Taking the “Broken” out of “Broken English”

After twenty years of introducing linguistics to current and prospective English language arts teachers, I continue to encounter students who have internalized negative beliefs and values regarding African American English, English-lexicon creoles, and other forms of language considered “broken English,” “ungrammatical English,” etc. In this paper I share a way of approaching this problem systematically that has emerged over the course of my teaching career. First I present some linguistic universals, such as predication, personal reference, and negation. I then present features that are not universal, such as voiced stops, specific tenses, and definite and indefinite articles. I then proceed to show that those features of “broken” Englishes that mark them as “ungrammatical” are in fact not universals, but belong rather with the features that are not required for human language. I draw on as wide a range of languages as possible, making sure to include well-known standardized languages, such as Russian. For example, the lack of a copula in sentences with AP, PP, or NP predicates turns out to be a feature that, although heavily stigmatized when displayed by speakers of creoles and AAVE, is shared with Russian as well as other languages. Finally, I suggest some features possessed by “broken” Englishes that are “missing” from standard forms of English. In the end, while not guaranteeing that students’ beliefs or behaviors will change, the goal is to bring them face to face with the illogic of their language attitudes and so constitutes a teaching strategy that can reduce, if not eliminate, some of their linguistic prejudices.