DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 024 928 AL 001 576

By- Shuy, Roger W.

Bonnie and Clyde Tactics in English Teaching.

Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, D.C.
Pub Date Nov 68
Note- 17p.; Speech delivered for the National Council of Teachers of English, November 1968.
EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.95
Descriptors- Dialect Studies, *Diglossia, Discriminatory Attitudes (Social), *English, Language Standardization, Negro Dialects, Nonstandard Dialects, Racial Attitudes, Regional Dialects, Social Attitudes, Social Dialects, Social Factors, Social Mobility, Sociocultural Patterns, *Socioeconomic Influences, Sociolinguistics, *Standard Spoken Usage, Teacher Attitudes, *Teaching
Identifiers- *Biloquialism, Black English Speakers

The author describes three current approaches to the problems of nonstandard English and examines the motivations behind their recommendations. The traditional negative correction to standard he calls "eradication," based on ethnocentric prescription. "Biloquialism" offers the student the option of adjusting phonology, grammar, and lexicon between home dialect and standard. There are dangers in this too, if students and teachers look down on the nonstandard dialect, or consider the standard cynically as merely a means for obtaining jobs or manipulating for power, rather than as a broadened repertoire for social and intellectual communication and a means to understand the system and dynamics of language use. The third approach is to give standard speakers a better understanding of nonstandard speech, both its forms and its validity. This is sketched rather as training to tolerate diverse language forms than as gaining a useful level of proficiency. The author proposes that English teachers should ask themselves: (1) Is what I am teaching the most important thing for my students? (2) Is my teaching unbigoted? (3) Am I giving my students the most useful alternatives for their self-fulfillment? (4) Am I using the most dynamic and timely principles and data for understanding the system of language? (5) Is my language teaching developing healthy attitudes toward human rights? (MK)

# BONNIE AND CLYDE TACTICS IN ENGLISH TEACHING



Roger W. Shuy, Director
Sociolinguistics Program
Center For Applied Linguistics
1717 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036



National Council of Teachers of English
November 1968

The decade of the 1930's will long be remembered for the depression, the rise of The New Deal and a mood which produced some of the more exciting gangsters of all time, including Bonnie and Clyde. Few need to be told that Bonnie and Clyde were noted for their fast eradication of those who stood between them and their various coveted goals. Although it may strain the analogy to refer to the Bonnie and Clyde syndrome in relationship to English teaching past or present, such a metaphor seems appropriate. One may argue, for example, that English teachers wipe out evil while Bonnie and Clyde eradicated without discrimination. Those who so argue either point bear the burden of proof. It is the eradication per se that concerns us here.

English teachers have long borne the secret guilt of overly negative evaluation. Most of the marks and comments on any given composition will support the assertion that English teachers are overly concerned about what is wrong with the universe, the student and the student's ability to write and think. We set about to note the negative aspects of a written composition, we correct oral language lapses and we search for weaknesses in the formal properties of the debates and interpretations of our speech courses. The paucity of positive criticism is carried on even through graduate seminars in Shakespeare where term papers have been known to return with a lone grade and a number of corrections concerning style, mechanics, and punctuation.

Although it is customary for such long nourished pedagogical traditions to be given frozen immortality, recently the English teachers'

accent in the negative has been reexamined in connection with the description, analysis and application of data about nonstandard English. In this paper I will describe several current approaches to the problem, suggest the motivations for and effects of changing the current system, and note some of the materials currently available.

## Current Approaches to the Problem of Nonstandard English

### 1. Eradication:

In an editorial in the San Diego Union (September 10, 1967), Dr. Max Rafferty, State Superintendent of Public Instruction for the State of California, strongly urged the return to a pedagogical strategy of teaching that right is right and wrong is wrong with regard to the social varieties of American English:

> It is precisely education's job to deal in rights and wrongs. Because a child may count on his fingers and toes at home is no reason for his arithmetic teacher to let him keep doing it at school. And because a bigoted neighborhood may revel in racism doesn't make it okay for the civics instructor to neglect teaching the Bill of Rights to youngsters who call that neighborhood home.
>
> Neither does the fact that mom and pop say "De cat ha. just split" when they mean "The man has just gone" make it right, any more than my Irish great-grandfather was permitted by his American teachers to go around voicing such Old Sod barbarisms as "Shure and begorra, 'tis a foine spalpeen ye are, bad cess to ye."
>
> After his teachers had finished with him, great-grandad spoke good English, and he was thankful for it all his life. His parents went to their graves speaking brogue.

