather than a vertical line, they also begin to inquire into verb functions and discover the difference between intransitive and transitive, the role of linking verbs, and the difference between a present perfect verb (*She has lost*) and a predicate adjective (*She looks lost*). The grammatical conventions become tools toward completing the diagram correctly, rather than a set of "rules" to be learned for what appears to be their own sake. Working through the lessons required to master the art of mapping a sentence onto paper, students grow attuned to conventions common to standard American English (SAE) that had eluded them when faced with "grammar," an area where most profess a deep ignorance and even distaste. For instance, a majority of students in the class raise their hands when asked if a professor has ever marked "passive voice" or "dangling participle" on their essays. When asked if they know what the terms "passive" or "participle" mean, most either do not know or provide an incorrect answer. In order to master the 24 chapters of Moutoux's *Diagramming Step by Step*, they must become familiar with all the traditional parts of speech and their functions; with various types of dependent and independent clauses; with noun, adverb, and adjective clauses; with verb conjugation and noun-verb agreement; and with concepts like apposition, causation, phrasal words, the nominative absolute, and so on.

From the outset, however, we do not characterize RK diagramming as grammatical prescriptivism. As Florey (2006, 62, 69) has noted, you can easily diagram a completely nonstandard sentence (see figure 1). The diagram "tells us nothing about [the sentence's] wrongness. […] Although diagramming a sentence can sometimes express its structural problems, it […] can't ferret out a lie, correct a lapse in logic, or explain a foray into lunacy." In other words, rather than preaching the exclusive acceptability of SAE, the pattern by which students learn RK diagramming denotes a useful way of depicting a given sentence. That a sentence is easier to diagram, let us say, if its adverbial clause possesses an antecedent may lead students to think about writing sentences with such antecedents; in fact, we hope it does,

FIGURE 1
Reed-Kellogg Diagram of Nonstandard *Me and him went out*
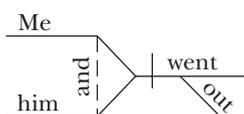
especially since most students taking the class indicate a desire to write "better" or "more clearly." But the pedagogical approach is, per Emily Dickinson, to "tell it slant"—to come at the persistent and occasionally useful "rules" of SAE from a less dogmatic perspective. The challenge of diagramming a sentence from the Gettysburg address or an aphorism like *A stitch in time saves nine* feels like a game (one student described Constructing Thought as being like "a course in Scrabble"), but its goals of improved expository writing and literary analysis remain firmly in place.

The class thus addresses half the concerns voiced by Fecho, Davis, and Moore (2006, 200), who argue that educators "need to acknowledge the oppressive nature of mainstream power codes while affording students the opportunity to become fluent in those codes." That is, we approach the syntax of standard English not as something that students should "master," but as the material out of which to make diagrams. Those diagrams in turn offer clues for more fluent written expression in terms of the prominence of a main idea or a possible disconnect between the main idea and an ancillary piece of information in, for instance, a subordinate clause.

The class does not, however, explicitly address the other half of such concerns, which focus on negotiating and applying African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in the classroom. As Fecho, Davis, and Moore (2006, [page#]) point out, we cannot "go on teaching mainstream power codes to students […] as if acquisition of that privileged dialect has no impact on student cultural and familial identity." Constructing Thought is not in any way aimed at student sensitivity to identity by way of vernaculars. Not only does the instructor of Constructing Thought lack expertise in AAVE or code-switching, but also the class's "game" of organizing syntax into RK diagrams does not readily admit a focus on specific features of vernacular English, African American or otherwise. Far from "facilitat[ing] student analysis of […] AAVE language features in a nonthreatening manner," as recommended by Hill (2009, 233) among others, the course seeks to apply the syntactical categories of SAE to coherent sentences regardless of their provenance.

