

# Language Ideologies on TikTok

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Jezične ideologije na TikToku

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Master's Thesis

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## Abstract

This Master's thesis found nine TikToks which present language ideologies and analysed them through the lens of Multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA). The goal of this paper was to find out what language ideologies are disseminated in the modern landscape of social media, and in what ways, using the modern tools these applications provide. In the introduction it is noted that TikTok seems to be the best platform to carry out this research as it boasts a considerable number of users, therefore leading to more potential examples of language ideologies. The nine examples chosen for this paper are broken down into three categories: three TikToks which present regional variant discrimination, five which present the standard language ideology, and one which is a parody of language ideologies. The elements this paper focuses on, in terms of representational strategies, were the gaze, pose, setting, attributes, and lexical choices, all in the hopes of thoroughly analysing these TikToks to uncover all the implications and meanings. The paper also focuses on the modern editing techniques and audio they employ to further add to their point. TikTok has a real community of users spreading their opinions on language, almost always at the expense of some other speakers, leading to language anxiety, erasure of non-standard linguistic features, and stigmatization of non-standard language usage.

## Sažetak

Ovaj diplomski rad pronašao je devet TikTokova koji sadrže jezične ideologije i analizirao ih je u kadru Multimodalne kritičke analize diskursa (MCDA). Cilj rada bio je ustanoviti koje jezične ideologije se šire u suvremenom prostoru društvenih mreža i na koje načine, koristeći suvremene alate koje te aplikacije pružaju. U uvodu je napomenuto da se čini da je TikTok najbolja platforma za provedbu ovog istraživanja jer se može pohvaliti znatnim brojem korisnika, što dovodi do više potencijalnih primjera jezičnih ideologija. Devet odabranih primjera za ovaj rad podijeljeno je u tri kategorije: tri TikToka koji prikazuju diskriminaciju regionalnih varijanti, pet prikazuju ideologiju standardnog jezika i jedan koji je parodija jezičnih ideologija. Elementi na koje se rad usredotočio, u smislu reprezentacijskih strategija, su pogled, poza, okruženje, predmeti i leksički odabiri, sve kako bismo temeljito analizirali ove TikTokove i otkrili sve implikacije i značenja u njima. Rad se također usredotočuje na moderne tehnike uređivanja slike i zvuka koje se koriste za dodatno pojačavanje nečije osnovne ideje. TikTok ima pravu zajednicu korisnika koji šire svoja mišljenja o jeziku,

gotovo uvijek nauštrb nekih drugih govornika, što dovodi do straha od jezika, brisanja nestandardnih jezičnih elemenata i stigmatizacije upotrebe nestandardnog jezika.

## Introduction

Language is in constant fluctuation. With the ever-increasing number of speakers and ways they can interact and communicate, this fluctuation seems to speed up and snowball. A particular point of focus for many language researchers in the past was to keep up with this speed to map down the changes, and more importantly, the reasoning behind them. At the turn of the century a particularly fruitful development for these researchers was the invention of social media, or Internet-based sites made to breed social interaction (Barton, & Page, 2014: 5). This, paired with the invention of smartphones, greatly increased the time in each day when a person could be expected to communicate with someone when they are not face to face with someone else, leading to more overall communication. Another notable change in the ways people could communicate was user-generated content, or moving away from a consumer-like experience online to that of a creator (Barton, Page, 2014: 8). If we put all of these together into a single image, we get seemingly boundless communication, creativity, and development happening in a span of twenty years. This could be interpreted as the perfect place for language research, not only because of its modernity, but because of the sheer amount of content and communication that one might find interesting. This paper will focus on one particular niche in this gargantuan image, and that is content created with the intent of commenting on language, and which language ideologies their creators present, and in what ways. However, instead of trying to navigate the entire online space, we have chosen to investigate content found on TikTok.

Among the ten largest social media sites or apps, TikTok stands out for our research purposes for two reasons. Firstly, its massive popularity cannot be overstated, it boasts around a billion monthly active users (Lua, 2023), and it surpassed Google as the most popular website in 2021, according to data from Cloudflare (Rosenblatt, 2021). The second reason is its relatively recent boom in popularity; the site was first launched in 2016, but exploded in user count in 2020. The combination of these two facts about TikTok make it compelling enough to be a part of our research into language ideologies on social media. TikTok is also notable for being quite user friendly, allowing for many simple editing techniques, filters, and audio and video effects to be added to a creator's TikTok within minutes. Content is bountiful not only because of the large number of active users, (and because most TikToks last around ten seconds) but also because of the speed at which one could potentially create content.

Before delving into the theory and methods of this paper, we must first briefly explain what our expectations from this research are. As we have noted, TikTok is a dynamic online space, so we expect to have some trouble sifting through all the examples suitable for this paper in order to find the ones that fit it best. Additionally, we expect to pick up several trends in our niche with discernible formulas and predictability. We expect several novel methods in presenting one's opinions on TikTok that add to the creator's point or make it clearer. We now move on to our theoretical framework, where we will discuss Critical Discourse Analysis and language ideologies.

## Theoretical Framework

The umbrella under which this paper will operate is that of Critical Discourse Analysis, or CDA, which is a combination of several approaches and sets of tools used to analyse language to uncover the ways in which speakers present events, what they imply, and what they omit when speaking (Machin, & Mayr, 2012: 1). It investigates the ways in which language can produce social realities or distort them based on the speaker's motivations (ibid.). An important idea in CDA is investigating how social power is maintained or lessened through language, and that is important to contest these abuses of language and not remain neutral (Machin, & Mayr, 2011: 8-9). Researchers concerned with this aspect of language hold that all speakers inherently promote societal factors into their speech, while trying to normalise them, or make them appear to be common sense (Machin, & Mayr, 2012: 2-3). This attribute of language, making someone's views appear commonsensical, is shared by ideologies, which we will discuss shortly. This paper will use the tools and principals provided by CDA, but with the added visual and auditory elements provided by Multimodal CDA, since the TikToks compiled for this paper all contain important video, audio and static clues that are inseparable from the text or speech. The specific details that we took notice of when researching will be further discussed in the Methodology section of this paper. Until then, a few words about language ideologies.

