

Hillbilly or Scholar? The Struggle for Appalachian Academics to Speak or Succeed

Matthew R. Buckle

Abstract

Appalachian students and scholars often face linguistic discrimination in academic settings where our dialect is unfairly associated with a lack of intelligence or credibility. This paper explores how biases against Appalachian English manifest in classroom participation and professional advancement, creating barriers to academic success and reinforcing linguistic insecurity. Through personal accounts and existing research, this study highlights the ways in which Appalachian speakers are pressured to conform to standardized English, often at the cost of our cultural identity. By shifting academic norms, we can ensure that Appalachian voices are valued for our contributions rather than judged by our pronunciation.

Two Sides of the Appalachian Coin

“You spend your life diggin’ coal from the bottom of your grave,” sings Eastern Kentucky native Patty Loveless before concluding that “you’ll never leave Harlan alive.” Loveless depicts her family’s transition from tobacco farming to coal mining in the early 20th century after big corporations moved into Central Appalachia. They offered the region’s inhabitants undervalued lump sums for their land and work, capitalizing on high demand and low supply of labor. Loveless’ family accepted the offer like many other Kentuckians did, selling their land in the mountains to be mined and their labor to be exploited for a chance at economic stability. Loveless sings about her grandfather moving to Harlan, a small coal town in Southeastern Kentucky, where he became a miner to support his family at the expense of his health.

Loveless’ story represents two sides of Appalachia: the resilience, selflessness, and strength of the region’s people who have sacrificed their well-being to provide for their families and build their communities, and the longstanding corporate exploitation that allowed outsiders to profit immensely at the expense of Appalachian workers and land. Despite this dual narrative that highlights the region’s complexities, portrayals of Appalachia often fixate solely on the exploitation. Like the industry chokehold that big corporations utilize to perpetuate cyclical and generational struggle, the media often overshadows the cultural and linguistic richness of Appalachia by limiting the narrative to poverty, a lack of education, and social struggles. These stereotypes are entrenched in Appalachian speech, particularly in professional and academic spaces where the language is often stigmatized as improper or uneducated, creating barriers to educational attainment and professional advancement. Students and scholars from the region face pressure to “correct” their dialect in order to be taken seriously, mirroring broader patterns of linguistic discrimination that intersect with class and regional prejudices. This research aims to examine how stereotypes of Appalachia reinforce dialectal prejudices against Appalachian academics, and how this differs among those who attend institutions within and outside the region.

Linguistic Bias Takes Root in Appalachia’s Political and Economic History

Understanding the linguistic discrimination faced by Appalachians requires examining the evolving economics, politics, and history of the region. Appalachia stretches from Southern New York to Northern Mississippi; with its heart in Central Appalachia, it includes Eastern Kentucky, West Virginia, Western Virginia, and Eastern Tennessee. Known for its rugged geography, abundant natural resources, and tight-knit communities, the region has long been shaped by the extractive industries that dominated its economy. The rise of coal mining in the late 19th and early 20th centuries defined Appalachia's economic trajectory, drawing thousands of workers to company-owned towns where coal barons wielded immense power. While the coal industry provided livelihoods, it also trapped many in cycles of dependency, with corporate monopolies controlling wages, housing, and even local governments (Eller, 2008). Small-scale farming and subsistence agriculture, once vital to Appalachian life, became secondary as industrialization took hold, leading to economic vulnerabilities that worsened as coal production declined.

The political landscape of Appalachia has been similarly shaped by economic exploitation and structural neglect. In the early 20th century, the region was a hotbed for labor activism, with coal miners organizing under groups like the United Mine Workers of America to fight for fair wages and safer working conditions. However, union power weakened as coal companies mechanized operations and labor demand waned, leaving many Appalachian communities in economic distress. The federal government intervened by implementing New Deal policies in the 1930s and Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty in the 1960s, casting Appalachia into the national spotlight as a region of economic and social deficiency. While these programs brought short-term relief, they also reinforced negative stereotypes that painted Appalachians as impoverished, backward, and in need of outside intervention.

