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Stigma and Prestige: Social Consequences of Standardising a Language

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Abstract

This paper examines how language and society shape each other when one variety becomes the public standard. Drawing on research from education, sociolinguistics, social psychology, language policy, and technology, it explains why the standard often generates prestige for some speakers and stigma for others. Evidence from schools, workplaces, public services, and digital platforms shows a consistent pattern: institutions reward the standard with trust and opportunity, while other varieties are more likely to be corrected, doubted, or excluded. The central mechanisms are gatekeeping by teachers, employers, public officials, and algorithms; the heavy learning load created by early, strict demands for the standard; and listener expectations shaped by class, region, and race. The paper proposes practical steps that preserve the benefits of a shared norm while lowering social costs: staged bridges to the standard in schooling with aligned assessments; guaranteed interpreting and plain-language communication in services; workplace evaluation based on intelligibility and task fit; and technology standards that report group-wise performance and include audience-aware settings.

Keywords: Language Standardisation; Stigma; Prestige; Sociolinguistics; Language Policy; Identity; Inequality; Education

Introduction

Language is more than an inventory of sounds, words, and grammatical rules; it is a social resource through which people form relationships, claim identities, exercise power, and gain access to education, employment, and public services. When a community or an institution elevates one variety as the public "standard," typically selecting it from among many coexisting forms, that choice reshapes social life. In this paper, "standard" refers to the variety chosen and supported for schools, examinations, news, and official records—an outcome of selection, codification, and public acceptance rather than of inherent

"correctness" (Haugen, 1966; Milroy & Milroy, 2012; Spolsky, 2004). A standard can facilitate communication across regions and institutions, yet it also tends to produce hierarchies of value among speakers (Milroy & Milroy, 2012; Lippi-Green, 2012). Prestige accrues to ways of speaking that are taken to be credible and "educated" (Bourdieu, 1991), while other varieties attract stigma—negative labels and disadvantages attached to forms perceived as inferior (Goffman, 1963; Lippi-Green, 2012). Put simply, the same structure that enables large-scale understanding can make alternative ways of speaking seem "less correct," "less professional," or even "less intelligent." This introduction sets out how language and society co-constitute one another, why standardisation routinely produces both benefits and harms, and how classic and recent scholarship clarify these dynamics (Bourdieu, 1991; Flores & Rosa, 2015). It also signals the paper's purpose: to analyze prestige and stigma as central social consequences of language standardisation and to outline more equitable designs for public life.

Sociolinguistic research begins from the premise that variation is normal and functional. Speakers regularly shift styles and features as audiences, settings, and purposes change (Hymes, 1974; Labov, 1972). Across many contexts, communities maintain multiple codes: local varieties for intimate and neighborhood interaction and more formal varieties for school, administration, or media. Ferguson's (1959) formulation of diglossia captured this division as "H" (high) and "L" (low) varieties. Subsequent scholarship has complicated the tidy two-slot model, but the core institutional pattern remains: public bodies typically prefer a high-prestige code for official business (Fishman, 1972; Trudgill, 2000).

How one variety becomes the "standard" has been described as a linked sequence of selection, codification, elaboration, and acceptance (Haugen, 1966). That sequence is never purely linguistic; it is braided with state-building, mass schooling, and media expansion (Spolsky, 2004). Once installed in textbooks, tests, courts, and national broadcasts, the chosen variety accumulates symbolic capital—convertible into grades, mobility, and credibility in schools and workplaces (Bourdieu, 1991). As prestige consolidates around the standard, other forms are increasingly framed as "incorrect," "broken," or "parochial," and their users are judged as less competent. Thus, standardisation generates status for some forms and stigma for others (Milroy & Milroy, 2012; Lippi-Green, 2012).

These values are sustained by language ideologies—widely shared beliefs about what counts as "good," "clear," "educated," or "professional" speech (Silverstein, 1979; Woolard, 1998). Such beliefs are not neutral descriptors of linguistic quality; they echo the histories and interests of groups with greater social power. Appeals to "common sense" standards often mask the elevation of the speech of historically dominant regions or classes (Bonfiglio, 2002). Once naturalized, these ideologies become easy to reproduce and hard to notice: teachers mark home speech as "wrong," employers equate the standard with

"good communication," and media lampoon nonstandard accents. Ordinary differences in how people speak can become a source of inequality (Bourdieu, 1991; Lippi-Green, 2012). Recent work on raciolinguistic ideologies adds an important layer: judgments about language are tied to judgments about race and ethnicity (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Rosa, 2019). Even when racialized speakers come close to the "standard," listeners may still perceive them as lacking. In other words, the social "ear" can outweigh what the speaker actually says. Experimental studies point in the same direction: the very same message is judged as less credible when it is spoken with a nonnative accent (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010). Thus, the value of language is produced jointly by speakers and listeners within a wider field of power.

