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ABSTRACT

The need for teachers of English to accept speakers of nonstandard dialects of English is stressed. It is the responsibility of these teachers to help their students cope linguistically with all aspects of their lives. With linguistic insights and information and classroom expertise, teachers bring hope to the disadvantaged child. (CK)

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"LOVE ME OR LEAVE ME BUT DON'T WASTE THE TIME": DIALECTS IN TODAY'S SCHOOLS

Jean Malmstrom

Hey, maybe I won't be a grammatical English teacher, maybe not a published BOOK writer, maybe not a bright black shadow glowing deaddull not even knowing I'm not free, can't move like I want to pinned to the pavement. You think I will ever sit down, brow furrowed, and figure out, try to figure out want to figure out the sentence structure of everything I write? Lady, I just don't

a. care
b. have the time.

Too much to do so little time. Love me or leave me but don't waste the time.

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So, to his English teacher, wrote Warren Wardell, a successful black English major in secondary education at Western Michigan University. He knows that language is the key to both conflict and communication, as sociolinguists are making clearer every day. Language creates and consolidates social groups, separating in-groups from out-groups. Conflict festers and communication falters unless each group can say to the others, with pride and honesty, "Teach me your language and I'll teach you mine."

Until the English teacher can utter those words, with friendly, honest, intellectual curiosity, to his students who are nonstandard speakers, his teaching of standard English to these speakers will yield anger and despair, not joy and hope. Inside and outside classrooms, solutions to social problems require respect for dialect differences. Classroom success begins with teachers' respect for their students' dialects, both regional and social. Without granting this respect to students, we teachers cannot ask students' respect for our dialects. Without mutual respect, we merely "waste the time."

In 1963, the National Council of Teachers of English published *Dialects —U. S.A.*[1] It was a little booklet to help students learn how geography affects the way we talk in the United States. Since the 1930's, "linguistic geographers" had been collecting data on American speech for the Linguistic Atlas of the United States. Their findings supported what we all know from radio and television: a person's speech reflects his geographic background. The differences result from early settlement history, population migrations, physical geography, the presence or absence of cities, and the social structure of the region. The several ways each person speaks are technically called his "dialects," and every language is a collection of all the dialects of all its speakers.

As *Dialects—U. S.A.* emphasized, the word *dialect* has no negative or evil connotations in the technical vocabulary of the modern student of language. Dialects differ interestingly in vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. As students and teachers investigated regional dialects firsthand, they discovered that the man-in-the-street is amused by vocabulary differences, puzzled by pronunciation differences, and offended by grammatical differences. For example, he chuckles when he discovers that his deepdish apple pie is somebody else's apple slump or apple grunt. But he is perplexed when he finds that people from other parts of the country "mispronounce" words, since in his opinion, his own pronunciation is the only "correct" one. His puzzlement changes to righteous indignation when grammatical differences confront him. He absolutely "knows" that *he don't* and *ain't* are grammatically "wrong," and he feels subconsciously that they are also morally "bad."

The study of regional dialects in the schools capitalizes on all these emotions, which actually explain the built-in fascination of the field. People may be amused, puzzled, or angered by dialect differences, but they are never bored by them. The intellectual spin-off of dialect study is that teachers and students acquire a new viewpoint about both literature and language. They learn to observe how writers use dialect in literature for many artistic purposes, and, as Alfred Dauzat said years ago in "La géographie linguistique," they learn

> that words, like men, are bound to the earth. Their conflicts do not take place in the clouds of philosophy but in one country or another, as men's conflicts do.

[1] Jean Malmstrom and Annabel Ashley.

Recently, men's conflicts in our cities have spotlighted the crucial importance of social dialects. As we face the educational dilemmas of urban ghettos, emotional reactions to dialects proliferate and intensify. Language is the most accurate single criterion of social class,[2] and racism in our country reflects in our national attitudes toward social dialects. Since the majority of the ghetto minority is black, their speech is the controlling nonstandard variety, the king of the street. The language of the street symbolizes intense intra-group loyalties and passionate social beliefs. This is the prestige language that the ghetto newcomer to New York from Puerto Rico, for example, wants to learn. It is his passkey into the commanding groups of his neighborhood. The middle-class standard English of the schools engages his attention only spasmodically and artificially; his involvement with the street language is massive and automatic. As Warren Wardell says, he does not attend "one of those littleredlilywhite schoolhouses where all the kids have the time to go home and play stump the English teacher. Or go home and play. Or go home."