Although justifiable criticism may be made for selecting this particular representation of the position of those who possess what might be called the Bonnie and Clyde syndrome, it nonetheless establishes the position with pristine clarity.

A more scholarly position statement in support of eradication was made by Robert Green in reference to the more generally held sympathy toward biloquialism noted at the 1964 Conference on Social Dialects and Language Learning:

> It was further indicated that if a person has a dialect that is peculiar to a given area and moves to another area, we should not attempt to change the dialect since it is acceptable in other parts of the United States. I would say that this point of view is not necessarily a defensible one, and I would again present the argument stressed previously--that area dialects which allow one to be identified and discriminated against perhaps should be restructured...The very inadequate speech that is used in the home is also used in the neighborhood, in the play group, and in the classroom. Since these poor English language patterns are reconstructed constantly by the associations that these young people have, the school has to play a strong role in bringing about a change in order that these young people can commuricate more adequately in our society. [1]

It is not surprising that two leading educators such as these men would adopt the Bonnie and Clyde syndrome with respect to the teaching of standard English to nonstandard speakers. The English teaching profession has long nourished such a position. Children are corrected in speech and writing from their earliest days in the classroom to the last rites of graduation. The anomoly of the situation is perhaps best seen in the report of Murray Wax in his observations of how English was being taught to the Pine Ridge Sioux Indians:

> Teachers are trained to criticize (the local dialect) as 'bad English,' and so, no sooner does the Indian child open his mouth to speak English, than he is branded publicly as speaking incorrectly. [2]

---

1 Robert Green, "Dialect Sampling and Language Values," in R. Shuy (editor), Social Dialects and Language Learning (NCTE, 1965), pp. 122-123

2 Murray Wax, Rosalie Wax and Robert Dumont, "Formal Education in an American Indian Community," Social Problems, (Spring, 1969) p. 82.

If it seems undesirable to produce predictable regional features such as those found among the Pine Ridge Sioux Indians, how much more undesirable it must be to produce socially identifiable features such as those found in ghetto communities. The great American assumption, it then follows, is to rid oneself of the stigma of those features by simply eradicating the features, a time honored tradition in the English Departments of our country.

2. Biloquialism

A second position is easier to describe than to name. The term, functional bi-dialectalism was suggested at the Conference on Social Dialects and Language Learning as a way of identifying a person's right to continue speaking the dialect of his home (which may be nonstandard) even after he has learned a school dialect (which may be standard). Since the term dialect seems to carry such a heavy pejorative connotation these days, other terms have been suggested in place of bidialectalism, including the recently coined terms, biloquialism, and the term borrowed from the field of bilingual studies, diglossia. It is relatively safe to assume that both of the latter terms are more neutral than any term which involves the word dialect. Whatever it is called, most linguists will agree that a speaker of any language will make linguistic adjustments to specific social situations. These adjustments in phonology, grammar and lexicon will range anywhere from the obvious adjustments between adults and small children to the more complicated sociolinguistic switching between school, home and playground talk. Those who encourage the adoption of biloquialism

feel that the teacher's job is not to eradicate playground English--or any other kind. Instead, teachers should help children to make the switch comfortably from one setting to another.

3. Non-Standard for Standard Speakers

Recently a third position has received considerable attention. Although the topic has been discussed for several years now, I know few linguists who have publicly advocated that instead of offering standard English to nonstandard speakers, we should do exactly the opposite--present nonstandard to standard speakers. However, in his review of the Roberts English Series, Wayne A. O'Neil observes:

> Instead of "enriching" the lives of urban children by plugging them into a "second" dialect (if that enterprise is too "enriching" (sic): why don't we let everyone in for the fun and games; "enrich" the suburban kid with an urban dialect), we should be working to eradicate the language prejudice, the language mythology, that people grew into holding and believing. For there is clear evidence that the privileged use their false beliefs about language to the disadvantage of the deprived. One way to stop this is to change nonstandard dialect speakers into standard dialect speakers at least for some of the time, i.e. when the nonstandards are in the presence of the standards, currying favor of them, jobs of the, etc. This seems to me intolerable if not impossible. Another response to language differences would be to educate (especially the people in power) for tolerance of differences, for an understanding of differences. This could be naturally done, easily done in elementary schools, but only by teachers who are themselves free of language prejudice. In many ways this is the more important kind of language study that needs to be accomplished in the schools.[1]

---

1 Wayne A. O'Neil, "Paul Roberts' Rules of Order: The Misuses of Linguistics in the Classroom," in The Urban Review II, no. 7.