Fewer than half the students in the class master the full store of diagramming terminology by midterm. Frequently, those who do have had classical or

Catholic secondary-school training in grammatical concepts, so their mastery reveals more about their prior preparation than about their learning skills. More instructive is the assiduousness with which minority and international students tackle the principles of syntax and structure that undergird RK diagramming. The social premium placed on acquisition of skills in SAE may be a motivating factor. It may also be germane that, as Billings (2005, 78) has noted, "[Blacks reject] the competence of the [AAVE] dialect even more than Whites," an observation to which I will return. Here, the point is that the grammar terminology and the rudiments of diagramming become means to an end in the second half of the course, when students seek out "real life" sentences—from poetry and music, by politicians and scholars— and attempt to diagram them. In the process, they often discover nuances of meaning and interpretation that had theretofore eluded them. The early advantages presented by more classically educated students can fall away as the application of standard syntactical categories to sentences found "in the world" begins.

THE NARRATIVE: ANTOINE DODSON. One of these "real world" assignments is to find and diagram a 50-word passage by a "famous person." "Famous" being a subjective descriptor, students come up with sources ranging from Abraham Lincoln to Snooki and with examples from both written texts and oral performances. As the class gathers, students who feel they have attempted particularly problematic passages are invited to display their diagrams on the blackboard. Because the exercise creates a group interpretation or correction of the difficult passage, we rarely lack for volunteers to share their efforts.

The last time I taught Constructing Thought, on "famous person" day, one of my cheekier white students offered to share the sentence he'd chosen, by one Antoine Dodson. Charles Dodgson? I thought at first, anticipating a selection from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. No, he said. Antoine. It was a famous passage. It had gone viral, he said, on YouTube. Naively, I booted up the classroom's computer and searched "Antoine Dodson." "That's it!" several students yelped when I found the title: "Antoine Dodson Warns a Perp on Live TV."

As soon as I clicked on the one-minute clip, from a news report of an attempted rape, I knew a pedagogical challenge was in store. After a brief interview with the victim, the reporter addresses the victim's brother, an African American who spoke with strong rhythm and moved his body for emphasis as he explained how his neighborhood has become more dangerous:

Well, obviously we have a rapist in Lincoln Park. He's climbing in your windows, he's snatchin your people up, tryna rape em, so y'all need to hide your kids, hide your wife,

and hide your husband, cuz they're rapin everybody out here. […] We got your T-shirt. You done left fingerprints and all. You are so dumb. You are really dumb, for real. […] You don't have to come and confess that you did it. We're lookin for you. We gonna find you. I'm letting you know that. So you can run and tell that, homeboy. [http://www .youtube.com/watch?v=EzNhaLUT520 (◀))]

   My students thought he was hilarious. My white students, that is. The two Asian, three Latino, and three African American students in the class watched without expression. Suddenly, we were confronting, not a misplaced modifier, but misplaced mirth—specifically, students of privilege guffawing at the gestures and idiom of an African American from the projects posted on YouTube. This was not amusement at the incongruity of a pop-culture example's being used in a college classroom; we had already looked at examples from Dr. Seuss, *Star Wars*, and the rock band Nickelback without eliciting such a response. The laughter seemed specific to this vernacular outrage from a victim's brother. It might have expressed the insensitivity born of bigotry, wherein Antoine Dodson's speech was seen as a sort of performance or it might have expressed some deep discomfort on the part of the white students. Either way, as I shut off the monitor, I considered how best to tackle this teaching opportunity. Leave the trees and ladders behind, whispered my social conscience. Address the assumptions that reduce white students to giggles over a brother's concern for his sister's welfare in a dangerous neighborhood. I had not prepared to change the direction of the class, but to ignore this spontaneous reaction seemed both cowardly and unprofessional.