Appalachia's history continues to shape perceptions of the region and mountain people, particularly in how Appalachian dialects are understood—or misunderstood—by outsiders. Linguistic discrimination against Appalachian English is deeply tied to broader economic and cultural prejudices, leading to the dialect being equated with a lack of intelligence or education. This perception persists in academic and professional spaces, where speakers of Appalachian dialects frequently face bias, exclusion, or pressure to code-switch to be taken seriously (Boggs, 2023). Yet, Appalachian English is not a sign of ignorance—rather, it's a distinct and historically rich linguistic system. The same forces that historically exploited Appalachian labor now contribute to the marginalization of its language as linguistic discrimination reinforces economic and social barriers that hinder the region's development. By challenging these misconceptions, it becomes possible to recognize Appalachian speech as a marker of cultural heritage rather than a deficiency, disrupting the cycle of bias that has long kept the region at a disadvantage.

What do the Scholars Say?

Academics studying Appalachian English emphasize its historical legitimacy and linguistic richness, tracing its origins to early Scots-Irish settlers (Montgomery, 2009; Wolfram and Christian, 1975). Despite its deep historical roots, Appalachian speech is often mischaracterized as improper or uneducated, reinforcing systemic inequalities in education and employment (Boggs, 2023; DeMarco, 2024). Media representations contribute to these biases by portraying Appalachians through stereotypes of poverty and a lack of sophistication, shaping public attitudes and reinforcing linguistic discrimination (Baker & Gore, 2024; Speer, 1993).

Within academia, these biases manifest in grading practices, hiring decisions, and assumptions about intelligence, disadvantaging students who speak Appalachian English (Boggs, 2023). Lippi-Green (1997) argues that Standard Language Ideology pressures students to

conform to a rigid linguistic norm, marginalizing nonstandard dialect speakers. Hudley and Mallinson (2011) highlight how this marginalization affects students' academic confidence and performance. DeMarco (2024) further explores how linguistic discrimination intersects with economic barriers, deepening educational disadvantages for Appalachians.

Addressing these issues requires institutional and cultural changes. Universities should incorporate sociolinguistics into curricula to legitimize regional dialects and counter stereotypes. Educators must be trained to recognize linguistic bias in grading and classroom interactions, ensuring equitable academic assessment (King, 2019). Additionally, mentorship programs can provide support for Appalachians navigating linguistic discrimination. Finally, activists should challenge media portrayals that perpetuate negative stereotypes, advocating for more accurate representations of Appalachian identity (Baker & Gore, 2024). By implementing these strategies, academia can foster a more inclusive environment that values linguistic diversity instead of marginalizing it.

Mapping Linguistic Bias

By integrating discourse analysis with qualitative interviews, I argue that linguistic discrimination against Appalachian English is deeply tied to broader economic and cultural prejudices that manifest in academia, where Appalachian students and scholars often face both overt and covert linguistic discrimination. First, I analyze recurring stereotypes in popular representations of the region, focusing on texts such as *Hillbilly Elegy* by JD Vance, shows like *Justified* set in Central Appalachia, and academic discourse on Appalachian identity. Then, I examine how these portrayals translate into real-world biases within academic institutions, conducting interviews with Appalachian students who reside both within and outside the region. Finally, I discuss potential strategies for challenging these stereotypes and fostering linguistic inclusivity in higher education.

A Qualitative Study of Appalachian English

This research employs qualitative methods including narrative inquiry and interviews to explore linguistic discrimination faced by Appalachian students. A critical discourse analysis of media portrayals will complement these interviews, examining how narratives shape broader perceptions. My positionality as a Stanford student from Central Appalachia informs this study, as my lived experiences provide insight into the challenges faced by Appalachian academics navigating linguistic bias. Through these methods, I seek to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the intersection between dialect perception and academic inclusion.

The study includes interviews with three Appalachian students: one who attends Harvard University, one who attends Centre College, and one who attends Eastern Kentucky University to highlight the differing experiences of Appalachian students who attend institutions within and outside the region. My interview will focus on their experiences with bias, perceptions of Appalachian English in academic spaces, and strategies they have used to navigate linguistic prejudice. Based on my personal experiences, I have recognized four main responses to my Appalachian dialect: romanticization, overt discrimination, covert discrimination, and varying forms of interest. Thus, I ask the following questions:

1. How do you feel about the way Appalachian English is sometimes romanticized as a marker of authenticity or cultural purity? Do you think this perception impacts how the dialect is treated in academic spaces?

