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ABSTRACT

Black English Vernacular (BEV) is spoken in more or less pure form by many, if not most, of the inner-city students attending college under plans like open enrollment. In cities, most blacks, Puerto Ricans, and many other non-native speakers speak or can speak a form of BEV. The prevalence of BEV in elementary and secondary schools of the inner city is even greater. BEV is a dialect of English which is infinite in scope and fully capable in principle of expressing anything which can be meant in any dialect in English. However, most English teachers neither speak BEV nor know anything about it. To negatively evaluate a paper written in BEV is to contradict the humanistic view of the value of each individual and the goal of English teaching as maximizing personal human growth--which is a position we cannot hold either politically or pedagogically. All teachers of reading and writing must make clear to their students the differences between written and spoken language using situations and the concomitant differences between written and spoken language conventions. This can and should be done for all speakers, for written and spoken English are different for all. (LL)

Yes, Virginia, There is a BEV

By

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I am going to assume several things:[1]

First, that there is a Black English Vernacular which is spoken in more or less pure form by many, if not most, of the inner city students attending college under plans like open enrollment. In our cities most Blacks, Puerto-Ricans, and many other Non-Native speakers speak or can speak a form of BEV. The prevalence of BEV in elementary and secondary schools of the inner city is even greater.

Second, that BEV is a dialect of English which is infinite in scope and fully capable in principle of expressing anything which can be meant in any dialect in English.[2] It is perfectly true, of course, that most BEV speakers don't use it in these ways, but that is another issue.

Third, that most English teachers don't speak BEV (and have never spoken it). And many neither understand it, nor know enough about it.

All of those positions can be (and have been) fully documented. There are arguments about the precise linguistic nature of BEV, about its early history and geographic spread, about its effects on early school performance, but I think we need not trouble ourselves with them here.

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1 I have decided to leave this paper primarily in the form it was prepared for oral presentation at the meeting of the Conference on English Education in Cleveland in March 1974. I was and am essentially making an argument rather than developing a scholarly position. Bibliographical references and certain explanatory comments suggested by the audience in Cleveland have been added as footnotes. The paper was originally prepared for a panel entitled, "But you can't give an A to a paper written in non-standard English: The Politics of Standards."

2 The research on inner city language has been done by many scholars in recent years. The term Black English Vernacular is William Labov's whose work has been most influential in developing my viewpoint. His work is most accessible in Language in the Inner City and Sociolinguistic Patterns both published in 1972 by the University of Pennsylvania Press.

The thesis I would like to propose here is that a position like: "You can't give an A to a paper written in non-standard English," is both a POLITICAL and a PEDAGOGICAL position and that if we believe in what we say we believe - that is in the humanistic view of the value of each individual and that the goal of English teaching is to maximize personal human growth - then it is a position we cannot hold either politically or pedogically.

Before arguing my case I'd like to clear away a bit of underbrush to make plain what I am not talking about. I am not talking about whether or not to give grades. Whether we do or don't we are by virtue of our role going to be viewed as and view ourselves as evaluators of student writing in some fashion. Nor am I pretending that I don't value or speak (and write) standard American English (SAE). I do and I do, and therefore, I am not arguing that anyone - black or white, native or non-native speaker - should not learn to write SAE if and when he or she wants to.

What I am concerned to define and explicate are some positions that we as English educators should take in helping our students to deal with one of the most crucial pedagogical problems they will face: what to do for their high school and college students who write papers in BEV. What do they do, in other words, for a student who writes the following paper to an assignment to respond to the question "Who are you?" as posed by five specified people.

I. A Cop about to arrest you --

> Alright this is the police, what is you name boy, do I look like a boy to you pig. Alright nigger watch you language before I beat you across you head with the jack. Well you'll have to prove that to me, action speaks louder than words, I wasn't doing anything to

make you try to arrest me any how my name Martin Roberts. Oh you are the wrong guy. Next time Be right because I'll shot the snot out of you.