   At the same time, it seemed immediately clear to me that taking the ostensible subject of the class, sentence diagramming, off the table to focus on a social issue presented two risks. First, it seemed likely to alienate the bemused students without drawing their attention and without empowering minority students to speak up. Much research into attitudes toward AAVE and SAE has focused on teachers' attitudes toward black students. Although linguists seem to agree that "African American students […] come to school speaking a language or linguistic form that is dissimilar but no less valuable than the language of instruction" (Sharrocky 2001, 55), instructors' tendency to stigmatize "home dialect" impedes learning. As Wheeler (2008, 55) has observed, "Research has found strong connections among teachers' negative attitudes about stigmatized dialects, lower teacher expectations for students who speak these dialects, and lower academic achievement." Scant attention has been paid to white students' attitudes toward AAVE or toward changing those attitudes. But just as African American students react negatively to condemnation of "home dialect," so white students react negatively to

condemnation of "white humor." Not having been the one to introduce the Antoine Dodson text, it was not possible for me to champion the legitimacy of his dialect without taking sides in the class and potentially alienating the students of color as well.

Second, the half-credit status of the class meant that every moment was taken up with questions of sentence structure and syntax, leaving no room to take on the Ebonics wars. This observation may seem an evasion. But having a student-centered classroom means respecting the goals of the students who enroll in that course in good faith. In the 30 seconds following the end of the Antoine Dodson video, I needed to decide if a discussion of language and social class was important enough to override what the students themselves—particularly the African American students—had taken the class to learn. The cost seemed high.
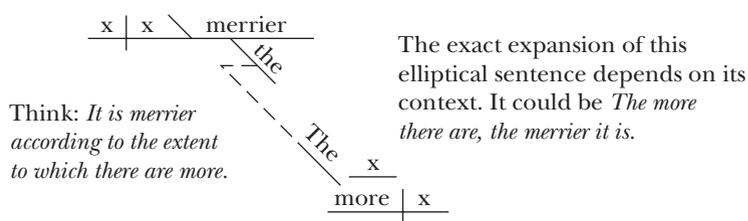
There was, however, another strategy. In diagramming selections both from the Moutoux text and from poetry, the class had dealt in passing with elision and contraction. Moutoux's (2007, 114) diagram of the aphorism *The more, the merrier* uses a series of *X*'s for missing verbs and subjects (see figure 2).

From this "standard" sentence mapping, it had not been a large step to understanding Gwendolyn Brooks's famous line *We real cool* as implying an *X* in the "slot" for the verb. Students attempting lines from "We're Not Gonna Take It" by Twisted Sister during the week on diagramming song lyrics had demonstrated that *ain't gonna* diagrammed perfectly fine so long as students interpreted the phrase as *are not going to*, connecting the end of a present progressive verb to the beginning of an infinitive phrase.

This application of SAE syntax to the analysis of nonstandard modes of speech, fitting them into the paradigms of formal written English, may be a drawback to RK diagramming. The system was designed, after all, when acceptance of nonstandard modes of speech in the academy was effectively nil. On the other hand, as Hill (2009, 130) found in studying the tension

FIGURE 2
Reed-Kellogg Diagram of *The more, the merrier,* Prepared by Moutoux (2007, 114)


x | x \ merrier
the

Think: *It is merrier according to the extent to which there are more.*

The exact expansion of this elliptical sentence depends on its context. It could be *The more there are, the merrier it is.*

The

x

more | x

between AAVE and SAE in a secondary-school classroom, students "drew from their home language to inform their voices in nonstandard writing contexts, and […] negotiated their voices in standard contexts." Moreover, whenever we conflate oral and written speech—as I've done above, simply by setting down Antoine Dodson's words in written form, with punctuation added and spelling that attempts to replicate speech, we are norming that oral performance to some degree. In the case of my class, undergirded as it was by RK diagramming, the elasticity provided by prior examples of sentence norming and elision, particularly in diagramming speeches and song lyrics, had actually prepared the students to encounter Antoine Dodson's outburst, not as comedy or "bad grammar," but as a piece of rhetoric.