Language ideologies are defined as the following: "sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived structure and use." (Woolard, 1994: 57). They are culturally based, and are also perceived to be common sense, particularly in the vein of standard language ideologies, which is a primary focus of this paper (ibid.). Standard language ideologies hold the standard to be the 'correct' form of language, the primary and

most important possible variant that a language can possess, as it is imbued with rules that ‘just make sense’ (Milroy, 2001: 535-536). Speakers that deviate from the standard are seen as not being able to distinguish right from wrong, as it is accepted and taught that there is one correct variant of a language (ibid. 535). In this way people are judged and othered on their perceived ability to adhere to the rules of the standard (ibid. 537). On the other hand, someone’s proficiency with the standard holds prestige, the speaker being seen as knowledgeable and valuable. The combination of these two realities about the standard language ideology often results in a conscious erasure of one’s non-standard utterances, language anxiety, and unnecessary judgment or implication of a lack of education or intelligence uttered by standard ideologues. This ideology will appear many times in this paper, and it will be presented and defended in many different ways, but they will adhere to the fact that the standard is simply correct, and everything else is not.

Apart from the standard ideology, another ideology will be present in our examples, and that is regional variant discrimination, which is a belief that some regional language variants are ‘better’ or ‘worse’ than others, that some accents are worse either because they are hard to understand, or because the ideologues do not like that region or its speakers. Sometimes the speakers will imply that their variant is the ‘true’ version of their language. In this case deviation from the standard is seen to have prestige in a particular region. This is an example of language ideology in which the denigration of other speakers or regions is done through language and is not really about language itself, as it hard to pinpoint why or how a different accent or vocabulary invokes negative emotions when heard. All of these stances reject linguistic arbitrariness, when some languages or dialects are perceived to be more ‘beautiful’ or ‘logical’, when language does not have the capacity to evaluate itself or other instances of itself, it is something we as speakers attribute to language and make judgments based on our evaluations (Milroy, 2012: 11). In any case, several TikToks will highlight this ideology and the different ways in which they are illustrated. Now we will move on to a more detailed look at the tools we used to analyse TikToks.

## Methodology

We will now discuss the details that we paid attention to when analysing TikToks. Once we found the TikToks deemed suitable for further analysis, there were several things to look out for before even re-watching them. There is a lot of external information that proved to be useful to us, starting with the name of the author and the title of the TikTok. These came to be



important as they either further illustrate the point of the author or they describe the author in some way before viewing, setting the tone for the TikTok, as it can either provide an air of humour or authority, or anything in between. Whether the author promoting a language ideology finds their stance or the people they disagree with funny or serious provides us with valuable information, because we can extract implications from it. In terms of the number of likes and comments on the TikToks, we paid no attention to the level of engagement they attracted, as they do not add to the overall point of the TikTok. We did, however, look at the comments on several TikToks as they sometimes disagreed with the original author or provided more arguments when agreeing with the author, which underlines a point in our introduction about the level of engagement and communication present on the platform. This is all information that we looked for before viewing the TikToks, but now we will briefly discuss the representational strategies employed by the creators and what they could mean (Machin, & Mayr, 2012: 77).

Since most TikToks in this paper are of a person speaking into the camera, a crucial tool provided by CDA is analysing the gaze (Machin, & Mayr, 2012:70). The gaze can be pointed in any direction, and based on that provides several meanings. If the person is looking away in an almost 90-degree angle away from the viewer it can be interpreted as being indifferent or nonchalant. On the other hand, as with most of our examples, looking straight into the camera can signify importance, it can construct a dialogue, intimacy, or trust (ibid. 71). Sometimes the pose is important coupled with the gaze, as if someone is slouched over it could mean they do not care or are indifferent, whereas if they sit straight, it could mean they are focused on the topic at hand (ibid. 74). Another important element of each TikTok is the setting (ibid. 52). They can differ widely based on their locations, the two most important of which for this paper are the street, and the home. The street is usually busy and it usually involves young people conducting street interviews, which gives a dynamic, energetic and youthful air to the TikTok, in which the interactions and responses are usually either very positive or very negative, with little room for neutrality. The home is more relaxed; the background is usually non-descript with little to no noise, highlighting the person's voice more than the street (ibid. 52-54). Home settings sometimes have attributes, or objects, behind which there could be meaning (ibid. 51). Mugs could represent a state of winding-down, the same with food, or books, or any similar objects. If we see papers lying about in disorder, it could be perceived as busy, dynamic and hectic (ibid. 51-52). Lastly, we focused on the words, modes and structures the authors used, or their lexical choices (ibid. 42). Using

official language or imperatives is often done for the purposes of establishing authority, whereas informal words and phrases are trying to create a more relaxed atmosphere, where the creator will try to appear like us. With these important elements in mind we will now move on to our examples and analyses, where we will reiterate some of these tools where necessary.

## Results

The following section will go over nine TikToks handpicked for this paper. They all present some sort of language ideology that falls under the umbrella of MCDA, so discourse that uses multiple modes, in this case 1) audio, someone speaking, and usually a song playing on top, and 2) video, the visual of the person and their surroundings and usually some graphics and text edited over them (Barton, & Page, 2014: 96-97). They will be divided into three broad categories – the first comprising of TikToks where the opinions on language shared are completely subjective, supposedly only light-hearted jabs at some of their linguistic pet peeves, but maintaining the perceived supremacy of a particular regional variant. The second group, and the largest in this paper, is also comprised of people sharing their opinions on language, but by appealing to the standard variant of English, correcting people in the process or judging them. One of them will be from an ‘educational’ standpoint, representing the correctness of the standard language, trying to right the wrongs that they see and hear online and elsewhere, serving as a speaking or writing tip. The last category is only one TikTok, and one that runs against the stream of all the other ones outlined in this paper, a parody.

