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AUTHOR Eskey, David E.
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the controversy over nonstandard dialects as opposed to the standard language in the teaching of English and makes a case for maintaining a commitment to Standard English. The primary function of standard English is to provide a means by which members of English-speaking society can communicate with each other. It is essentially a complex set of rules, much like the rules of baseball or chess and abandoning the rules or stretching them too far can result in a total breakdown of the game. That the rules of standard English are an arbitrary set of intrinsically no better than those of nonstandard dialects in no way detracts from their immeasurable value as the agreed-upon rules. To some extent, the drive for social justice depends on certain kinds of education, and teaching the facts about languages and dialects may help to dispel one kind of prejudice. The school, however, must also continue to teach students to read and write the standard language, not as the language of the rich or powerful, but as the language of educated English speakers. (Author/HW)

The Case for the Standard Language

David E. Eskey
University of Pittsburgh

For years, even centuries, the English teaching profession has gone along attempting to teach standard English without giving much thought to its reasons for doing so. For the most part we have taught it badly, failing, for example, to distinguish between questions of convention and questions of moral value. Unconventional speakers from Huckleberry Finn to the latest ghetto dropout have traditionally been treated as linguistic pariahs up with whom no standard speaker should have to put. Thus the average English teacher continues to regard the language advocated in prescriptive grammars and employed in the dullest and most verbose of textbooks as, simply, "good English" and the language of any nonstandard speaker, no matter how imaginative, pungent, or apt, as, simply, "bad English". This approach to dialect is obviously absurd and the sooner the profession discards it the better.

There are, however, good reasons for teaching the standard dialect. The goal of such teaching has been, roughly speaking, to turn our students into fluent users of standard English, which is just rough enough to have allowed for all kinds of crazy interpretations by teachers who did (and do) not know much about language. And yet if properly defined this goal is a good one: it should not be abandoned merely because so many English teachers have abused it in the past. We must rather distinguish more carefully among "students" and ascertain more precisely what it means to be "fluent" in standard English.

Students, for example, obviously differ in their knowledge and control of this particular dialect. Just as obviously then there is no point in insisting that every student use it from the moment he enters school. Nothing good can come from rejecting a student's language, or attempting to impose an unfamiliar set of forms on a student in the midst of expressing himself in what is for him the most natural manner. It makes much better sense to teach such a student what a dialect is, what the standard dialect is and why it might be worth learning, and then to help him make the dialectal adjustment. I should add "if he wants to." For some students in this era of confrontation, the subject of dialect has unfortunately become so emotionally charged that the students' self-respect is now inseparably bound up with refusing to learn to speak or write standard English. Every teacher should attempt to prevent or dispel this kind of sullen-peasant thinking, but if his best attempts fail, so be it (as a friend once observed, salvation is not compulsory): no student in our schools should ever be failed for purely dialectal reasons. In assessing a student's language performance, there are, as Gineva Smitherman points out,[1] far more important things to worry about — like clarity, coherence, organization, and using evidence effectively. One can write well or badly in any dialect.

I would argue very strongly for this view of the problem. It seems to me that in defining and isolating dialects we have largely obscured the natural human ability to adjust to many varieties of language. A dialect after all is only an abstraction, a particular set of features[2] abstracted from the language of a whole group of speakers of one region or class, no one of whom is likely to exhibit just that set of features and no other features. As Labov has noted, there are no single-style speakers (or listeners, readers, and writers) and many of the features that distinguish style from style similarly distinguish dialect from dialect.[3]

Given a little rational guidance and sufficient exposure to standard English, any student who cares to can probably master its forms, which are no more complex than those of any other dialect. He may still of course have trouble expressing his thoughts, or have no thoughts worth expressing, but these are altogether different problems.

Students also differ in their linguistic needs. Any high school graduate should perhaps be able to read the morning paper or Newsweek without a struggle, but only a self-defined minority will want to do more sophisticated reading or the kind of formal writing that, for example, a university student may have to produce.