Hesitatingly, I began correcting my student's diagram (figure 3). He had mistaken the present progressive verbs *is climbing* and *is snatching* for linking verbs with predicate adjectives; mistaken the transitive verb *snatching* for an intransitive participle modified by a prepositional phrase, as if *up people* were akin to *up the pipe*; mistaken *got* for a transitive construction like *I got milk;* and mistaken the dependent relationships of the two adverbial clauses, among other errors. None of these mistakes had to do with code-switching; they were all errors of basic sentence mapping. To cite just one example of how the student misconstrued an otherwise perfectly coherent sentence, we may note how his diagram indicates that the reason the stranger is climbing in windows and snatching up people is that "they" are raping anybody—in other words, the assailant is figured as fleeing the rapist and taking others with him. Antoine Dodson had been clear in his meaning; the student's diagram

FIGURE 3
Student's Initial Attempt to Diagram a Sentence from Antoine Dobson's Interview
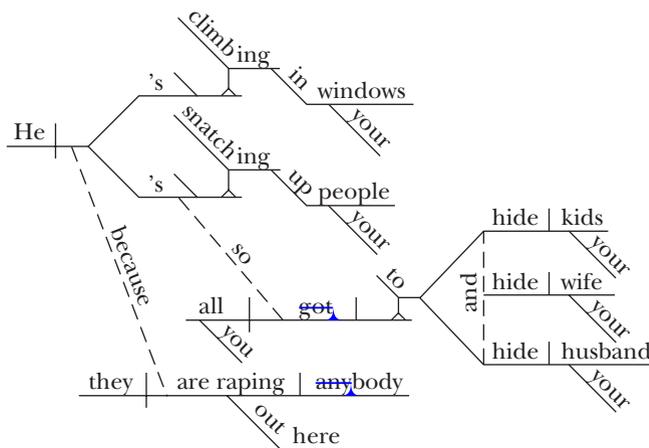
was of an incoherent sentence. I coached the students to correct the diagram (see figure 4). Clause by clause, phrase by phrase, we laid out the structure of Antoine's short speech. Correcting my student's errors led the class to discuss, not Antoine's rhythmic language or movement, but the difference between present progressive verbs and predicate participial adjectives, as well as the ~~peculiarity of the American parsing of the verb~~ *must,* ~~whose past tense is~~ *had to* ~~and which therefore lends itself to the AAVE present tense of~~ *got to.* We also noted, in passing, the repeated infinitive *hide,* a rhetorical gesture reminiscent of the previous week's diagrams from famous speeches. "Y'all ~~got~~ to hide your kids, hide your wife, and hide your husband" compares favorably, for instance, with "we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship" from JFK's inaugural address.

Gradually, the giggles died. The biggest guy in the class, who was African American and usually silent, raised his hand. He pointed out that *home boy* in Antoine's last sentence was a vocative, not an appositive. In the end, Antoine Dodson's syntax diagrammed almost perfectly. This shouldn't have come as a surprise. Dodson was speaking rationally and forthrightly, and with all its shortcomings, RK diagramming should be able to map a competent sentence in English regardless of idiom (with the allowance granted above that certain nonstandard features are "translated" into SAE). What does come as a surprise, and an enlightenment, is the mechanism by which my students lost their assumed entitlement to laugh at a speaker's expense. When the

FIGURE 4
Student's Corrected Diagram a Sentence from Antoine Dobson's Interview
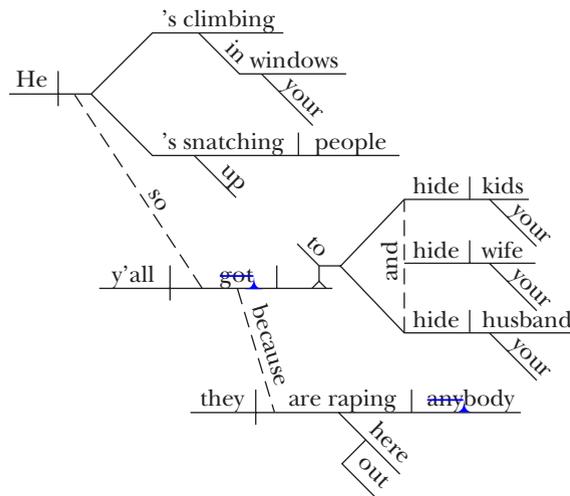
incoherence they had wrongfully deduced from Dodson's accent and body language melted away, his distress was not amusing but moving. Contrast the proven incoherence of Sarah Palin's syntax as diagrammed in *Slate,*[1] where logical incongruity dissolves meaning—and gives rise, instead, to a chuckle. The humor here has to do not with vernacular, but with scrambled or voided meaning.