We put the cart before the horse if we assume that a nonstandard speaker automatically wants to learn standard English in order to increase his economic, social, and political mobility. First, he must be convinced that such mobility is both possible and desirable. Skin color cannot be changed by dialect-switching; and skin color is crucial for our black majority-minority. It intensifies all the problems implicit in social dialect differences, inside and outside classrooms. Warren Wardell comments on it to his English teacher:

> I don't believe in your language and I don't believe in you. Your language tells me that black is evil, magic, mysterious, dirty. You tell me with this same language I can get as far as the white boy? I got to write grammatically? I got to write in sentences? World's not built that way. I go to get a job, old days, man sees my face, nowords of mine, just his, Not hiring. Igotoget a job newdayshipperdays manseesmyface (says Sit down Boy. Are you qualified? Don't call us, we'll call you.) nowordsofmine, justhis NOT HIRING. If I get A's on my papers it doesn't make me happy, it surprises me. That someone should go through all that trouble to form A when all the A's turn into simple easily made O with the Man.

Sociolinguists cannot solve these problems but they can give us guidance. They have analyzed social dialects and their relationships to race, age, sex, and class in several cities—New York, Washington, D. C., Chicago, Detroit, for example. So far, most work has been done on the language of the black-ghetto majority-minority, though attention is also being paid to the language problems of other minorities—Indians, speakers of Spanish from Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Mexico, and disadvantaged whites from Appalachia. Sociolinguists have discovered that black nonstandard English is as patterned as standard English, with which it contrasts in clear and definite ways. Though these contrasts are social markers, they are relatively few. In other words, nonstandard and standard English are much more alike than different. But those few differences are the crucial problems for teachers who would bring the black-ghetto child into the mainstream culture. Across the country, these patterns and contrasts are the same, a

[2] William Labov, **The Social Stratification of English in New York City** (Washington, D.C., Center for Applied Linguistics, 1966). Labov summarizes some of his findings in "Stages in the Acquisition of Standard English," **Social Dialects and Language Learning**, Roger W. Shuy, ed. (Champaign, Ill., National Council of Teachers of English, 1965), pp. 77-103.

fact that greatly simplifies the preparation of teaching materials and techniques.[3]

However, the study of social dialects is not being joyously welcomed into the schools, as the study of regional dialects was in 1963. Martin Buber says that real education is accepting the learner before trying to influence him. Too often such acceptance is the impossible hurdle for the teacher. A teacher who thinks that nonstandard English is "wrong," "bad," "sloppy," or "illiterate" reflects his middle-class values, clinging to his standard English as a symbol of his middle-class membership. English teachers, both black and white, are members of the middle class. A linguistically-informed teacher knows that any language is a collection of dialects, of subvarieties within dialects, and of stylistic varieties within those subvarieties. We all need many types of language to handle various situations appropriately.[4] The teacher's goal is to help students learn dialect-switching to cope intelligently with all parts of their lives. Speakers of standard and nonstandard alike need to acquire such basic communication skill.

Working in New York City, William Labov has organized important phonological rules that correlate with crucial grammatical inflections. These correlations produce homonyms in the ghetto child's speech so that he cannot hear the signals of standard English. In other words, his language lacks the signals of school language; these signals are "silent" just like the *k* of *knife* or the *b* of *lamb* in standard English.

For example, Labov cites the following phonological variables.