As these remarks suggest, the standard I have in mind is essentially a written standard. There is no standard pronunciation of English, not even for the U.S. let alone the whole world. Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon provide an obvious example of (among other things) the range of phonological variation among speakers of standard American English: pronunciation clearly differs from region to region. Although the electronic media do exert a kind of standardizing influence, the essence of the standard dialect is in its grammar and vocabulary. To say that someone speaks standard English then is merely to say that he controls this syntax and this vocabulary, that he can if he wants to (in making a formal presentation, for example) talk like a book.

Properly defined, the goal of our teaching should thus be to help every student develop an understanding of what standard English is and what it is used for, and to help him become as fluent a reader and writer of it as he wants and needs to be. Such a goal in no way implies pouncing on every nonstandard form or making absurdly inflated claims for the beauties and virtues of standard English.

For reasons considered in some detail below, that goal has, however,

recently been questioned. Spokesmen for the profession like James Sledd and Wayne O'Neil now argue against any special commitment to teaching standard English at the expense, as they see it, of the nonstandard dialects.[4] But to abandon that commitment would be, in my opinion, a greater blunder than all of our previous mistakes put together. There is a case to be made for teaching the standard language far different from the one that is currently in vogue, and the purpose of this paper is to make that case.

The recent controversy over nonstandard dialects (and especially Black English) has engendered two extreme antagonistic positions both of which seem to me to be dangerously wrongheaded. One, the bidialectalist (or biloquialist) position, is that every nonstandard speaker should be given a chance to learn the standard dialect without having to give up his own kind of English. Since standard English is the language of those in power, the nonstandard speaker, so the argument runs, must learn it if he wants to get ahead in our society; he should not, however, be expected to give up the dialect of his family and friends. The idea is for him to become bidialectal, that is to master a second dialect — standard English -- which he can use in climbing the establishment ladder. According to my colleague Christina Bratt Paulston, bidialectalism "has as its goal comfortable code-switching" between standard English and nonstandard English "according to the appropriate situation." She adds that "most of the literature" dealing with the problem of nonstandard dialects "favors this approach, and it is no exaggeration to say that it is the one most commonly endorsed by sociolinguists today."[5]

The counter position is that nonstandard speakers should not be expected to become bidialectal, partly because it probably cannot be done and partly because the whole idea is based on what is essentially a racist premise -- that minorities must learn to do things our way in order to succeed in American

society.

In general I accept the first part of this, not, however, because I believe that people never change their dialects, but becuase in mixed dialect situations they almost always do. My own experience (and the empirical evidence) suggests that there are no bidialectal speakers.[6] In the process (formal or otherwise) of becoming educated, the nonstandard speaker will inevitably modify his dialect, consciously at times, unconsciously at others, so that his formal style (especially his formal written syle) will gradually evolve into one more version of standard English. At the opposite end of the scale, however, his intimate style is likely to retain much more of his original nonstandard English, although no one who speaks that dialect only will miss the intervening modifications. Such a speaker will, in short, speak a mixed dialect like many, perhaps most, of his fellow Americans.

It is the second part, however, which constitutes the heart of the anti-bidialectalist position. The real battle is being fought not on linguistic but on moral grounds. Of bidialectalism's several published critics the most eloquent is James Sledd, who, with a curious combination of rhetorical brilliance and sociopolitical hysteria, has attacked this approach with considerable heat:

> The biloquialist, of course, makes a great fuss about giving the child of the poor and ignorant, whether black or white, the choice of using or not using standard English. "He should be allowed to make that decision as he shapes his decisions in life." But the biloquialist obviously sees himself as the determiner of the decisions which other people may decide, and the choice he deigns to give is really not much choice after all. In the name of social realism, he begins by imposing a false scheme of values, of which "upward mobility" is the highest; and he then sets out to make the child "upwardly mobile" by requiring hours of stultifying drill on arbitrary matters of usage, so that in situations where standard English is deemed appropriate the child may choose between "Ain't nobody gon' love you" and "Nobody is going to love you." Appropriate will be defined by the white world, which will also fix the punishment if the liberated doublespeaker prefers his own definition. Ain't nobody gon' love him if he does that.[7]