The TikToks will be analysed in the following structure: we will first briefly comment on the channel, or account, that posted the content, if it is a channel that usually comments on language. This will be followed by a description of all the multimodal aspects of the TikTok and all the information they provide us with, as almost all the information is pertinent in the bigger picture. Once the plot, or the message of the TikTok is explained, we will underline the ideology, the way it was expressed, what it implied, and what tools were necessary to decipher these points. In several TikToks we will also include the comment sections, as they are often also riddled with ideology, anxiety, ridicule and social pressure, in a few cases more than the original authors of the TikToks who generally try to be as likeable as possible. These examples do not pretend to be an all-encompassing representation of what can be found on TikTok in this niche – nine short TikToks are only a drop in the ocean of content that is present on this one social media app, let alone all the other apps that are not covered. It does

hope however to be a contribution to understanding how it works and how language ideologies are propagated on it.

Before getting into the examples, a brief word about a structural similarity that most of them share: a person talking directly into the camera at close range sharing their opinion about a certain aspect of language – a talking head shot with no person behind the camera (usually a phone). A lot of these will then, by definition, have the same gaze (Machin, & Mayr, 2012: 70), a term that will be used often in this section. There are a couple outliers which we will get into when necessary, such as the first two in the next paragraph.

1. Regional variant discrimination

- A. “THAT ENDING THOUGH! 😂😂”

- B. “DID YOU SEE THAT? 😂😂”

The first two TikToks come in a pair, as they are structurally identical. They have the same author, more or less the same setup (a question posed on the street, a genre of content popularised by the likes of Jimmy Kimmel), and even the same question, but the answer and the visual edits over the video are quite different, which makes for an interesting analysis. The whole channel is dedicated to a man asking random people on the street or in venues questions or posing challenges hoping for a funny response or reaction. The setting is always urban, busy, and dynamic, and the people interviewed are young, which added together results in a more fun watching experience for an audience that is above all young (Machin, & Mayr, 2012: 52). The titles of the TikToks do not provide any information, and are there mostly to attract more clicks, but have two identical hashtags, #relate, #worstaccent, which is what grabbed my attention.

In the first TikTok, after establishing that both the author and the man on the street are from Birmingham, the author asks the leading question destined to have a good answer - “What is the worst accent in the UK,?” - to which the reply is “Liverpool”, the rationale being “Bro you can’t understand them”. When asked to imitate the accent, the man doubles down with “No because you won’t understand me, there’s no point!”, and after this exchange they settle on a sound which resembles the bark of a dog. The TikTok ends with an eruption of laughter and 10 crying-laughing emojis on the screen. The other emojis on the screen during their exchanges are standard for TikTok, most statements ending with a variant of the smiling or laughing emoji, keeping things light and funny. The second TikTok is much different however, even with the exact same setup, “What is the worst accent in the UK?”. This time the person, a woman from

Liverpool, responds that the Birmingham accent is the worst, and the rationale is “Because you can’t even understand them half the time, d’you know what I mean?”, a basically identical response to the TikTok previous. When she says this, she is asked to repeat herself, because it was apparently unintelligible, and after a quick meme is inserted (HA, GOT ‘IM), she repeats herself in a different tone, and the author loudly remarks “Where’s that scouse accent gone?”. The line of questioning repeats as in the first TikTok and she is asked to imitate the Birmingham accent, and after she more or less repeats the question in a deeper voice, the author responds with “Just trying to bug me up, ye? Just trying to bug me up!” while laughing, ending on a positive note. As he is saying this, the famous AI voice actress on TikTok reads the text that appears on screen in the last few seconds “Is she right?” and a cry-laugh emoji.

While the two TikToks have a great many identical elements, there are a few glaring differences. In the multimodal realm, the visual element of text and emojis on screen serving as subtitles and screen saturation (having more changing and flashing elements on screen often lead to a higher chance of viewer retention) are written out in a much different way. The woman’s statements are written in a grossly exaggerated way, “LIVEAPOOOOOOL”, “Ermm birmingham omg”, “Because you \*inaudible speech\*” and later on the author’s commentary on screen “\*Accent changes\*”, implying that he is also of the opinion of the man from his hometown in the first TikTok, the Scouse accent is unintelligible. Spelling out her statements in this way, underlining the notion of irony when she disparages the Birmingham accent for being hard to understand when she herself is apparently the one that is hard to understand, undermines her point, and uses her accent as a tool against her own point. Both the people asked on the street use the same logic to arrive to the same point, understanding is the metric by which an accent is rated good or bad, and their own ability or inability to understand speakers with the accent is the accent’s fault. Of course, the question itself is absurd, as an accent cannot be good or bad from a ‘neutral’ point of view, only more or less similar to other accents based on their linguistic features, but both of them answer to keep the author’s show going. The author’s prejudice is especially visible with the addition of a second voice saying “Is she right?” at the end of the second TikTok, something that is also missing from the first TikTok. Additional validation of the author’s point is not sought after in the first TikTok, adding to the already present feeling of making the woman from Liverpool lesser or dehumanized, if we factor in the imitation of a dog’s bark at the end of the other TikTok. Language ideology, in this case regional discrimination, is targeted at the woman from Liverpool, presented through a visual mode, the text and emojis on screen, and with additional audio from the AI voice actor.

Regional discrimination occurs when speakers deem other speakers' non-standard accents less valuable, annoying, 'not a real accent', rural, unintelligent, and similar prejudiced descriptors. The exaggerated transcripts of her statements and the author asking the audience if her point is valid, are coupled with his behaviour, asking her to repeat herself when she was not really unintelligible and commenting on her accent when it changes, which exerts pressure. This can lead to further stigmatization of accents and people who use them, all the while normalizing the behaviour in which we judge people and the way they speak, resulting in more tension and pressure, and a situation where people become aware of the prejudice against their accent, leading them to change it or erase it for good, so as not to be ridiculed.

A quick look at the comment section of both TikToks gives us a variety of accent-related opinions, mostly over which accent is best and which is worst, with no argumentation, such as the following:

„Scouse is the worst or maby Glaswegian“

„Birmingham is the worst though lol“

„I from Newcastle, nd I don't like Liverpool accent!“

„We scouse do hate the brummie accent 😊 we are aware people hate ours too lol“

There also seems to be a level of self-awareness on the last commenter's part, that their accent is hated but they hate other accents back. It is interesting that something as arbitrary as an accent can be found in a context with the word as powerful as 'hate'. The next example is also UK accent-related, but in the talking head frame that we mentioned earlier.