Those who share O'Neil's position will aruge that a brutal frontal attack on the problem, such as the one advocated by those who encourage the development of biloquialism, will be fruitless. They argue that this is not simply another case of bonehead English, that a frontal attack will alienate nonstandard speakers from us and from education, and that indirection is likely to work better than a head-on attack since their language will change of itself as they are introduced to a wider and wider world. Furthermore, advocates of this position feel that it is as morally defensible to change the rest of the world as it is to change the linguistic behavior of the nonstandard speaker.

These three positions, then, characterize current thought on the question of what to do about nonstandard English. A further position might be added in order to account for an even larger portion of the teachers of America -- that of historic lethargy. One might opt for continuing to ignore the problem.

## Motivations for Changing the Current Situation

Before delving too deeply into the techniques of the approaches of eradication, biloquialism or nonstandard for standard speakers, it may be wise to examine briefly the reasons most frequently listed for engaging in such behavior.

The eradicators, of course, carry the flag of unquestionable morality. Standard is better because it's nicer, but why it is nicer is never really explained. To accuse the people who hold this notion of

ethnocentrism would be to involve the fierce wrath of the Mortimer Smiths of America on one's head. Smith, in fact, has recently observed:

> We can only hope that teachers of English, especially of the deprived, can resist the notion of linguistic equality. We hope, as we have said before in these pages, that teachers will continue to operate on the theory that education must seek to enlarge the horizon of the student, to improve and change and refine him, and to move him on to something better than he now knows.[1]

The eradicating Bonnies and Clydes of Smith's persuasion apparently feel that "enlarging the horizon of the student" means that he should forsake his old ways, his old culture for something vaguely represented as "refinement" and "something better than he now knows." That this runs counter to the natural flow of education and life experience in general seems not to have occurred to the editor of the Bulletin of the Council for Basic Education. At least it seems reasonable to assume that learning one thing does not necessarily require the eradicatior of another thing, even if they are diametrically opposed to each other. One can only hypothesize how eradication can be conceived as enlarging one's horizon, particularly in a free society.

The motivations of the advocates of the biloquial position are considerably more complicated and deserving of attention. I will mention two motivations relating to social goals and two relating to intellectual goals.

## Social Goals

1. Upward Mobility. By far the most commonly stated reason for teaching children to be biloquial is to enable

---

1 Mortimer Smith, "The New English," Bulletin of the Council for Basic Education, Vol. 13, No. 1 (September, 1968), p.4.

then to ascend the social ladder. Whether this is viewed crassly or altruistically, it must be listed as the goal most frequently cited.[1] Those who are critical of upward mobility as a goal of American education feel that our concern should be not with economic achievement but, instead, with expanding one's intellectual potential. It is difficult, of course, to disagree with this reasoning and there may be, in fact, no real reason to disagree with it. At least some of those who favor biloquialism do not consider upward mobility as mere social climbing. Instead, they mean to provide the learner with the linguistic tools with which he can operate synchronically on a number of social levels at one time. He can identify with and communicate comfortably to a wide spectrum of people. He can refrain from both talking down to and talking over the heads of his audiences. If such teaching is accompanied by condescension toward the lower socio-economic groups and fawning toward the uppers, it is the practice which errs, not necessarily the philosophy. And this, of course, can be a serious problem. If the practitioners of biloquialism hold only a hollow regard for nonstandard and do not view it as a legitimate form of language which, like other legitimate forms, has boundaries of propriety and ludicrousness,

---

1 See, for example, San-su C. Lin, Pattern Practice in the Teaching of Standard English to Students with a Non-standard Dialect (Teachers College, Columbia University 1965) p. 1.

they are not really advocates of biloquialism anyway. They are only masquerading Bonnies and Clydes.