Thus the bidialectalists regard the standard language as essentially a means for getting on in the world, like wearing the right clothes or getting to know the right people. Their opponents regard it as essentially a weapon the main purpose of which is to keep the in-group in and the out-group, especially the black out-group, out. The fact is that the social issue here is crowding everything else out, including common sense. Obviously the standard dialect has proved useful to both upward-bound blacks and establishment racists in pursuing their mutually opposed social goals, but the primary function of standard English is to provide the basic means by which the educated members of English-speaking society can communicate, as easily as possible, with each other.

Like Sledd, I have always been irritated by Charles Fries' provincial definition of standard English as the language of those "who are responsible for the important affairs of our communities."[8] I would argue that standard English is rather the language of the educated English-speaking peoples, "educated" in the simplest sense of the word (not, needless to say, the sense of having earned this or that degree, but the sense of having actively engaged in serious reading -- possibly some writing -- serious listening, and informed conversation). That some of these people have made it big in New York, London, and Ann Arbor, Michigan, is , to put it as politely as possible, not the defining characteristic of the group, a group which includes people of many races and many socioeconomic classes. What makes a community of all these different kinds of people is the form (though not the content) of what they read and write and what they listen to and say, a form which allows for widespread communication. For a more to-the-point definition of standard English, I therefore turn to this recent comment by J. Mitchell Morse:

> Standard English is the English in which most of the books, magazines, and newspapers we read are written. The ability to read, write, and speak it is a necessary key to the information and artistry books con-

> tain and the conversation they make possible. One of the cliches educationists live by is that the spoken English of the educated classes is called "standard" as a matter of snobbery. But that is a half-truth. Obviously there is snobbery; but the spoken English of the educated classes is called "standard" becuase in its grammar and vocabulary it conforms to the world-wide uniformities of written English: in a word, because it is standard.[9]

The real case to be made for the standard language, then, has nothing to do with any group's conscious use or misuse of it. Its value, like the value of language itself, is one we largely take for granted, but perhaps the time has come to point out that the English-speaking world -- which encompasses much of the physical world -- has profitted enormously from the simple existence of a general standard which has helped to keep the language, despite its many dialects, universally intelligible.[10]

In defending standard English and the teaching of standard English, I am certainly not, however, suggesting that we should just go on doing what we have been doing. On the contrary, I would argue that the teaching of stadard English, though it must not be abandoned, should be radically overhauled. If American students had ever been exposed to the facts about language and varieties of language there might never, in my opinion, have been any problem. We should, as responsible professionals, thus insist that no English teacher be turned loose in the classroom until he has mastered at least the fundamentals of social and regional dialectology. Such a teacher will know better than to try to sell his students a single brand of English as the one and only English for all times and places. He will deal with the many dialects of the language, and the natural shifting of styles within dialects, as the typical situation it is. And he will waste no time in class running down nonstandard forms or making transparently fraudulent claims for the natural superiority of the standard dialect. He will, however, continue to teach it and, given a rational description of the facts, his students may in turn come to understand the true function and value of standard English

in our society.

Standard English is essentially a complex set of rules (albeit a loosely structured set), much like the rules of football or chess and, just as in these sports, abandoning the rules or stretching them too far can result in a total breakdown of the game in which nobody wins and everybody loses. That the rules of standard English are an arbitrary set intrinsically no better than those of nonstandard dialects in no way detracts from their immeasurable value as the agreed upon rules of the game. To some extent the drive for social justice depends on certain kinds of education, and teaching the facts about languages and dialects may help to dispel one kind of prejudice. But the schools must also continue to teach our students to read and write the standard language, not as the language of the rich and powerful but as the language of educated speakers everywhere.