The influence of the standard is most obvious in large institutions. Schools are the main place where children confront it. The aim of providing a shared academic register is defensible because it supports learning across subjects and access to higher education. Yet the pathway matters. Evidence shows that students learn more effectively when early literacy grows from a familiar language or variety and then systematically bridges to the wider standard (Willig, 2002; Walter & Dekker, 2011). When systems demand immediate mastery of the standard—particularly from minority or migrant-background students—children shoulder two tasks at once: learning new content while operating in an unfamiliar code. The double load depresses performance and confidence. Bridging models, including transitional bilingual and two-way immersion approaches, begin from the home code and guide students toward the standard, advancing inclusion and long-term attainment (Polanco & de Baker, 2018). Assessment design shapes these outcomes. High-stakes tests steer classroom behavior; if early tests require strict standard control, teachers will correct form even at the expense of understanding, turning the standard into a source of shame (Shohamy, 2006). If assessments are aligned to a staged plan, teachers can secure comprehension first and gradually tighten expectations for standard form, shifting the message from "your language is wrong" to "your language is the foundation we will build on."

Public services use standardized language to keep records and procedures consistent in courts, policing, health care, and welfare. While this helps staff work efficiently, it can create dangers for people who do not use the prestige variety, leading to confusion about charges, consent, or eligibility. On the ground, officials often improvise—switching languages, asking family members to interpret, or simplifying forms—to reduce harm, but this produces uneven access that depends on individual discretion (Shohamy, 2006). Language policy research points to institutional fixes: guaranteed interpreters at high-stakes moments, plain-language versions of core documents, and shared terminology across agencies (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997; Spolsky, 2004). These measures keep the coordination benefits of standardization while reducing stigma and risk.

Digital tools now help decide what counts as "good" language. Spell- and

grammar-checkers trained on standard varieties may flag rule-governed community norms as "errors," and automatic speech recognition has shown higher error rates for some racialized speakers, limiting access to services (Koenecke et al., 2020). Large language models can also reproduce and amplify standard-language ideologies if they are trained and evaluated too narrowly; diversifying training data and reporting group-wise performance can curb this risk (Bender et al., 2021). In short, the machine "ear" can either reinforce the standard's prestige and automate stigma—or, with different design choices, broaden access by recognizing linguistic diversity.

Underlying these institutional patterns is a political tension between efficiency and recognition (De Schutter, 2007). Efficiency favors a single shared code for smooth operation of schools, courts, and markets; recognition demands respect for diverse identities and repertoires. Exclusive pursuit of efficiency marginalizes those outside the prestige norm; exclusive pursuit of recognition can complicate large-scale coordination. The task is to balance both aims. A practical synthesis emerges from the literature: build staged bridges to the standard in schooling and align assessments accordingly; guarantee language access through interpreting and plain-language policies in services; evaluate workplace communication by intelligibility and task fit rather than prestige; and require technology standards that disclose group-wise performance and offer audience-aware settings (Willig, 2002; Walter & Dekker, 2011; Shohamy, 2006; Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997; Spolsky, 2004; Koenecke et al., 2020; Bender et al., 2021).

Why do prestige and stigma reappear so reliably under standardisation? Three forces recur across domains. Gatekeeping converts linguistic rules into social judgments, as teachers, exam designers, hiring managers, editors, and algorithms decide what counts as "clear," "correct," or "professional" and then attach material rewards or penalties to those judgments (Bourdieu, 1991; Shohamy, 2006). Timing and learning load matter, because inflexible early demands impose a double cognitive burden that invites correction and contributes to stigmatized identities, whereas staged approaches reframe home varieties as resources and improve outcomes (Walter & Dekker, 2011; Willig, 2002). Finally, the social ear mediates value, since expectations about class, region, and race shape how speech is heard; even standard-like production by stigmatized speakers may be discounted, while prestigious speakers' deviations are tolerated as "style" (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Lippi-Green, 2012; Woolard, 1998).