CONCLUSION. Not all of us teaching in the humanities are linguists, much less sociolinguists, and yet many of us come across moments like my class encountered with Antoine Dodson in the course of our teaching. To "facilitate student analysis of mainstream and AAVE language features in a nonthreatening manner," we need to discover strategies that work WITHIN the context of course goals. In the case of the Antoine Dodson video, I was able to seize an opportunity—provided, essentially, by Dodson's own eloquence—to treat AAVE as serious rhetoric and thus to change students' perceptions of African American idiom and, by extension, of urban blacks. As Billings and others have noted, students of various races perceive speakers of AAVE as less competent and articulate than speakers of SAE; one study even concluded that "Black participants were much harsher critics of BE [Black English] than Whites" (2005, 77). By diagramming Antoine Dodson's words with the same seriousness as Lincoln's, my students were able to discern both his competence and his articulateness.

In the case of Constructing Thought, the entire class benefited as their perception of Dodson as a jokester tranformed into one of Dodson as rhetorician. The deminishing laughter during the one session I have detailed might have proved an isolated incident. But from that point forward, whenever we came to instances of nonstandard English available for diagramming, I found the tone of discussion had shifted from a set of binaries (proper speech/improper speech, formal/slang) to a broader range of so-called legitimate expression. In the final exercise of the class, for example, students choose sentences from their own academic papers on which they have received negative comments from professors. They attempt to diagram the sentences; analyze the diagrams to discover syntactic or rhetorical flaws in the sentences; rewrite the sentences; and diagram the new versions for comparison. Following the open, serious discussion of Antoine Dodson's brief speech, students of color were more apt than previously to select sentences in which they had employed AAVE and to distinguish between criticisms of "flaws" like nonstandard subject/verb agreement and criticisms of genuinely confusing rhetoric, like clauses with no referent. A sentence about the influence of social norms, for instance, originally read, "Perhaps more than one be in effect, or maybe better way of looking at it is a life of constraints that

equate to one larger context." The uninflected verb (*more than one be*) and elided article (*maybe better way*), when placed within an RK diagram, revealed themselves as vernacular English, no different from standard English when it came to their coherent syntax, and the general meaning of the sentence was the same as if it had been uttered in SAE. By contrast, the construction of the final predicate and adjective clause (*is a life of constraints that…*) displayed its logical incoherence when we attempted to diagram it. The exercise demonstrated that although code-switching between AAVE and SAE might be desirable in such a formal paper and presents a valid subject for inquiry, the dysfunction of the sentence lies in its latter half. Students of color were also more apt than previously to mount such examples on the blackboard and to invite discussion from peers.

The lesson here, I think, is neither to give up on teaching culturally sensitive issues of language nor to feel compelled to take a class down a lengthy and frustrating tangent when such issues arise. Working within the tools of the course, we can plant seeds that ripen, not only into the legitimation of nonstandard linguistic forms, but also into more open minds among white students when it comes to issues of class and race. Those open minds, in turn, create a class atmosphere in which students of color sense the value of their own contributions, not just in terms of the instructor's engagement, but also in terms of their peers' attention and respect.

NOTE

1. Kitty Burns Florey's RK diagram of Sarah Palin's speech (http://www.slate.com/articles/life/the_good_word/2008/10/diagramming_sarah.html) contains a number of errors, but her point about the incongruity of Palin's syntax gained a large following and sparked blogger Garth Risk Hallberg's elegant diagram of a sentence by Barack Obama (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/02/18/what-sentence-diagrams-re_n_167988.html).

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LUCY FERRISS (to come). E-mail: lucy.ferriss@trincoll.edu.