2. Have you ever experienced or witnessed overt discrimination based on your Appalachian dialect in an academic setting? If so, how did it manifest, and what were the consequences?
3. In what ways do you think linguistic discrimination against Appalachian speakers operates more subtly in academia, such as in grading or classroom discussions?
4. Have you encountered instances where people outside of Appalachia express interest in the dialect? Do you think this interest is genuine, or does it sometimes reinforce stereotypes?

Additionally, I analyze media depictions of Appalachian dialects, screening them for recurring themes related to intelligence, professionalism, and social class. By triangulating interview data and discourse analysis, this research aims to provide a robust account of how language discrimination affects Appalachian identity in academia.

Media Portrayals and Their Academic Consequences

A key example of the stereotyping of Appalachian dialects in media is J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*, a memoir that has been widely critiqued for its portrayal of Appalachia as a region defined by dysfunction, poverty, and cultural stagnation. Vance's narrative frames Appalachian hardship as a product of personal failure rather than structural neglect, reinforcing stereotypes that depict the region's people as inherently resistant to progress. The book's adaptation into a Hollywood film further cemented these reductive portrayals, with linguistic choices playing a crucial role in shaping perceptions of Appalachian speech. Characters in the film speak in exaggerated, nonstandard English, reinforcing the association between Appalachian dialects and a lack of intelligence and sophistication. Researchers such as Baker and Gore (2024) argue that representations like *Hillbilly Elegy* shape public attitudes toward Appalachian speakers, influencing how their dialect is perceived in professional and academic settings. These portrayals contribute to implicit biases that associate Appalachian speech with limited intellectual capability, leading to tangible consequences for Appalachian students in higher education. Within academia, these stereotypes translate into the assumption that Appalachian speakers must either suppress their dialect to be taken seriously or risk being dismissed as uneducated.

The impact of media portrayals extends beyond contemporary works like *Hillbilly Elegy*, with similar linguistic stereotyping appearing in film and literature across generations. While shows like *Justified* occasionally feature more complex Appalachian characters, linguistic authenticity remains a point of contention. The use of Appalachian dialect in mainstream media frequently oscillates between hyper-exaggeration and erasure, either portraying speakers as caricatures of ignorance or flattening their speech to conform to standardized English. This selective representation strips Appalachian dialects of their linguistic richness and historical significance, reinforcing the perception that deviation from mainstream norms signals inferiority. Speer (1993) examines how classic American literature, particularly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, relied on dialect-heavy speech to depict Appalachian characters as simple, backward, or out of touch with modern society. These literary conventions helped solidify national perceptions of Appalachian dialects as markers of ignorance, shaping broader cultural attitudes that persist today. These attitudes, in turn, manifest in academic settings, where Appalachian students often face the same implicit biases that were cemented in literary and cinematic traditions.

By tracing the representation of Appalachian dialects from historical literature to modern media, it becomes clear that linguistic discrimination is not merely about accent or grammar but about how cultural narratives shape real-world consequences. The persistent framing of

Appalachian English as a marker of backwardness influences the way students and scholars from the region are perceived within educational institutions. Appalachian students who speak in their natural dialect often find themselves in a double bind: either they conform to standardized English or risk having their academic abilities questioned. This pressure to modify speech patterns reflects the enduring impact of media portrayals, demonstrating that the cultural devaluation of Appalachian dialects is not confined to fiction but extends into the lived experiences of those navigating academic spaces.

Speaking Up: The Appalachian Experience in the Classroom

The pressures faced by Appalachians in academia reveal the real-world consequences of linguistic discrimination, extending beyond mere accent differences to fundamental issues of credibility, identity, and belonging. Many college students from Appalachia report feeling the need to suppress their dialect to avoid being perceived as less competent, reinforcing a form of linguistic insecurity that affects not only their participation in academic discourse but also their overall confidence in their intellectual abilities (Boggs, 2023; Labov, 1972). This pressure is particularly pronounced in disciplines where formal presentation and standardized English are emphasized, such as law, medicine, and the humanities, where Appalachian students may feel they must overcorrect their speech to be taken seriously. The expectation to conform linguistically can create an internalized sense of inferiority, leading students to question their academic legitimacy despite their qualifications.