1. *r-lessness.* The *r* is omitted before other consonants or at the ends of words and is often omitted even before a vowel. Thus the following pairs are homonyms.

guard/god	fort/fought	Carol/Cal
nor/gnaw	court/caught	Paris/pass

2. *l-lessness.* The same pattern appears almost as often with *l* as with *r*. The two sounds are similar in their physical production in the mouth. "Dropping *l*'s" produces homonyms like the following.

toll/toe	tool/too	all/awe
help/hep	fault/fought	Saul/saw

3. *Simplification of consonant clusters.* At the ends of words, one consonant disappears from a cluster, especially those ending in *t* or *d* and *s* or *z* sounds. Thus the following words become homonyms.

past/pass	mend/men	six/sick
rift/riff	hold/hole	mix/Mick

Note that if several rules of omission combine, triple homonyms can appear:
told/toll/toe

4. *Other phonological variables producing other types of homonyms.* For example, the voiceless *th* sound becomes *f* at the end of words: *Ruth* and *roof* and *death* and *deaf* are homonyms. Lack of vowel distinction makes homonyms of *pin* and *pen*, *since* and *cents*, *sure* and *shore*, for example.

[3] William Labov, **The Study of Nonstandard English** (Champaign, Ill., National Council of Teachers of English, 1970); J. L. Dillard, "Negro Children's Dialect in the Inner City," **Florida Foreign Language Reporter**, Vol. 5 (Fall 1967), pp. 7-8, 10; Lee A. Pederson, "Some Structural Differences in the Speech of Chicago Negroes," **Social Dialects and Language Learning**, op. cit., pp. 28-51; **Teaching English in the Inner City**, Ralph W. Fasold and Roger W. Shuy, eds. (Washington, D. C., Center for Applied Linguistics, 1970); **Linguistic-Cultural Differences and American Education**, Special Anthology Issue, **Florida Foreign Language Reporter**, Vol. 7 (1969).

[4] Jean Malmstrom, "Language and Situation," **An Introduction to Modern English Grammar** (New York, Hayden Book Co., Inc., 1968), pp. 2-44.

These phonological facts, and others, correlate with grammar in complicated ways. For instance, the loss of *r* affects the possessives *your* and *their*, making them homonyms of *you* and *they* respectively. The loss of *l* affects the future-time forms: *you'll* and *you* fall together as do *he'll* and *he*, and *she'll* and *she*. The loss of *t* and *d* affects the past forms of verbs, which regularly use these sounds for signalling the *-ed* inflection of the past tense and the past participle. The absence of *s* affects the present of verbs and the plural and possessive of nouns. These are only some of the consistent phonological-grammatical conflicts between the street language and the school language. They can cause extreme problems in learning to read and write standard English.[5]

Sociolinguists can now rank contrasts between the street and school languages in an order of cruciality so that teachers can knowingly teach the problems and avoid the non-problems.[6] In order of descending importance, the five most crucial contrasts which brand the speaker of black English in the ears of his listener are the following.

1. Omission of *-s* from the third person singular of the present tense of verbs (*he go* for *he goes*).

2. Multiple negation (*didn't do nothing* for *didn't do anything*).

3. Omission of the *-s* possessive suffix (*man hat* for *man's hat*).

4. Invariant *be* (*he be home*, with no standard equivalent, meaning something like "He is home frequently," as contrasted with "He is home permanently" or "He is home at the moment").

5. The absence of *be*, the copula or linking verb (*he nice* for *he is nice*).

On the basis of this information, sociolinguists are now preparing teaching exercises, using foreign-language teaching methods, contrasting two dialects instead of two languages. Four types of drills seem especially effective.

1. *Discrimination drills.* As stimulus the teacher says pairs of sentences: *He work hard* and *He works hard* or *He work hard* and *He work hard* or *He works hard* and *He works hard*. To each pair the student reacts by saying "same" or "different." Thus he shows his power to hear the crucial *-s* of the third person singular present tense.

2. *Identification drills.* The teacher gives a one-sentence stimulus and the student identifies it as "standard" or "nonstandard." For example:

He work hard "nonstandard" *He works hard* "standard"

3. *Translation drills.* Students translate back and forth between the two dialects, changing the stimulus *He works hard* to *He work hard* and the stimulus *He work hard* to *He works hard*. Translation drills can be complicated in various ways. For example, *I, you, we,* or *they* may be substituted for *he*, whereupon the crucial *-s* of the third singular disappears. The student shows his understanding of that fact by replying *They work hard* to the stimulus *They work hard*. This knowledge is crucial because many nonstandard speakers overcorrect, generalizing *he works* into *I works, you works, we works*, and *they works*. He needs to examine the entire set to see the point of contrast. Translation drills illuminate the totality, not merely the one inflected form.