Global mobility further complicates the ideal of a single national standard. People and texts circulate across borders, and speakers deploy repertoires flexibly, as Blommaert (2010) argues. In such conditions, rigid standardisation can misrecognize real skill: a nurse might deftly manage multilingual ward communication yet face barriers from narrow accent criteria, while a community organizer may achieve superior public engagement in a local register even if formal writing departs from prestige norms. Attending to audience design and register—matching forms to purposes and hearers—allows institutions to value

communicative competence rather than prestige alone (Hymes, 1974; Trudgill, 2000).

These observations lead to a practical question: what kind of language ability should public institutions require? Classical sociolinguistics recommends a shift from correctness to appropriateness—forms that fit context and achieve goals (Hymes, 1974). Critical work cautions that "appropriateness" can become a covert gate if expectations track race or class (Flores & Rosa, 2015). The answer is not to abandon standards but to define them in task-based, transparent terms. A health consent form should be assessed by patient understanding; a writing course can teach structure and audience awareness while presenting multiple registers, including the standard, as resources rather than as a ranked ladder. Such moves preserve clarity while reducing stigma.

Finally, legitimacy depends on framing. When authorities cast the standard as a neutral test that individuals must pass alone, it appears as an instrument of control. When the standard is framed as a shared public asset that the state helps everyone learn—through strong teaching, fair assessments, language access, and responsible technology—citizens are more likely to view policy as building capability rather than enforcing conformity (De Schutter, 2007; Spolsky, 2004). In that frame, prestige becomes a common good: not a badge monopolized by one group, but a capacity that systems help distribute. Language and society are tightly linked. Decisions about what counts as a "standard" shape who can access knowledge, jobs, and rights. Classic studies show a durable pattern: variation is normal; institutions elevate one variety; prestige accrues to it while stigma attaches to others (Ferguson, 1959; Haugen, 1966; Labov, 1972; Bourdieu, 1991).Contemporary work maps how these dynamics intersect with race, mobility, and technology (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Blommaert, 2010; Koenecke et al., 2020; Bender et al., 2021). The path forward is to keep the coordinating power of a common norm while redesigning systems so the standard is earned through support rather than policed through punishment. In doing so, societies can preserve clarity and expand dignity at the same time.

Methodology

This review draws only on published literature examining how language standardisation shapes social outcomes—especially stigma and prestige—across education, workplaces, public services and digital platforms. Eligible sources were peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and refereed conference proceedings; unpublished reports, preprints, theses, and general web content were excluded. Studies qualified if they addressed standardisation or standard-language ideology and linked these to social meanings or consequences such as status, trust, discrimination, access, or opportunity. Publications were located through targeted keyword searches and citation tracking. After title/abstract screening and full-text review, each study was charted with a template capturing setting, participants, methods, constructs, mechanisms, outcomes, and policy or practice notes. Quality was appraised by clarity of questions, methodological

transparency, adequacy of evidence, and discussion of limits; higher-quality studies received greater weight. Findings were organised around prestige/stigma production, impact mechanisms (gatekeeping, early proficiency demands, listener expectations, algorithms), distributional effects, and levers for change in assessment, service communication, workplace criteria, and technology standards. The synthesis prioritises guidance and patterns rather than statistical effect sizes.

Result and Discussion

Across education, assessment, workplaces, public services, and technology, a consistent empirical pattern emerges: when one variety is elevated as "the standard," institutions attach trust, opportunity, and mobility to it while other varieties more often attract correction, doubt, and barriers (Ricento, 2002; Shohamy, 2006; Lippi-Green, 2012). In schools, early, rigid demands for standard control impose a double load—new academic content plus an unfamiliar code—depressing performance and confidence among children whose home repertoires differ from the prestige norm. By contrast, programs that begin literacy in the learner's familiar language or variety and then bridge in stages to the public standard reduce repetition and narrow achievement gaps without sacrificing ultimate mastery (Willig, 2002; Walter & Dekker, 2011; Polanco & de Baker, 2018). Exams amplify these forces. Because teachers "teach to the test," assessments that require early, strict standard usage incentivize surface correction and suppress effective bilingual pedagogy; staged assessments, aligned with planned bridges, secure comprehension first and raise form expectations progressively, trading stigma for inclusion (Shohamy, 2006; Walter & Dekker, 2011).

Workplaces display a parallel "prestige premium." Experimental and field evidence shows that identical messages are judged less credible when produced with nonnative or nonstandard accents; hiring and promotion decisions often treat prestige features as a proxy for competence (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010; Lippi-Green, 2012; Chiba et al., 1995). A more equitable approach distinguishes intelligibility-for-task from conformity-to-prestige, evaluating whether colleagues can understand and coordinate rather than whether speakers match a dominant accent (Derwing & Munro, 2015). Listener-side factors matter: attitudes and expectations—the "social ear"—shape credibility judgments even when production is near-standard (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Woolard, 1998; Lindemann, 2002).