FOOTNOTES

1. "'God Don't Never Change': Black English from a Black Perspective," College English, March 1973, pp. 831-832.

2. More specifically a set of phonological, grammatical, and lexical features. In my own Pittsburgh area English, for example, there is only one low or central back vowel (cot and caught are homonyms), many speakers would accept your hair needs cut and that's all you ever talk about any more as perfectly grammatical, and a soda is not a soft drink -- that's pop.

3. William Labov, The Study of Nonstandard English (Washington, D.C.: NCTE/CAL, 1970), pp. 19 and 22.

4. See, for example, Sledd's "Bi-dialectalism: the Linguistics of White Supremacy" (English Journal, December 1969, pp. 1307-1315); and "Doublespeak: Dialectology in the Service of Big Brother" (College English, January 1972, pp. 439-456), which follows O'Neil's "The Politics of Bidialectalism" (pp. 433-439). All three articles are attacks on bidialectal(or biloquial)ism ("doublespeak" in Sledd's contemptuous coinage), a movement devoted to teaching standard English to nonstandard speakers (for more discussion, see below). In an exchange with one disgruntled critic, Sledd carefully points out that he has never exactly opposed the teaching of standard English in the schools, but he has certainly made it clear, as has O'Neil, that he sees no particular value in it (George R. Beissel, "Comment on James Sledd" and James Sledd, "Response to George R. Beissel," College English, January 1973, pp. 582-585).

5. "On the Moral Dilemma of the Sociolinguist," Language Learning, December 1971, p. 176. Sledd provides an extensive list of bidialectalist publications in his "Doublespeak," p. 440, text and footnote.

6. Or very few: an occasional linguistic virtuoso hardly counts. For further discussion of the virtual nonexistence of genuine bidialectal speakers, see Sledd's "Doublespeak," pp. 440-441 ("The Moneyed Bankrupt"). See also Labov, p. 36.

7. "Doublespeak," p. 450. For Sledd a positive commitment to teaching standard English implies collusion with an utterly corrupt establishment. The conclusion which follows from this remarkable premise is, not surprisingly, apocalyptically gloomy: "Because our ruling class is unfit to rule, our standard language lacks authority; and because our society has been corrupted by the profit-seeking of technology run wild, an honest teacher cannot exercise his normal function of transmitting to the young the knowledge and values of their elders. In fact, the time may come, and soon come, when an honest teacher can't keep his honesty and keep teaching" (p. 455).

8. American English Grammar (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1940), p. 13. I should perhaps point out that Fries was here concerned to establish objective criteria for classifying various kinds of writers, and was therefore almost inevitably drawn to years of formal education, occupational status, and similar measures. The study itself, like so much of Fries' work, is a masterpiece, but the fact remains that this definition of standard English strikes an extremely sour note today.

9. "The Shuffling Speech of Slavery: Black English," College English, March 1973, p. 835. My only quarrel with this is in some of the phrasing: I would say that standard English "is a necessary key to the information and artistry" many (not all) "books contain," and I would substitute a simple "educated people" for "the educated classes": I doubt that such people really constitute a class in any of the usual senses of that word. About Morse's article as a whole, however, and Smitherman's contrasting "God Don't Never Change", I have more serious reservations.

10. In 1964 during the last in their series of BBC broadcasts, Albert Marckwardt, in response to a question from Randolph Quirk about the future of English, observed "that in Shakespeare's time there were about five million persons speaking English. At present, there are no less than 270 million speakers of English who have learned it as their first language, that is to say, who speak it natively. This, after all, is a more than fifty-fold increase in four centuries. In addition, there are many millions also who speak English as a foreign or as a second language; possibly 135 million" (A Common Language, Washington, D.C.: USIS, 1965, p. 74). To this he later added the observation that the English language "is global already. People speak it natively in virtually every continent of the world" (p. 75). "The sphere of English," Quirk concluded, "now is the world" (p. 79).