[5] "Reading Problems for Negro Speakers," **New Directions in Elementary English**, Alexander Frazier, ed. (Champaign, Ill., National Council of Teachers of English, 1967), pp. 146-157, updated and reprinted as "Some Sources of Reading Problems for Negro Speakers of Nonstandard English," in **Teaching Black Children to Read**, Joan C. Baratz and Roger W. Shuy, eds. (Washington, D. C., Center for Applied Linguistics, 1969), pp. 29-67.

[6] Walter A. Wolfram, "Sociolinguistic Implications for Educational Sequencing," in Fasold and Shuy, eds., **op. cit.**, p. 117.

4. *Response drills.* Although still carefully structured, these drills give students greater freedom to reply. The teacher may give a nonstandard or standard stimulus and ask the student to match the dialect. For example, if the teacher gives the nonstandard stimulus *Your best friend work after school,* the student replies in the same dialect: *No, he don't.* If the teacher gives the standard stimulus *Your friend gets good grades,* there are several standard-dialect optional replies, *No, he doesn't* or *Yes, she does,* for example. To a nonstandard stimulus like *Do his sister go to this school?* the student has a wide option in answering, but must reply in nonstandard to show that he has recognized the dialect appropriate to the stimulus.[7]

The important breakthrough in these exercises is the deliberate and respectful use of nonstandard dialect in helping students—both standard and nonstandard speakers—hear the contrasts. Never before has such proper respect been paid to the native language of our black majority-minority.

In acquiring standard English, the child develops in definite stages. He learns his basic grammar in his home to communicate with the people who surround him there. In his preadolescent years—from about five to twelve—he learns the vernacular of his neighborhood, the speech of his playmates and schoolmates. In early adolescence he begins to understand that school language differs from his vernacular, though he still speaks only the latter. In his first year of high school, at about age fourteen, as he is exposed to a larger group than his immediate neighborhood, he begins to shift his language in the direction of standard English, especially in formal situations. The two final stages often are not reached by nonstandard speakers. These stages are the ability to maintain standard speech for any length of time—long enough for a job interview, for example—and the ability to use the entire range of styles, shifting from standard to vernacular and back again.[8]

If the teacher in a ghetto school, having once been a nonstandard speaker himself, can achieve the final stage of flexibility, he has a true ace in helping students relax in the face of language study. He can convincingly demonstrate how to use both dialects, explaining how he recognizes situations appropriate to each. His problem is maintaining an unemotional, objective, balanced position between them. Lacking such ability, the teacher may ask a student to lead the drills. Interestingly, motivated students enjoy such drills, revealing that common sense is one of the best and easiest ways of motivating language study.

A pressing responsibility now rests on teacher-training institutions to set up courses in nonstandard English. Such courses already exist in some large universities—UCLA, Columbia Teachers College, Georgetown University and Trinity College in Washington, D. C., Northeastern Illinois University, and Michigan State University. Such a course should be part of every teacher's preparation.

With linguistic insights and information and classroom expertise, teachers bring hope to the disadvantaged black child. Without hope this child expects failure by grade four, and, from then till he is old enough to drop out of school, he lags farther and farther behind his advantaged classmates every year. The one crucial lack in the world-view of the very poor is hope. "Hope," says Jules Henry, anthropologist, "is a boundary: it separates the

[7] Irwin Feigenbaum, "The Use of Nonstandard in Teaching Standard: Contrast and Comparison," ibid., pp. 92-100. Feigenbaum's program for speakers of black-ghetto English has been published as English Now (New York, New Century, Educational Division, Meredith Corporation, 1970). It includes audio-visual materials as well as workbooks and teacher's manual.

[8] William Labov, "Stages in the Acquisition of Standard English," op. cit., pp. 91-92.

free from the slave, the determined from the drifting . . . time, space, and objects really exist for us only when we have hope." The culture of the very poor is "a flight from death"; only the "survival self" remains.[9]

We need mutual respect, relevant programs, and an end to toying with trivia. So we will motivate our black college students, and motivation, like hope, fosters the will to carry on. Then the Warren Wardells will no longer write:

> You offer me no new life, but rather a resurrection of the same old bloody cross-bearing.