In public services, standardized forms and scripts help maintain consistent records and safety procedures, yet clients who lack full control of the prestige variety face misunderstandings about charges, consent, or eligibility. Street-level improvisations—ad hoc interpreting, code-switching, simplified explanations—can prevent harm but yield uneven access keyed to individual discretion (Moyer & Rojo, 2007). Institutional remedies move these fixes from goodwill to rights: funded interpreting at high-stakes junctures,

plain-language versions of core documents, and shared bilingual terminology across agencies (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997; Shohamy, 2006; Stableford & Mettger, 2007; Flores, 2005).

Digital platforms and language technologies now act as gatekeepers at scale. Spell- and grammar-checkers calibrated to prestige norms may flag rule-governed community features as "errors," while automatic speech recognition shows higher error rates for some racialized accents, constraining access to services (Koenecke et al., 2020). Large language models trained and evaluated narrowly risk automating standard-language ideologies unless designers diversify data, report group-wise performance, and include audience-aware modes (Bender, Gebru, McMillan-Major, & Shmitchell, 2021). Because platforms scale fast, design choices can either entrench prestige or widen access (Bender et al., 2021; Koenecke et al., 2020).

Interpreting these results through classic and critical sociolinguistics clarifies why prestige and stigma so reliably co-occur under standardisation. First, gatekeeping turns rules into social judgments: teachers, exam designers, hiring managers, public officials, editors, and algorithms decide what counts as "clear," "correct," or "professional" and allocate material rewards accordingly (Bourdieu, 1991; Lippi-Green, 2012). Second, timing matters: early, inflexible demands impose heavy cognitive and social loads; staged pathways reframe home varieties as resources, improving outcomes and dignity (Willig, 2002; Walter & Dekker, 2011). Third, listener expectations shape value: the same production can be heard differently depending on who speaks, reflecting raciolinguistic ideologies and indexical associations (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Eckert, 2008). Finally, legitimacy depends on framing: when authorities cast the standard as a shared public asset that institutions help everyone learn—via strong teaching, fair testing, language access, and careful technology—trust rises; when framed as a private test, stigma grows (De Schutter, 2007; Spolsky, 2004). Together, these findings show that standardisation is not merely linguistic engineering; it is social design whose outcomes hinge on policy choices across systems.

Stigma and Prestige—Social Consequences of Standardising a Language

The central lesson of the evidence is not that standards are "good" or "bad," but that the same structures that enable coordination can also produce durable hierarchies of value. Elevating one variety as the public norm inevitably concentrates symbolic capital around its speakers, converting linguistic traits into institutional advantages—grades, credentials, credibility, and mobility—while attaching suspicion or deficit to other repertoires (Bourdieu, 1991; Lippi-Green, 2012). Gatekeeping is the turning point: rules have no effect until gatekeepers interpret and enforce them, and each decision converts language into social outcomes (Shohamy, 2006). Because high-stakes decisions repeat across schooling, hiring, media, and public services, the prestige variety accumulates

advantages over time.

Schools make this especially visible. Early, rigid enforcement of the standard creates a double cognitive load and invites constant correction. The repeated message—"your language is wrong"—shapes participation and identity long after the correction itself (Walter & Dekker, 2011). Staged approaches flip that message: "your language is a resource we will use to reach academic registers." These approaches produce stronger long-term achievement and fewer stigmatizing interactions (Willig, 2002; Polanco & de Baker, 2018). This aligns with broader research on language, identity, and learning: students do better when teaching builds on their existing repertoires and translanguaging practices rather than pathologizing them (García & Wei, 2014). Assessment is pivotal because of washback. If exams reward early surface conformity, teachers will police form at the expense of understanding; if exams track a planned progression, teachers can prioritize meaning first and tighten form later (Shohamy, 2006; Walter & Dekker, 2011).