C. “Just not an attractive accent tbf“

This TikTok is quite straightforward: the singer EM/ELLE is sitting in a car and talking to the camera, establishing a dialogue between the viewer and the singer, saying “People say why do you sing in an American accent and not, like, your accent? And I say cos this:”, when she proceeds to sing the same line from the song “Make Me Feel Good” by Belters Only featuring Jazzy in an American accent and then in her accent. The point can be extrapolated from the title, without which it might not be clear what she is trying to say, “Just not an attractive accent tbf”, commenting on the attractiveness of her original accent and the one she assumes when singing professionally. It presents the same visuals as the first two TikToks, text on screen

which serve as a transcript of what she is saying, but at the bare minimum – no emojis, and no added commentary on her part, only most of what she says.

This TikTok and its message could be regarded to be the result of social pressure and some stereotypes or damaging perceptions of British accents that we mentioned in our earlier examples, regional discrimination. She does not feel comfortable singing in her natural accent, and so she flattens it, changes it, to make it more marketable, or more attractive. In this instance, the language ideology appears to be self-inflicted, which is why we move to rule this to be a consequence of language ideologies, such as the ones seen in the first two TikToks, being propagated enough to have a real-world effect. Sadly, this TikTok only helps to further propagate the baseless notion of British accents not sounding attractive. All of this put together also reinforces the notion put forth by Milroy that there are common beliefs wherein some languages are more attractive or logical, rejecting linguistic arbitrariness (2012: 11). The comment section in this one is, mostly, quite positive, on the other hand,

„Yea but see.. As an American. Your accent sounds amazing singing. 🥰“

„Sounds better scouse“

„Can u only sing in an amarican accent“

It is interesting to see more positive opinions on the scouse accent on an unrelated TikTok, further underlining that accents are something that people have real and tangible opinions on. Positive or negative, they have effects that ripple out and cause anxiety or skewed views of the attractiveness of accents, which is above all subjective in the end. This results in a virtual erasure of non-standard accents in music, because the more the people shy away from using their accents in songs, the stranger it becomes when someone actually does use it, making erasure of accents ‘normal’. This concludes the first part of this section, where the content creators do not present themselves as educators, but rather share language opinions and pet peeves.

## 2. Appealing to the standard variant

### A. “Does bad grammar drive you crazy?”

The channel Justagram is a collection of brief videos whose main purpose is humour, sometimes self-deprecating ‘old-people’ jokes, or the author acting cute in a given situation.

In brief, the video highlighted for this paper is not in a collection of similar videos commenting on everyday grammar, but the exception. The general setting and atmosphere are Christmas-heavy, specifically with the song playing over video, Candy Cane Lane by Sia, and Christmas decorations in the background. While the video is posted on December 20<sup>th</sup>, the Christmas theme seems coincidental, if not only to provide an air of light-heartedness, a just-for-fun attitude. While walking down a hallway, she stops and notices red letters on a mirror saying “YOUR NEXT!”. She is first confused, then she laughs and covers her mouth, and looks back at the camera making a ‘can you believe it’ face. In the end she takes out her lipstick and changes the text to “YOU’RE NEXT!” by adding an apostrophe and an e. Afterwards she erupts in joy and looks at the camera one last time, moving away from the shot. Over the video we find the text “Gram hates bad grammar”, where we finally arrive to the pertinent part of the video. The text on the glass, “Your Next!” in red, is referred to as bad grammar, the connotation (Machin, & Mayr, 2012: 32) being that non-standard English is bad English, and that she cannot stand it. The joke is supposedly this, as the original intention of the video is humour – when faced with a menacing threat on her safety or wellbeing, her only reactions are mocking it and correcting it immediately. After correcting it, she jumps with happiness, as if the larger crime in the situation, bad grammar, was handled properly.

The emotions imply the following: spelling errors, or as she calls them, bad grammar, are a source of a whole string of negative emotions, whose only solution is correction on the spot. The correction of bad grammar is more important in the situation, but not before laughing at it and scoffing. The direct looks at the camera, setting up a silent dialogue between the viewer and the author, in an otherwise acted-out situation, along with the warm ambiance of the setting and cheerful music are in stark contrast to much more powerful messages expressed by the following words and facial expressions: *hate*, *bad*, *driving someone crazy* (in the description), shock, and mocking laughter. The ideology of the standard language, even in a seemingly utmost informal setting such as this one, is at full display in this instance, spelling errors are bad, the author hates them, and they drive her crazy. The multimodal element, text on screen, is edited over the entire video, unmoving and unchanging, setting up the point of an otherwise speechless TikTok. The text over video editing tool is especially useful for making these messages clear without stating them using audio, which cuts down on playtime and uses a lot of dead space in the frame to fill it out with something, and will be present in pretty much every TikTok in this paper. To return to the grandmother though, the range of negative emotions she experienced would have all been avoided had the person behind the

threatening message used ‘correct language’. Seeing as the behaviour she exhibits in this TikTok is ridicule, it further normalizes the mocking of people’s spelling, and perhaps even encourages it. The more this type of behaviour persists, the more anxiety there will be over writing any sort of message online, a setting in which grammatical correctness is quite low on the list of priorities to fulfil.

What we might also consider in this video is the comment section, where several users affirm the author’s intention of propping standard language up, with comments such as these:

“seriously. I've been known to correct the graffiti on the bathroom walls at work. 🤔🤔🤔 even teachers make mistakes. 😬😬😬😬”

“phew.. my grammer anxiety was going crazy- thank goodness for your lipstick!! 😄😄”

“Yep, bad grammar drives me CRAZY!!! And poor math skills... I asked for half dozen chicken nuggets and was told they only have 3, 6 or 9.”

“How about "I don't got any"? That's like fingernails on a chalkboard lol.”