II. Whitey interviewing you for a job --

Hi whats happening man do you have any job open, I am a very good sales men had 7 years experience in stores carlots and factories anything you name I've had it. What you reasons for quiting all these job, see when I get a man I won't one that is responsible of being hear. If you salary is right, you have a responsible cat working for you today, tomorrow, and the next days. Well you is on. Who my name is Martin Roberts, let go back to my office.

III. Your girl friend --

Hell-o whats happening baby how are you feeling. Well I am feeling alright, just thingking of what was the mean of being with that girl last night. Man I dont no what you are talking about, you no I wouldn't nothing like that baby. But, Hell you did, woman I'll take you mine out, and pinch it and see if it will jump if you don't believe me well you can best thing. Ok honey I'll be right.

IV. Your closest friend of same sex, late at night, as conversation gets very serious --

Hay man I mean brother man I am in serious trouble man I got steeling some potato chips, now I have to pay out 100 dollars for just one simple thing. Do you parents no about it yet, man I dont wont them to fine out about that they beat the mess o t of me with my cloths on. Well we'll fine it out what we can do.

V. A child whom you have just met --

Hi, man, my name is Martin what is your's Old Blacks the snot catcher I catches any thing you can let loose Well thats go man because I have some Bugger in my nose that is ready to fly. Well I do other things besides that I play sports, now thats whats happening lets see what going down in the park O K man.[3]

Before considering the paper and its pedogogical implications I would like to make clear why this is a POLYTICAL question. Anyone who watched the Nixon team in action on the tube last summer or listened to the Johnson boys' defense of "protective reaotion strikes" should not need to be told that language questions are almost always political questions. Those of us who

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3 This paper was ritten for a class taught by Louie Crew at Claflin College. It appeared in College English in January 1973, p. 586. Dr. Crew was responding to an essay by James Sledd, "Doublespeak: Dialectology in the Service of Big Brother," College English, January 1972. Crew and Sledd were further responded to by W.R. Hickman in January, 1974.

have read George Orwell at bedtime always knew they were.

The central point here is that whether one takes the viewpoint of linguistic theory or the broader one of socio-linguistics the significance attached to the differences between spoken BEV and spoken SAE are based on social, economic, and political factors which stem from who speaks what, when, and to whom rather than anything based in the language systems themselves. There are, of course, wide distinctions among speakers of both dialects but the between groups differences are not as great as the within groups differences. In fact, the street culture of the inner city may put more stress on superior verbal performance than any other American subculture. My point essentially is that the value attached to spoken BEV stems from the power possessed by those who use it, and if it were the dialect of Wall Street and Scarsdale, it would be the prestige dialect in our schools.

As a language, in fact, BEV has certain advantages of precision and regularity lacking in SAE. To cite but two examples, the SAE present progressive

(1) he is working

is used to express both a present activity and an habitual activity or state of affairs. This distinction is captured by the BEV which uses (2) to express the former and (3) for the latter.

(2) he working

(3) he be working

Similarly the number of irregular past participles (the so-called strong verbs of SAE) has been considerably reduced in BEV thus permitting a much simpler (i.e. more regular) grammatical description of verbs like go, run, and sing because the system being described is more regular.

Such issues are irrelevant here, however, because the question of superiority of one dialect or another must be asked in terms of the culture or cultures in which the dialects are used. In fact one of our tasks as English educators must be to help our students see the political and cultural implications here and to realize that the notions of a "standard" dialect (and, by implication, of non-standard ones) are not those of absolute but relative value - and that those values can vary at least on historical, regional, and social-class grounds.

One of the difficulties in doing this, however, is the incredibly powerful gut-based linguistic snobbery that almost all of us have. Since I am sure that English teachers have this disease more strongly than most, it will not be enough to deal with such questions intellectually and abstractly. We must learn how it feels to speak a stigmatized dialect and to recognize the emotional impact of being told that we speak funny (or bad or stupidly). Linguistic prejudice is no more rational than any other kind and rational explanations will not wholly eradicate it.