In employment, the prestige premium depends on the "social ear." The same content is rated as less credible when spoken with a nonnative or nonstandard accent (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010), and field studies document penalties tied to accent and register in customer-facing and academic roles (Chiba et al., 1995; Lippi-Green, 2012). Yet intelligibility, comprehensibility, and fluency are separable from accent: people can communicate effectively without matching a prestige norm (Derwing & Munro, 2015). Listener attitudes help explain this. Social-psychological work shows that perceived group membership shapes how we hear (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and sociolinguistics finds that features index social personae that evaluators read off the speech signal (Eckert, 2008). In short, stigma is produced not only by speakers' tongues but also by listeners' expectations. Public services show the stakes clearly. Standardized scripts support consistent records and safe procedures, but without guaranteed language access, people can misunderstand rights, risks, and obligations (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997; Shohamy, 2006). Ethnographic studies find that frontline workers often bend monolingual rules—switching languages, using ad-hoc interpreters, or simplifying forms—to prevent harm, but these fixes make inclusion depend on individual discretion (Moyer & Rojo, 2007). Evidence from health communication and interpreting strengthens the case for institutional guarantees: professional interpreter services improve understanding and care; plain-language design improves comprehension of forms and consent (Flores, 2005; Stableford & Mettger, 2007). In legal settings, misrecognition can be severe: courts and juries have sometimes treated minoritized varieties as less credible or even unintelligible, with real consequences for justice (Rickford & King, 2016).

Technology scales these dynamics. Automatic speech recognition shows higher error rates for some racialized speakers, and writing tools trained on prestige corpora may mark community norms as "errors," thereby automating stigma (Koenecke et al., 2020; Bender et al., 2021). Because platforms operate at population scale, design choices can

either lock prestige in place or distribute benefits more fairly. Audience-aware modes, diverse training and evaluation sets, group-wise error reporting, and human-in-the-loop safeguards for high-stakes contexts shift value from prestige conformity toward task fitness and user understanding (Bender et al., 2021; Koenecke et al., 2020).

A core political tension runs through these findings: efficiency versus recognition (De Schutter, 2007). Shared codes enable mass schooling, reliable records, and national debate (Haugen, 1966; Spolsky, 2004). Yet the same uniformity can erase or penalize linguistic diversity. Comparative research shows alternatives: pluricentric standards and locally grounded policies can preserve mobility while honoring linguistic repertoires (Kachru, 1997; Bamgbose, 1998; Woolard, 2016; Alexander, 2003; Hornberger, 2002; Pennycook, 2010).In a globalized world of mobile speakers and circulating texts, rigid monolithic standards misrecognize real skill; audience design and register are better guides to communicative competence (Blommaert, 2010; Hymes, 1974; Trudgill, 2000).

Overall, standardisation concentrates prestige unless institutions deliberately counterbalance its effects. The social costs—missed learning, skewed hiring, unequal service access, and automated exclusion—are not side effects but central, predictable outcomes of how standards are used. The benefits—coordination, clarity, shared literacies—are real, but they are most legitimate when systems "earn the standard through support" rather than police it as a gate. Framed and designed that way, prestige becomes a common good, and stigma recedes (De Schutter, 2007; Spolsky, 2004).

Implications and Recommendations

Keep the benefits of a shared public standard—but redesign systems so people can reach it with support rather than confront it as a barrier. In education, present the standard as a destination reached through planned bridges. Begin early literacy in the language or variety students know best, then extend repertoire toward the academic register through explicit, staged milestones. Align assessment to those stages so washback rewards comprehension before fine-grained control of prestige forms. Monitor outcomes by language background and provide targeted supports where the double load slows progress (Willig, 2002; Walter & Dekker, 2011; Shohamy, 2006; Polanco & de Baker, 2018). Pedagogies that leverage translanguaging—strategic movement across repertoires—help students build disciplinary knowledge while developing the standard, reframing home varieties as assets (García & Wei, 2014).

Public services should guarantee inclusion by procedure, not by goodwill. Fund professional interpreters at legally and clinically high-stakes moments; publish plain-language versions of core documents; maintain shared bilingual terminology across agencies; and standardize consent and rights explanations at appropriate readability levels (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997; Shohamy, 2006; Stableford & Mettger, 2007). Health and legal systems should audit disparities by language background and adjust workflows

accordingly. Where automated tools are used—for triage, eligibility screening, or document generation—organizations should require human review and clear appeal routes, recognizing that small model biases can scale into large harms (Bender et al., 2021; Koenecke et al., 2020).