The second comment in particular is interesting because they themselves made an error that should drive them crazy, writing *grammer* instead of *grammar*, ironically. The negative emotions expressed by these people are all in line with the author’s, with powerful ideologically loaded words such as anxiety, crazy, bad, crazy again, poor and a particularly potent comparison between the extremely unpleasant sound of fingernails on chalkboards to someone speaking English with a dialect, to the point of having a physical reaction such as cringing because of a sound. It is also worth mentioning that these loaded sentences are in the first two cases followed by light-hearted crying laughing emojis. People seem to take great issue with non-standard English, spelling mistakes and dialects, and they all present these instances of language which could be otherwise classified as informal, chatting, and relaxed, as stressful and anxiety-inducing. Non-standard is wrong, and they are victims of other people’s bad English. There seems to be a feedback loop here, as it is often noted that correcting people and strongly reacting to non-standard language production in informal situations is often anxiety-inducing in its own right.

B. “Kimchi Karen can’t stand improper grammar or consistent misspellings. Please check the red squiggly line before hitting send”

The following TikTok is made by the channel kk31387, which generally posts structurally identical content of her speaking on different topics and sharing her opinion on things like



sex, relationships, and preferences, with the gaze (Machin, & Mayr, 2012: 70) pointed directly at the camera, suggesting closeness and a personal conversation. In this particular TikTok, she goes over a personal language preference, and specifically people writing her comments supposedly riddled with grammatical errors. The first statement is the following: “Call me a Karen for this, but one of my biggest icks on this app in my comment section is when people leave really insulting comments towards me, but it’s full of grammatical errors and misspellings.” There are a few words in this sentence alone that need some explaining, as they are quite modern and popular online. The first one is Karen, whose definition we will look up on dictionary.com, “*Karen* is a pejorative slang term for an obnoxious, angry, entitled, and often racist middle-aged white woman who uses her privilege to get her way or police other people’s behaviours.” The usage of this word employed not as a proper noun for people named Karen but as a generalized and insulting common noun for a specific group of people started a couple of years ago, when some people linked the name with this obtrusive and privileged behaviour. The author in this instance allows the public to call her a Karen, because the opinion that follows is one that distresses her enough to elicit this behaviour from her, hence the TikTok in the first place. If we look at the title, we can see that she calls herself “Kimchi Karen”, labelling herself as Korean and not white as our definition suggests.

The second word is *ick*, which, according to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, is “used to express disgust at something unpleasant or offensive”. She is trying to say that misspellings and grammatical errors disgust her, after which she continues,

“I can’t even take it seriously after I try to stumble through what they say. ‘You only care about money, you’re just a gold-digger’, and the whole time they don’t know the difference between *to* and *too* and *your* possessive versus *you’re* contraction. And I know this seems very nitpicky, but this is all stuff that we learned in grade school. If you can’t spell or use proper grammar, you more than likely don’t have gold to dig, so just knock it off. Like I don’t actually understand in this digital age where every single program highlights every misspelling or grammatical error, that you can still make them consistently, and not think ‘Oh, maybe I’m wrong.’ A lot of people defend their lack of ability to use proper grammar or spell correctly by saying ‘It doesn’t matter to the message.’, and I’m kind of like, I get that to a point, but if it doesn’t matter, just do it right. If you can’t spell, I’m sorry, I can’t take you seriously, but I also was a runner-up spelling bee champ in third grade, and I lost to a sixth-grader, so maybe I’ve been nitpicky my entire life.”

There is a lot to go over here, but first let us discuss the only visual edit in the TikTok, which is, as per usual, a superimposed bit of text edited after filming, which does not change throughout the TikTok, “If you’re going to leave insulting comments please use proper grammar and spell correctly 🙄”. The frame alternates between two almost identical shots, the only difference being that her posture changes a little bit, the point probably being to prevent the TikTok

from getting stale, as it is only a person speaking, this time without subtitles. There are also a couple of interesting hashtags in the description, such as #grammarpolice and #educationiskey. This once again demonstrates the ideology of the standard language, particularly in the way she assumes authority over other people's comments, rude or otherwise, by simply negating them on the basis of perceived correctness. The content of the comments is void due to the abundance of grammatical errors. The assumption of authority and negating other people's opinions is seen here in two ways: when mentioning that the errors people make, for which she provides two examples, she underlines the early point in everyone's life at which this is taught (in grade schools), again undermining them as individuals, implying that those mistakes are inexcusable and therefore valid for discarding, and once more when she mentions her participation in spelling bees, trying to justify her behaviour. Other than the TikTok itself, we see this in the hashtag #educationiskey, on the one hand propping up the importance of education, and herself along with it, and making the people who make mistakes in the comments lesser, uneducated, they cannot be taken seriously, and they should avoid appearing in the comment section from now on. This is in part what Milroy (2001) describes as prestige, a social category assumed by speakers, and attributed to language, when it is the speakers themselves who distribute the prestige. In this sense, the standard language has high prestige, especially above the people in her comment section (532).

The author is not only trying to assume the supposedly neutral stance of the standard, implying that all the other variants are of lesser value and are discardable; she also quotes the people in her comment section and presents their arguments in her own way. What is interesting is that she partially concedes to an argument that she should concede to fully, when she says "A lot of people defend their lack of ability to use proper grammar or spell correctly by saying 'It doesn't matter to the message.', and I'm kind of like, I get that to a point, but if it doesn't matter, just do it right." This seems to completely reduce her argument to a point of personal preference, undermining the authority she is trying to assume. Even if TikTok comment sections were robust academic environments (it would not matter even if they were), this should not excuse her from conflating education and spellchecking in a TikTok comment, implying that not knowing how to spell 'properly' instantly disqualifies someone's opinion or argument. Not to mention a lot of other assumptions that she makes that are unverifiable and, in the end, pointless: whether they hold this worldview and even care if they make a spelling 'mistake', whether they even went to grade school, whether they believe an informal setting is a rational place to relax and type comments how they want, etc. To conclude, she undermines her point

once more by mentioning the digital era, because if all the programs really did show which parts of the comment were mistakes, education would be a non-factor. Her rationale once more highlights the fragility of the arguments set forth by the ideology of the standard, that a language variant inherently represents ‘correctness’, and that you are an outsider if you do not subscribe to this worldview, in this case literally, as she wants those individuals outside of her comment sections (Milroy, 2001: 535-536). The comment section is mostly on her side in this case,

“I’ve always said that your words are the yardstick by which people measure your intelligence... 🐱”

“They try to insult you and they can’t get it spelled right. Definitely need to make fun of them”

“i am sorry,as I get older I find the spelling to be more of a chalenge but enjoy listening to you,so I will keep my mouth shut and listen.”