The political and pedagogical aspects of this issue merge when we consider the English teacher particularly in his or her role as a writing teacher. While the goals of human growth through language development do not necessarily require that any student change the dialect he or she speaks (in Bernstein's terms all dialects are equally capable of being used in an elaborated code and in Labov's there is just as much logic in BEV as in SAE)[4], both the economic realities of our culture and, more important, the nature of our schooling process do require that a student who wishes to attain success in our educational system must generally be

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4 B. Bernstein, (1972) "A sociolinguistic approach to socialization: with some reference to educability" in J. Gumperz and D. Hymes (eds.) Research in Sociolinguistics. New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston. W. Labov, "The Logic of Non-Standard English," The Florida FL Reporter, 1969, 7 (1), 60-74.

able to WRITE in Standard Written English (SWE). The issues merge because whether one views the nation's schools as the great equalizer or the great sorter, it has consistently been assumed that teaching SWE is part of the English teacher's task.

By SWE I mean simply - and I hope non-controversially - those conventions of punctuation and usage and spelling as well as certain facets of vocabulary and grammar which are characteristic of contemporary rhetoric. I don't mean to imply that I am unaware of stylistic variations or levels of usage, only that most of that kind of variety can be encompassed in what I take to be SWE. A more precise definition would be desirable, but I don't have one at hand.[5]

One of the important reasons why SWE is important to learn to read and to write is that many (but not all) of the features of dialect variation which (or please) our ears disappear in the written form. People who speak Standard Atlanta American or Standard Boston American or Standard Chicago American may sound very different, but they don't write or spell differently. The point is even clearer when one considers the differences in the spoken English of Australia, Canada, England, and so on. The very abstractions captured by the English spelling system which sometimes make it hard to learn also have the positive effect of making it flexible across dialects much as Mandarin Chinese is. It would be a great loss either to tamper with this marvelously flexible international writing system or to deny to any student the opportunity to learn to use it.[6]

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5 In the discussion that followed the presentation of this paper Marjorie Farmer suggested the term "Edited English" as better than SWE. Since it is a more neutral term it may be preferable, but it too would have to be more clearly defined.

6 The virtues of the English spelling system are clearly discussed in Carol Chomsky's "Reading, Writing, and Phonology," Harvard Educational Review, 1970, 40, 287-309.

We must be careful to recognize, however, that our "Standards" for written English must not become too inflexible. To say that all students should acquire skill in SWE neither means that all student writing should be written in SWE nor that SWE is an unchanging system. Promoting language growth may require many types of writing - some of which should be essentially speech written down and emphatically NOT in SWE - while some of which must be in SWE. Further we must not forget that Shakespeare's SWE is not ours, and that the future conventions of SWE are hard to predict even with Fowler or Strunk and White at our elbow.

Assuming for a moment that we all agree that one of our goals for the students of our students is the acquisition of skills in SWE, then how do we help them get them there? And how do we help them help writers of papers like the one I distributed? Can they given an A to a paper written in NSWE?

Without presuming to give a complete answer to these questions, I think it is safe to offer some suggestions and, perhaps most important, some caveat about things we would not have our future teachers do. (And that we should not do ourselves.)

The first caveat is that acquiring skills in SWE need not mean any change in the way one speaks. Changes in pronunciation and in some aspects of grammar are separable from changes in writing and reading ability. Our spelling system is <u>not</u> phonetic and it is no harder to learn it if one lives in Atlanta than in Boston. Similarly few, if any, of us talk as a writer of SWE writes. Therefore we all have to adapt our language system to meet the requirements of SWE. We need do so, however, only to read and write and our peculiarities of speech can sail on undisturbed.

Therefore, my first suggestion is that all teachers of reading and writing must make clear to their students the differences between written and spoken language using situations and the concomitant differences between written and spoken language conventions. This can and should be done for all speakers, for written and spoken English are different for all. The degree of difference may vary and will therefore require a different emphasis here, but the basic process is similar across dialects.