2. Manipulation. With the healthy advent of black self-awareness and ethnocentrism comes a different possible goal for learning standard Engl_sh-- that of increasing one's ability to manipulate whitey. The overtones of such a development range from the most extreme form of hatred of whites to the less excitable need for establishing an economic base within the black population. In some ways this goal is subject to the same criticism which we noted for those whose goal is upward social mobility. One can reasonably wonder whether the aim of English teaching is to help people become powerful every bit as much as we can wonder if it is to help people become financially secure. Yet certainly many teachers would agree that the black community needs to develop this power and ability to manipulate its environment. If biloquialism helps contribute to this goal, well and good. If it is used to foster hatred, however justifiable this may seem, again it is the practice, not necessarily the philosophy which needs to be repaired.

Intellectual Goals

1. Understanding Language System. A relatively untapped but perfectly legitimate reason for encouraging biloquialism is that it can provide a convenient and interesting way to observe

the systematic nature of language. Those who feel that learning can take place effectively by the use of contrast will want to seriously consider aspects of the contrast of systems between standard and nonstandard language. We can make no claim, in this case, for the use of such contrast merely to teach standard English, however much this might be true. A more likely outcome could be that students will learn something important about the systematicity of language, a fact which may be very helpful in building important understandings across social classes in both directions. And they just might learn something about how languages operate too. It seems reasonable to assume that studying the system of nonstandard English can lead to an appreciation of its speakers.

2. Observing language dynamics. If English teachers seriously believe that their subject matter is one of the most dynamic in the curriculum, they can be strengthened in their belief by observing language variation in process. It seems to be totally relevant to study the varieties of our contemporary language in relation to the current social scene. This can be done poorly-- and probably will be by some. But if linguistic variety is approached as a means of developing self awareness-- what it is like, linguistically, to be thirteen years old rather than thirty-five or what it is like linguistically to be black rather than white, we may be on the virge of presenting the English language in its most meaningful and dynamic dimension.

The motivation for changing current pedagogy, then, differs considerably for the eradicators and the biloquial advocates. The former lean heavily on time honored notions of rightness, giving little concern to cultural relativism or social pluralism. The advocates of biloquial education feel that it is their duty as educators to provide the learner with the alternatives to make his life what he wants it to be. If he chooses to cut cleanly with his past, he can do so by learning standard and eradicating nonstandard forever and ever. If he chooses to become fluent in both standard and nonstandard, he is given this option also. If the student's motives are selfish, the educator may be sorry about this, but he can do more about it than my former college literature teacher who worried herself sick over what might happen to us if our reading D. H. Lawrence would lead us to sexual promiscuity. Her worries were real and well motivated. But the decision of whether or not to offer D. H. Lawrence was really never hers. The course demanded it. Our education required it. Her duty as an educator was to offer the material and let us decide what to do with that knowledge. She had to provide us with that option. Our application of it, whether altruistic or selfish, whether we remembered it or forgot it immediately, was, in one sense, none of her business.

The motives of those who advocate presenting nonstandard to standard speakers are undoubtedly good. The reasons for the low esteem in which nonstandard English is held derive from mankind's lowest points. Snobbery, hatred, inequality, racism and jealousy are all likely candidates. There can be no question about the need for removing these aspects from human

life and there can be no doubt that we will continue to fail to do this. But there is no reason why we shouldn't try and I hold very great sympathy with the advocates of nonstandard for standard speakers in this respect. To be sure we need to engage in a massive attack on the legitimacy of nonstandard English for and by itself. This might be done through the study of Black English grammar (once one is written) in the high schools, through the study of language variety and change (noted earlier) and, more likely for now, through an enlightened social studies program.

In order to do any of these things, however, linguists need to tell us a great deal more than we now know about nonstandard English--particularly that variety used by Negroes. If we are going to use English as a Second Language techniques for teaching standard to nonstandard speakers, educators need to tell us why we should use this method and exactly how to delineate the differences between learning a second language and learning a second dialect. From psychology we need to learn at what age a child can best learn adult norms of standard English along with other aspects of the problem of motivation. From many disciplines (or perhaps from none) we need to learn how to direct men's hearts away from hatred, jealousy and greed.