More of the same, conflating intelligence and spelling ability, and even willingness to spell ‘correctly’, which is usually not a priority when typing online. The third comment is very interesting, as it not only agrees with the author, but apologizes, in this case, for their age which inhibits their ability to mind their spelling. This is evidence not only of a successful indoctrination by the proponents of the standard language ideology, but also of anxiety, seen by a person willing to apologize for their spelling, in an informal setting, and when spelling is out of their control. Why spelling is even so important is still not quite clear, especially not to feel sorry for yourself when spelling is a challenge. The third commenter is ultimately trying to avoid stigmatization, the natural end result of this sort of rhetoric, but might be unable to because of aging. Spelling things online should not have an effect this negative and ostracizing, but the ideology of the standard language tends to achieve this effect.

We will also make a brief note here of a common thread in this paper by now, and that is the emoticon ending a sentence. We notice that it very often mimics a full stop, and linguistically functions as a reminder that the statement preceded is supposed to be taken in a light-hearted way, perhaps even a joke. In the instance of Kimchi Karen, she adds a crying laughing emoji at the end of the sentence superimposed in the TikTok, without which the sentence would sound like a straightforward judgment of the people that do not adhere to her spelling preferences and as an order. As a lexical choice (Machin, & Mayr, 2012: 47), the imperative mood implies authority, which we also gathered from other parts of the TikTok.

C. “Everyone miss uses this word. Something is either unique or not.”

The following channel, *grammarians30*, is the first in this paper that is dedicated exclusively to posting content relating to language, so this specific TikTok is in a long series of others pertaining to English grammar tips and common errors. At a brief glance, all the TikToks of the account are more or less the same, the author standing quite close to the camera with his gaze pointed directly at it, with subtitles superimposed and a pop-up near the end of the TikTok that recommends more of his content. Since his name is *grammarians*, he presents himself to be an authority figure on all things pertaining to the English language, which will be relevant a bit later in the discussion. For now, let us see which common mistake he focuses on in this example.

He begins with a promising and attention-grabbing phrase, “One of the most misused words.”, under which the following text is written: “Everyone misuses this word.”. He follows this up with a question and an answer, “Did you know that something can’t be ‘very unique’ or ‘more unique’? That’s because ‘unique’ means ‘one of a kind’. So, grammatically, something is either unique or it’s not. It’s either one of a kind or it’s not. When you’re speaking or writing, if you say something is ‘very unique’ or ‘so unique’ you’re actually being ungrammatical.” Before we begin the discussion, it is worth first checking with a few dictionaries if his statement is even true, because he does not offer any arguments to defend his position other than a ‘that’s just the way it is’ attitude while appealing to logic. On the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, we can find the following under *unique*,

“3 : UNUSUAL

a very *unique* ball-point pen

... we were fairly *unique*, the sixty of us, in that there wasn't one good mixer in the bunch.—

J. D. Salinger”

In this definition of the word, under meaning 3, we find that the *grammarians*’s definition for one of the most misused words is not true. In order to be totally sure, we shall look at another dictionary, the Oxford online dictionary, “2: very special or unusual. You can use more, very, etc. with *unique* in this meaning.” With two reputable dictionaries stating the exact contrary to what he is saying, we can be sure that his claim is not true. People can, have, and will use the word *unique* in a variety of different ways, some which are when something is special or unusual, and not always to the very narrow definition that he presents, as rarely anything can be completely one of a kind. In this way the semantic field of the word has expanded to mean more than what he is proposing, and the only thing he can accomplish is to reduce it.

While his statements are untrue, it must be noted how he presents them. He emphasizes grammar three times, once with his name, *grammarians*, a second time when he underlines “So, grammatically, something is either unique or it’s not” and a third time when he says “if you say something

is ‘very unique’ or ‘so unique’ you’re actually being ungrammatical” without ever presenting a grammatical argument, at least not fully. This is an example of the etymological fallacy, as the word unique comes from the Latin *unus*, meaning one, from where it got its original meaning, ‘one of a kind’. This, however, is not the only meaning of the word anymore, as we saw in the examples above, and the word can be used in all sorts of ways. What is particularly insidious in this example, and the many accounts like this one, is that they present themselves as impartial educators, while promoting ideologies and false information. We believe that this type of content is more harmful than the ideologies presented in the first three TikTok’s, as this one pretends to have some authority – creating doubt, confusion, and stress to his viewers because it is a natural feeling not to want to misuse words. We could also say that he can induce language anxiety with the thumbnail of the TikTok’s visual element used to attract potential viewers, in which we see his face and the text “Everyone misuses this word.”. The effect it actually has is a feeling in his audience that they do not want to be a member of the ‘uneducated everyone’, they do not want to be ‘wrong’, but rather, they want to be ‘proper’ and ‘taken seriously’, words and phrases that we have already seen many times in this paper. Another perspective is that of a ‘fun-fact’, where they can consume this content and disseminate it further, to ‘everyone’, since having learned what the grammarian taught them, they are no longer part of ‘everyone’.

There is an interesting exchange in the comment section of this Tik Tok,

“Are you sure? I’d say that the very is included to emphasize that is is unique and not that it is more unique than something else”

“I know what you mean but it’s a special adjective called a non-gradable adjective. So you can’t use more/less if you want to be grammatical. 😊😊😊😊”

Here the author includes an argument for his point of view that he did not include in the original TikTok, saying that *unique* is a non-gradable adjective. In the definition that he provided for the word this is true, but when we say *unique*, meaning special or unusual, this is again no longer true.