The paper I distributed is a clear example of this problem. I don't much care whose fault it is. The demands of written English require that different speakers be identified with quotation marks, by paragraphing and with sentence final punctuation. The failure to do this in the paper makes it hard to read but such questions do not, as far as I am aware, have anything at all to do with Standard vs. Non-Standard English. And learning/teaching such conventions has nothing to do with politics or class in a differentiated sense, because everyone has to learn them. You may acquire an upper-class accent at your mother's knee but there is nothing natural or automatic about learning how to use quotation marks.[7]

The second caveat is that for language development to take place and for the acquisition of writing and reading skills, segregation is the worst policy. The particularly insidious segregation I have in mind is that which

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7 In the discussion of the paper Frank O'Hara questioned its validity as an example of the kind of writing we are trying to promote. He argued that James Britton's distinction between "participant" and "spectator" language (in Language and Learning, Penguin, 1972) is crucial here. He argued that this paper was an example of participant language and therefore appropriately in BEV while papers written in spectator language should not be in BEV. While I agree that Britton's distinction is important, I would argue that since this paper was an attempt, by the writer, at viewing himself in experiences he is recalling that it is indeed spectator language and is still appropriately in BEV for the reasons discussed below. Representing BEV in writing should not mean, however, the abandonment of the conventions of SWE.

"tracks" those students who don't have the skills into classes, frequently non-credit, with others who also don't have them. While this may have the virtue of isolating the "dummies" in hopes of preventing the infection of the "real" students (is dumbness really catching?), it also guarantees that virtually all of them will stay there until they get discouraged and quit. Anyone who has looked even briefly at the literature on language conformity to group norms knows that if one wants to be part of the group one must talk like them. (In Labov's terms only the "lames" - those kids who can't make it with their peer group - turn to the school as a source of value and therefore lose or never acquire a full command of the BEV.) Therefore putting kids with BEV language skills, habits and attitudes together assures us that most will never see any value in reading books in SWE or in writing on subjects and for audiences who require SWE. If they don't do either, they will certainly never master SWE themselves.

The second suggestion, therefore, is that "remedial" reading and writing classes should be abolished and that heterogeneous grouping be employed with as widely divergent students as possible. Only by doing this will all students become real students who can learn to value SWE not as a replacement for their vernacular but as an addition to their linguistic repertoire. This is not to advocate either bi-dialectalism or eradication of "sub-standard" dialects, but rather to value linguistic and cultural pluralism and to give some experiential content to the view that different levels of language must be used in different contexts. If we value cultural pluralism we must also value linguistic pluralism even while striving for some uniformity in some types of written English.

The paper at hand also can show us the value of this approach. I don't know anything of the composition of the class it was written in, but I am sure that the paper could have been improved - again without reference to dialect - if it had been written to a diverse student audience. Any writer wants to communicate something to someone. (This is, of course, often not true of schoolwriting, which only demonstrates that most of it is not writing at all.) If the someones one is writing to are a diverse group who don't all share the same background of experience, the pressures on the writer to use a language they have (or can have) in common (i.e., something approaching SWE) are much greater. Immediate audience feedback from a valued audience as the class is likely to be or can become can help to bring clarity and impact in much more effective ways than any teacher judgment from the Olympian heights of Aristotelian rhetoric.

My final caveat is a brief one: not all student papers should be written in SWE. This was stated in passing earlier but it cannot be emphasized too strongly.

If the writer of the paper we've been looking at had been clear and used the conventions of written English, his communicative purpose would have been badly served by using SWE throughout. If he is to really catch his own voice and that of those he is talking to he must use BEV if that is the way they really talk in those contexts. The purpose of the assignment after all was to answer the question "Who are you?" and it is not an assignment which should invite or require a deceptive answer. In fact the writer's great strength is his honesty and his willingness to attempt to communicate a series of powerful feelings. His teacher can be proud that he was trusted to receive them.

We must give A's to some papers written in Non-Standard English because sometimes they are written in the best way they can be. If we want our students to grow and develop as language users and as human beings they must know who they are and not have to pretend to be someone else. Learning to write SWE should help them become what they can be, but they do not have to learn it at the cost of denying who they are.