In employment, evaluate communication by intelligibility and task fit, not by prestige mimicry. Hiring rubrics should ask whether candidates can be understood, coordinate effectively, and adapt messages to audiences; they should not treat accent per se as a proxy for competence. Provide reasonable drafting time, structured prompts, and audience-aware style guides so applicants and employees can show ideas clearly. Train evaluators about listener bias and the difference between intelligibility, comprehensibility, and accentedness; this reduces unwarranted penalties while maintaining high standards for clarity (Derwing & Munro, 2015; Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010; Lindemann, 2002). Where public-facing speech norms are relevant (e.g., broadcast, safety-critical call centers), define them transparently in task terms and support employees to meet them without erasing identity (Lippi-Green, 2012).

For technology, require audience-aware modes in writing tools so community norms are not flagged as "errors" by default; diversify training and evaluation datasets; report group-wise error rates; and limit fully automated decisions in high-stakes contexts. Procurement policies should include fairness and accessibility criteria alongside accuracy and latency. Vendors should publish model cards detailing performance across speaker groups and registers, while institutions maintain oversight to ensure human-centered use (Bender et al., 2021; Koenecke et al., 2020).

Finally, governance and framing matter. Present the standard as a shared public asset that schools, services, employers, and platforms help everyone acquire, rather than as a private test individuals must pass alone. Co-design policy with affected communities so reforms align with local repertoires; communicate in ways that emphasize capability rather than control. Comparative cases suggest that pluricentric standards and context-sensitive policies can preserve mobility while recognizing diversity (Woolard, 2016; Kachru, 1997; Bamgbose, 1998; Alexander, 2003; Hornberger, 2002; Pennycook, 2010). This synthesis does not weaken the standard; it legitimizes it by distributing benefits more evenly and shrinking stigma (De Schutter, 2007; Spolsky, 2004).

Limitations

This review is a qualitative synthesis, not a meta-analysis. It brings together studies from different designs, regions, and time periods, but it does not calculate pooled effect sizes or test statistical heterogeneity. As a result, I cannot make strong claims about causal impact or the exact size of effects. The evidence base is uneven: English-language sources and research on schools and workplaces are more common than studies from informal domains or from under-documented languages in the Global South. Publication bias may

also favor positive findings or policy-friendly results. Comparability is limited by inconsistent use of core terms—such as "intelligibility," "appropriateness," and even "standard"—which complicates cross-study alignment. Fast-changing technology adds another uncertainty: disparities reported in speech recognition and language models may shift as systems are updated (Koenecke et al., 2020; Bender et al., 2021). Finally, although we trace plausible mechanisms linking standardisation to prestige and stigma, it is difficult to separate language effects from related factors such as class, race, gender, and migration status.

Conclusion

Language standards help large societies coordinate education, public administration, media, and commerce. They offer shared reference points for textbooks, examinations, records, and debate. Yet the evidence across fields shows a clear social pattern: when one variety is treated as "the standard," it tends to gain prestige, while other varieties more often attract stigma. These outcomes are not accidental; they arise from everyday gatekeeping—choices by teachers, exam writers, employers, officials, journalists, and algorithms that treat the standard as a marker of competence and credibility (Bourdieu, 1991; Lippi-Green, 2012). Such choices shape who advances in school, who is hired or promoted, who fully understands legal rights and clinical risks, and whose voice is amplified—or filtered—by technology.

The research points to a practical and fair path forward. Societies can retain the coordinating benefits of a shared standard while also recognizing—and making room for—diverse linguistic repertoires.In education, students achieve more when early literacy grows from the language or variety they know best and then bridges—step by step—to the public standard; when assessments follow this timeline, learning improves and stigma falls (Willig, 2002; Walter & Dekker, 2011).

In public services, interpreting rights and plain-language documents protect due process and safety without abandoning uniform record-keeping (Shohamy, 2006). In workplaces, evaluating communication by intelligibility and task fit, rather than by proximity to a prestige accent, reduces unfair penalties while maintaining high standards (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010). In technology, diversified data, group-wise error reporting, audience-aware settings, and human review in high-stakes contexts help prevent the automation of bias (Koenecke et al., 2020; Bender et al., 2021).

The broader message is institutional and normative. Competence in the standard should be treated as a public capability that systems help people build, not as a private gate that individuals must pass alone. Policies that "earn the standard through support" are more legitimate because they spread the benefits of a shared code and distribute its costs more fairly. When governments, schools, employers, and vendors adopt this stance, prestige becomes shareable: the standard functions as a ladder that many can climb, not a wall that

keeps others out. Reducing stigma is not a compromise with quality; it is how quality is extended to a wider public. In this sense, language policy is social policy: building fair pathways to the standard improves learning, safety, participation, and trust—the everyday outcomes of a healthy, inclusive society.

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