## Current Materials

A majority of the materials currently available for teaching standard English to nonstandard speakers rest on the uneasy assumption that TESOL techniques are valid for learning a second dialect. They

do this without any solid proof. We do not have a viable evaluation tool at this time nor are we likely to get one until the linguists complete their analysis of the language system of nonstandard speakers. Most current materials deal with pronunciations although it has long been accepted that grammatical differences count more heavily toward social judgments than phonological or lexical differences.

It stands to reason that there is a hierarchy of importance in matters of teaching standard to nonstandard speakers, whether from the stance of biloquialism or Bonnie-and-Clydery. If grammatical matters count more heavily in social judgments, it seems reasonable to assume that grammatical matters should receive high priority in materials development. I know of only one set of oral language materials which has done this so far.[1] Most focus on pronunciations and few specify the nature of the problem beyond the usual list of aberrant features.

Until a clear hierarchy of importance with respect to nonstandard features is established, however, it will be difficult to decide when a learner has arrived to the point at which no negative social judgment is made of his oral language (or to decide the point at which pursuit of standard forms buys him so little that it is not worth the effort).

An even more perplexing problem has to do with distinguishing those features which black speakers wish to retain in order to be identified as black from the features which give them low social status.

---

1 These materials were developed as part of the Sociolinguistics Program at The Center For Applied Linguistics under funding from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The author, Irwin Feigenbaum, developed these materials in the Washington, D.C. schools over a period of two years.

Contributing to our difficulty here is the unsettled state of things in general at this time. Ron Karenga, for example, has argued that black people need to become socially distinct as a basis on which to function politically and economically with unity. In order to do this he advocates a cultural revolution which involves developing a mythology, a historical tradition (with new heroes and new holidays), the restoration of emasculated black males, the development of new political and economic organizations, and an education, art, literature, and music which will create and support a black ethos. At his center for instruction in Los Angeles, Karenga also encourages black people to learn an African language, Swahili, to tie language to the cultural revolution. Although it is quite perceptive to recognize that language is an extremely important part of developing black ethnocentrism, three things might be said of Karenga's choice of Swahili. First, it quite unlikely that Swahili was an ancestral language of very many of the black people of America. It is an East African language and most slaves were uprooted from West Africa where other languages, such as Hausa and Yoruba, were spoken. Second, one may legitimately wonder whether Karenga is not making his job harder than it need be by going back to Africa to resolve the language question. Third, it is unlikely that blacks will be any more successful in teaching Afro-Americans to speak Swahili than are our high schools in teaching Euro-Americans to speak French, German or Spanish

Certain distinctive characteristics of contemporary Negro speech may well suffice to serve the same purpose. At this point, this in only a hypothesis, of course, but could it be that two or three phonological features such as the final consonant cluster reduction and the devoicing

of the final voiced stop consonants /b/, /d/, and /g/, will suffice to provide this black identity. A major difficulty with such a suggestion is that phonological features are not very high in the threshold of speaker awareness. These features, for example, are often the last remnants of nonstandard Negro speech primarily because the speaker is not aware that they so identify him. Indeed, it might be easier to select grammatical features which Negroes can use to satisfy their black consciousness since it would be easier to restructure conscious indices than to make unconscious ones conscious. At this point, one can most sensibly observe that the topic bears further investigation.

It would appear that the three positions described in this paper (The Bonnies and Clydes, The biloquialists and The advocates of non-standard for standard speakers) are not necessarily in mutual opposition. As in politics, it is frequently difficult to tell the Republicans from the Democrats. There are eradicators who claim to be biloquialists and biloquialists who sympathize with the idea of presenting nonstandard to standard speakers. The latter two positions have more in common, however, than either of them with the eradicators.

It is difficult to tell exactly what the most efficient procedure will be from here on but it seems clear that all English teachers should concern themselves with the following questions:

1. Is what I am teaching about the English language the most important thing that my students can study at this time?

2. Is my English language teaching completely unbigoted?

3. Am I honoring my obligation as an English language teacher to provide the most useful alternatives or options for my students' self fulfillment (not just job opportunities)?

4. Is my English language teaching utilizing the most dynamic and timely principles and data for undertaking the system of language?

5. Am I taking every advantage of the opportunities in my English language class to develop healthy attitudes toward social justice, brotherhood and human rights?

If the answers to any one of these questions is no, we had better reexamine our motives for being where we are and for doing what we are doing.