Faculty members from the region encounter similar biases, facing assumptions that their dialect signals a lack of intellectual rigor. This can make it more difficult to secure tenure-track positions, leadership roles, and research opportunities. Appalachian scholars often find themselves needing to code-switch in professional settings to be considered credible, a skill that comes at the cost of authenticity. The pressure to adopt standardized English as a professional necessity reinforces the idea that Appalachian speech is an obstacle to success rather than a legitimate linguistic variation. This bias is further institutionalized through hiring practices, peer reviews, and classroom dynamics that subtly privilege those who speak in more widely accepted dialects.

Beyond formal evaluations, the perception of Appalachian English as inherently unsophisticated often manifests in classroom discussions and social interactions. If an Appalachian student makes a grammatical mistake, it is treated as confirmation of their lack of preparedness; students from more privileged backgrounds who make similar mistakes are given the benefit of the doubt. This double standard reinforces existing inequalities, making it harder for Appalachian students to feel fully integrated into academic spaces.

An Eastern Kentucky University student shared her experience with linguistic discrimination, explaining that while she has not faced significant issues, she has encountered instances where others took her less seriously as a tutor and lab assistant. During an exam prep session, a student questioned whether she was mispronouncing anatomical terms or if it was just her accent. She noted that such moments, while subtle, can reinforce insecurities about one's dialect. Participant 1 also observed that some students and professors who are unfamiliar with Appalachian life may unconsciously carry biases that affect classroom dynamics. She recounted instances where peers volunteered to "speak for the group" in presentations, assuming that their speech would be easier to understand.

Similarly, a student at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky recounted a particularly stark instance of discrimination in a sociology class. During a discussion about rural resource

disparities, another student openly remarked that Appalachian accents were "funny and hard to take seriously." This comment deeply impacted her, making her hesitant to participate in future discussions. She noted that linguistic bias can make it feel as if Appalachian students are starting from a different point than their peers and thus have to prove their intelligence before their words are taken seriously. While she has also received positive remarks about her accent, she pointed out that negative experiences tend to overshadow the positive ones. She further expressed concern that grading rubrics that evaluate presentation skills and tone of voice may unintentionally disadvantage students with Appalachian accents.

A Southeastern Kentuckian and current Harvard student shared similar experiences of linguistic bias in academic settings. He recalled being told by a professor that his accent was "distracting" and that he should work on "neutralizing" it for professional settings. This comment reinforced his fear that his natural way of speaking would always be perceived as less competent. The same student noted that even outside the classroom, peers would jokingly imitate his accent, often under the guise of friendly teasing. The repetition of these moments contributed to a broader sense of alienation. He found himself avoiding certain words or phrases in order to minimize his accent, further deepening his internalized insecurity about how he spoke.

My experience as a Stanford student and Southeastern Kentucky native has made me acutely aware of the biases tied to Appalachian speech. Before coming to Stanford, I had already encountered linguistic discrimination; at a political seminar during a summer camp, I was mocked for my accent by my peers who fixated on how I spoke rather than what I said. That moment stuck with me, but I had hoped that ideas would matter more than pronunciation in higher education. Instead, at Stanford, I have experienced similar dismissals. In class discussions, I have caught peers exchanging glances when I speak, smirking at my pronunciation, or subtly questioning my credibility. Outside the classroom, I have been told that I "don't sound like I belong," as if my presence at Stanford is at odds with the way I speak. Over time, I have become hyper-aware of my voice, sometimes softening my accent or avoiding certain words to prevent judgment. Yet every time I do, it feels as though I'm erasing a piece of myself. My speech is not just an accent—it carries my home, my family, and my experiences. The double standard is frustrating; my accent is treated as charming or amusing in casual settings, but in academic spaces, it is rarely associated with intelligence.

The fascination with Appalachian English in popular culture does not necessarily translate into academic respect. A respondent noted that while people outside the region sometimes express curiosity about the dialect, this interest often carries a condescending undertone. Comments like "charming" or "quaint" subtly reinforce stereotypes, suggesting that Appalachian speech belongs in folk stories rather than intellectual discourse. One student participant recalled being asked whether she had to travel outside her hometown to buy shoes—an absurd question reflecting the persistence of negative stereotypes about Appalachia. Another student similarly recalled a childhood experience at summer camp where another camper from Northern Kentucky remarked, "Your accent is so cute, you must have grown up in the hicks." These experiences highlight how even seemingly innocuous comments can reinforce a sense of otherness.