D. “One thing I can’t stand is someone who’s grammar is bad because wtf is “mines”???”

The next creator’s account is called *meniyahsimone*, and it is an account with a wide variety of different TikToks, posting life updates, her weight loss journey, some humour, etc. This one in particular seems to be a rare comment on a language pet peeve. It is the shortest TikTok in this paper, and it goes like this: a close-up shot of a woman with her gaze pointed

at us in a non-descript setting, looking at the camera in disgust and shaking her head signifying “no”. She then bops her head to the beat of the audio, which is a repetition of the word “don’t”, and lifts her hand, also waving it in the end. The last visual element in the TikTok is the phrase “I’m gonna make you mines” in quotations, meaning that the word in question is what fills her with disgust, also present in the title of the TikTok.

This TikTok touches upon a topic not yet discussed in this paper, and that is the particularity of the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) from which the author extracts and highlights a word, a variant to the standard ‘mine’. While there is often ideological baggage in many studies of the structures in AAVE, often stating that it is more different from the standard English language than other non-standard vernaculars (Mufwene, 2001: 31-32), this short TikTok exhibits only the ideology of the standard highlighted in many other TikToks in this paper. Yet, it seems that the author does not have a problem with ‘who’s’ instead of ‘whose’, but implying more than that is not supported by any other evidence. Disgust, together with the description in the title, “bad grammar”, is yet another example of non-standard variants being deemed illegitimate (Milroy, 2001: 547). What sets it apart from the others in one sense, is the usage of a soundbite that plays over the video. The visual element is coupled with audio, her silently lip-syncing it and adding some negative facial expressions and text. This is a trend on TikTok that makes it easier to create content on the platform – there are many popular soundbites, often from pop culture, that get recycled by users with a unique spin based on what they want to say. A short soundbite of the word ‘don’t’ can be imagined to be used in many different possible ways, and in this one it is a demand for a non-standard word to be discontinued, as it is a source of strong negative emotions for her. Multimodal elements now seem to be usable in any way imaginable on TikTok, whether it is text on the screen, images, or emojis, all with different meanings and implications, or a soundbite, song, or sound effect to reinforce the point of the video or to help set the right setting.

E. \*doesn’t capitalize at the beginning of sentences\*

The next author’s channel, joanna.murella, is quite similar to many others in this paper, in the sense that it posts a mixture of comedy, opinions, factoids, life updates and similar content, usually in the close-up shot of her face while talking. The TikTok chosen for this paper, while it shares an ideology discussed multiple times already, is different from her other content in its format, and different in the level of intensity when presenting their ideologically loaded opinion.

This is the TikTok – a sped up video of her eating something at a table which has a coffee and a book on it, with relaxed jazz music playing on top. Nearly the entire screen is covered by text, however, which says, “one thing about me is that i am the grammar police. use the wrong you/you’re? i WILL correct you. confused between there/their/they’re? don’t worry i’ll tell you the difference. not only that, i will absolutely not hesitate to point out any and all spelling errors that you might have made. and throughout it all, i will be silently judging you.” This is a good place to discuss the definition that the creator gives for themselves, that of the grammar police, a noun phrase that we have already seen in a hashtag before in this paper. The grammar police, as a part of internet slang, could be explained as people correcting other people’s grammar, almost always according to the rules of the standard variant, when such corrections were unnecessary and most likely unwanted. At one point in the phrase’s history, it was related to a synonymous phrase, a grammar Nazi, which has fallen out of favour in recent times. In any case, the text written by the author of the TikTok can pretty much serve as the grammar police manifesto, with a few classic examples of grammar mistakes added for clarity – they will correct people whenever they feel like it, without hesitation, not to teach someone the standard, but to judge them, and decrease the value of their statements, and once again, to use Milroy’s term, make them illegitimate (2001: 532).

What is interesting about this TikTok, other than the sheer bluntness and intensity of their ideology, is that the video’s importance is toned down as much as possible – the TikTok functions as a static image with some gentle music playing over it. Because of this, we can inspect other discourse elements, and that is her pose (Machin, & Mayr, 2012: 74), which is slightly hunched forward. This, coupled with the soothing music playing, and the objects (ibid. 51), a coffee and a book, implies relaxation, which is in stark contrast to the borderline violent text on the screen. The end-result, as far as we can gather, is the following – the author is aware of their behaviour and how it looks, but they do not care. They are able to present themselves in a negative light to correct and judge people for their mistakes, while listening to jazz, calmly eating, and having a coffee and a book ready for later. They are willing to constantly check other people’s grammar and ostracize them when they make a mistake. This kind of behaviour, as we have already noted, creates a hostile environment for virtually any form of communication and induces language anxiety and stress on all her viewers. She is also aware of her own production of English, as their title seems to be ironic of the ‘spelling mistakes’ she commits in the text. There is also one intense comment that supports her,

“i hate the people who are like “shut up we’re not at school” when i correct their grammar 😞”

This makes fun of an argument that we used in this paper, that of the informal environment, where there is no language learning, and the key element is solely communication and understanding, so adhering to strict grammatical rules and correcting each other seems pointless. The reaction to that argument, which some other people seem to share, is hatred, or, most likely, annoyance.

### 3. Parody

#### A. “pov: I am the grammar police”

This last TikTok, by the account curlydaddy, is the last one in this paper, and it serves as a counterweight to all the other ones discussed, because it overtly discusses other people’s beliefs and ideologies, making the TikTok meta-ideological, all the while making fun of the other creators. It is another close-up of his face while he is simulating a conversation with you, the viewer, in a made-up scenario. That is the “pov” in the title, meaning point-of-view, a trend on the internet where the viewer’s engagement is elicited. So, by the title itself, and with the text on screen also saying “pov: I am the grammar police”, we know that we are conversing with the grammar police, and he starts, with a finger pointed at us, “I’m sorry, did you just the use the correct form of you’re speaking?! I cannot believe that! Don’t even text me if you’re using the wrong from of there, their and they’re, you know what I’m saying like – we could be having the most deep conversation, but I will still correct your grammar, so - -” (the dashes signify sudden jump cuts).

The creator echoes almost all the same phrases that we have analysed in this paper, by saying “don’t text me” like Kimchi Karen, and “I will still correct your grammar” by joannamurella, but exaggerated, usually in a sarcastic tone or with his eyes wide open to feign a threat. The language ideology typical for this paper is found in the comments, where there is a strange mix of people agreeing with him, and those that align themselves against his satire.

“i don’t like when people use the wrong grammar because I don’t know what they’re trying to say 😞”

“I mean the fact that English it's not my mother tongue and I still know how to use (their there and they're) better than most native speakers is kinda odd”

“Honestly their there and they’re aren’t that hard”

“Exactly save it for school 😞”



We see here one person whose problem is understanding English with grammar mistakes apparently, while the other two have a problem with what they perceive to be the level of difficulty in mastering those words. What stands out time and time again is judgment, and othering the people that do not adhere to their standard variant correctness requirements for communication (if not, judgment is applicable and even encouraged).

## Discussion

We will now briefly go over what we have found in the Results section, followed by a word about the challenges of working on this paper. To begin, we have found and analysed nine TikToks, three of them in the “Regional variant discrimination” category, five of them in the “Appeal to the standard” category and one in the “Parody” category. While searching for TikToks in this niche, these were the three main strands of content that we have found, and in order to give a genuine look into what can be found on the platform regarding language ideologies, all three had to be represented by at least one example and analysis. Of course, our examples are in no way exhaustive, but a representation of the thousands that are out there, which certainly warrant further examination.

There are two main language ideologies present in these examples, regional discrimination, or regional supremacy for the first three, and the standard language ideology for the rest (and the etymological fallacy in the case of the grammarian). Most of the time these ideologies result in language anxiety, the reinforcing of other people’s language biases (often visible in the comments), the stigmatization of non-standard variant speakers, and erasure of certain non-standard elements (the singer’s scouse singing accent, “mines”). Due to the availability of many different editing techniques on the platform that provide video and audio enhancements, these ideologies are presented in many unique ways. In terms of video, text can and does often appear on screen either as subtitles or as post-TikTok commentary, sometimes exaggerated to make the other person appear in a negative light, as is the case in the street interview with the Scouse speaker. We often see emojis on the screen, which serve as reminders that the TikTok in question is supposed to be comedic and light-hearted, despite the often hurtful nature of the content. In terms of audio, the two main things we can notice that are unique to TikTok are the uses of pop-culture soundbites, and music playing over the TikTok. The soundbites provide the backbone of the TikTok and generally the point they are trying to make, while the music sets the tone, which serves a similar purpose as the emojis. This novel and multimodal combination of editing techniques was TikTok’s main draw for

being picked as the platform of this paper, as while the language ideologies remain mostly the same wherever we look online, the way they are presented, downplayed, or enhanced are new and worth delving into.

Now we will briefly go over some of the challenges that we faced when researching for this paper. TikTok's algorithm quickly picks up our watching patterns, likes and dislikes, and based on those fills up our ForYou page. Knowing this, we first started 'training' our algorithm to show us TikToks with language ideologies or language opinions organically, as would happen to any other user, by quickly sliding over irrelevant TikToks or by pressing "not interested" on any unrelated TikTok. This proved to be a surprisingly unsuccessful method, as when we would press "not interested" too many times, it would resort to the base information it had to start over, bringing up Croatian mid 20's male-centric TikToks, far away from our target. After spending quite a long time training our algorithm and failing, we resorted to searching and digging through TikTok manually, where we found many examples fit for examination. At this point, we faced another challenge unique to TikTok more than any other social media platform.

Throughout the period of researching and writing this paper, an interesting challenge appeared. There were three TikToks that we had fully analysed and written up, when we found that the TikToks were deleted, or that the accounts that first made those TikToks do not exist anymore. This hurdle proved to be more demoralising than inconvenient, as the overall structure of the paper had to change along with the mere word count. Even if we screen recorded the TikToks in advance, it would be possible for it to be an ethical problem. The creator who deleted the content should have the right to publish and unpublish what they want without it being immortalized in a research paper with several other readers. On the other hand, it was possible that TikTok themselves deleted or banned the accounts, whereby we might face a legal problem. TikTok is known to not be very lenient when it comes to moderation of content, and have a full list of ban-worthy topics, names, events, religious and LGBTQ+ groups, sometimes even suppressing content made by people with disabilities or weight issues or people who mention a controversial event in Chinese history (Botella, 2019; Hern, 2019). These harsh moderation guidelines may have in fact affected this paper, and may affect all future papers that attempt to do the same as this one. A long-term and broad research of content on TikTok for now seems implausible. This makes TikTok a truly one-of-a-kind social media platform, whose sheer pace of moderation and content uploading necessitates speed from the researcher's side, whereas other classic forms of media, such as

books, papers, movies and music last practically forever. However, given these challenges, we would not change the course of the research and development of this paper, as the challenges were informative in their own right, and the work required more adaptation and forethought than any other similar research topic we had had in the past. We can only change our approach going forward.

## Conclusion

This paper hopes to illustrate some of the language ideologies that can be found on TikTok and how they are presented. These ways of presentation are varied, novel, and interesting, something almost unprecedented in the social media landscape. TikTok proved to be the best social media platform to investigate these multimodal techniques due to its fast-progressing nature, which is the very aspect that made researching it difficult. On the other hand, the language ideologies we found are more or less the same as they have ever been, and we believe that they will not change any time soon. However, the methods of expressing them are evolving faster than ever, and this development warrants further research.

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Lukevernon\_, <https://www.tiktok.com/@lukevernon/video/7169243849217363205>, "DID YOU SEE THAT? 😂😂"

Emelleofficial, "Just not an attractive accent tbf"  
<https://www.tiktok.com/@emelleofficial/video/7089895761063759109>

Justagram, "Does bad grammar drive you crazy?",  
<https://www.tiktok.com/@justagram/video/7179252456109526277>

Kk31387, "Kimchi Karen can't stand improper grammar or consistent misspellings. Please check the red squiggly line before hitting send",  
<https://www.tiktok.com/@kk31387/video/7184882088498203947>

Grammarians30, "Everyone miss uses this word. Something is either unique or not."  
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