The themes of overt and covert prejudice in regional schools and the impact of linguistic discrimination on self-perception are recurring challenges for Appalachian students. Prejudice, whether explicit or subtle, can shape academic experiences in ways that diminish confidence and sense of belonging; additionally, prejudice isn't limited to institutions outside of the Appalachian bubble. Students at regional schools where Appalachian student populations are sizable face the

same degree of overt and covert stereotyping. Linguistic discrimination reinforces negative self-perceptions, making students feel as though their natural mode of communication is an obstacle rather than an asset. These intertwined biases create barriers that Appalachian students must navigate throughout their academic journeys. The cumulative effect of these experiences can lead to decreased confidence, reluctance to engage in academic discussions, and even decisions to leave academia altogether. For many Appalachian students, the struggle to balance academic expectations with cultural authenticity creates an ongoing sense of alienation, reinforcing broader societal messaging that asserts success requires shedding one's linguistic heritage. However, as one student participant emphasized, continued representation in academic spaces is crucial. The best way to challenge stereotypes is for Appalachians to remain visible, vocal, and successful in their fields.

Reshaping Appalachia's Narrative

Addressing linguistic discrimination in academia requires both institutional and cultural changes. Universities must actively recognize linguistic diversity as an asset rather than a deficit and foster environments where all forms of speech are valued and respected. Linguistic diversity, particularly involving regional dialects such as those spoken in Appalachia, should be seen as a reflection of cultural heritage and identity, not as a barrier to success. To combat linguistic bias and ensure equal opportunities for all students, institutions need to implement policies that encourage inclusivity and challenge the dominant linguistic norms that perpetuate discrimination.

One of the key strategies for combating linguistic discrimination is incorporating sociolinguistics into university curricula. Educating students about the legitimacy and social significance of regional dialects, including Appalachian English, is an effective way to dismantle harmful stereotypes. As a field, sociolinguistics examines the relationship between language and society, helping students understand the complex ways in which dialects reflect cultural identity and historical context. Through this understanding, students can develop a deeper appreciation for linguistic variation and become more accepting of dialects that differ from standard academic language. By fostering an appreciation for the diversity of speech, universities can create an environment where students from linguistically marginalized backgrounds feel validated and empowered in their communication styles.

In addition, encouraging inclusive pedagogy is critical in addressing linguistic bias in academic settings. Professors and educators should be trained to recognize and counteract linguistic bias, particularly in grading and classroom interactions. Research shows that educators may unintentionally favor students who speak in standard dialects, which can disproportionately affect those from regions with distinct speech patterns, such as Appalachia (Hudley & Mallinson, 2011). Professional development programs focused on inclusivity can help professors identify their biases and learn strategies to assess students' work based on content and critical thinking rather than linguistic style. By creating an equitable grading environment, professors can ensure that all students have equal opportunities to succeed, regardless of their dialect or language background.

Activists must continue to challenge media representations of Appalachian identity. Often, portrayals of Appalachian dialects and culture in popular media are reductive and stereotypical, reinforcing negative perceptions of individuals from the region. By advocating for more accurate and diverse portrayals of Appalachian communities, academics can contribute to a broader cultural shift that recognizes the value of regional dialects and cultures. As these

portrayals evolve, they can help dismantle harmful stereotypes and promote a more inclusive understanding of Appalachian identity in both academic and public spheres.

Change Your Ears, Not My Accent

For too long, Appalachian speech has been used as a marker to silence, dismiss, and exclude. Linguistic bias isn't just about accents—it's about power. It reinforces economic and cultural barriers, making it harder for Appalachian students and scholars to be taken seriously, regardless of their intelligence or achievements. My research reveals where these biases take root: in media that turns Appalachian English into a joke and in classrooms where students are ridiculed for and second-guess their voices. But Appalachian English is not broken English. It is a dialect with history, identity, and legitimacy. Academia must move beyond empty rhetoric and recognize Appalachian English as valid, ensuring that students are judged on their ideas, not their accents. We don't need to change how we speak. Academia needs to change how it listens.

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