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AUTHOR Gefvert, Constance J.
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ABSTRACT

Modern linguistic research shows that the language of America is that spoken by all residents of the Americas, with many varieties influenced by other national languages (e.g., Spanish, African, American Indian). In addition, linguistic research has resulted in two competing theories about teaching standard English: that teaching standard English to a dialect speaking child enables him to succeed in activities dominated by the white middle class (bidialectalism), and that such insistence on the teaching of standard English is racist. This dilemma indicates the real problem to be ethnocentrism, not racism, which is merely a subcategory of ethnocentrism. The vicious cycle of an ethnocentric society may be broken both through the growing awareness that not only is black beautiful but all ethnic groups are beautiful, and through a learning of the standard form of the language of America. (JM)

THE DILEMMA OF THE AMERICAN LANGUAGE: ETHNOCENTRISM OR RACISM?

[illegible] J. [illegible]
[illegible] Professor of English
Wayne State University

What is the American language? Or more properly speaking, what is the language of America? Recently the Wayne State University Press published a book which should be of concern to all American linguists and English teachers, though so far it has been noticed by few scholars except those interested in colonial Americana. The name of the book is A Key into the Language of America, written by Roger Williams, a New England Puritan minister, in 1643, and just issued in a definitive edition last [illegible]. Williams originally published his book barely twelve years after he had arrived in the American colonies and only eight years after he had been banished from Massachusetts Bay for his insistance on religious freedom. It was after he established a colony in Providence, Rhode Island, that he became actively involved in missionary work among the Naragansett Indians and learned to love both their language and their culture. His Key Into the Language of America is an anthropological and linguistic study of the Naragansetts. It is most significant that in a day when we are fighting racism and ethnocentrism in language attitudes we can read a colonial author who considers the language of America to be not the language of the British colonists, but the language of the native inhabitants.

It should be obvious to everyone here that his is not the most prevalent view of the Language of America, even today, with the exception of some scholars in anthropology, linguistics, and related fields. To many, including many educated Americans, the American language is merely a corrupt version of British English. To others, especially to English teachers, the language of America is what they speak and teach in their classrooms. To those who are not English teachers, the language of America is often some idealized

"perfect" version of a language which they only imperfectly attain to, and that "perfect" language is what is taught in schools by English teachers and enshrined in grammar books.

The research of modern linguistics has, of course, shown all of these theories to be untenable. The language of America does not consist in one good dialect and many inferior ones. It is perhaps closer to Roger Williams' definition than any other; the language of America, as I will use the phrase here, is the language spoken by all residents of the Americas, and in the context of this paper, specifically residents of the United States, regardless of their origin. Its many varieties have obviously been influenced by British English, but they have also been influenced by Spanish, by American Indian languages, by African languages, and by innumerable other national languages.

What I want to discuss here is a problem Americans have been wrestling with for almost three centuries. Ever since Williams' book was first published there has been a controversy over whether American English is one monolithic standard that should be imposed upon everyone (certainly many of Williams' contemporaries felt London English was the only proper language for Americans), or whether it is an infinite variety of viable dialects. The problem is, which point of view do we accept? And then what do we do about people who live in America but who don't speak what someone else (English teachers in particular) think is the language of America? For example, what do we do about the middle-class teacher in an urban ghetto school who insists Johnny correct his so-called black dialect and learn so-called standard English? Some people would say don't do anything--that's exactly what the teacher should insist upon. Those who hold the opposite point of view, however, find that attitude to be racist--forcing the white man's standards and requirements on the black child.

We have been hearing a lot these days about racism in the American language and especially about racism in our attitudes toward the American language. It all began about ten years ago, when linguists doing research in non-standard dialects, especially in dialects spoken in our urban black ghettoes, seemed to indicate that educational psychologists like Carl Bereiter and his associates had racist attitudes toward the speech of black children. These educational psychologists, as the result of some rather spurious "research," had concluded that children of minority cultures, especially blacks, did not have a fully developed language that was capable of communicating coneptual and abstract ideas, and that that linguistic deficiency was the result of an inferior culture. Linguistic research has largely evaporated that myth, and teachers of English are beginning to recognize that all dialects are equally viable linguistic systems, and that the problem is one of attitudes toward other dialects, not the dialects themselves.

Whether or not racism was really the cause of Bereiter's conclusions is debatable. The point is, that his theory is no longer accepted by linguists though unfortunately it is still accepted by many English teachers.

The research of linguists, and the substitution of facts about language for myths, has resulted in two competing theories about teaching standard English. One, often called the "bidialectal" theory, recognizes that while all dialects of English are equal from a linguistic point of view, they are not equal from a social point of view. Therefore, if Johnny is going to succeed in school, industry, and business dominated by middle-class whites, he will need to learn the dialect of that class--else he is in danger of not being able to compete for jobs and academic plums. But according to the bidialectalists, he should learn that dialect in addition to, not as a replacement for, his native dialect. The bidialectalists be-

believe we can teach children to be bidialectal as well as we can teach, say, Mexican-American students to be bilingual.

But there is a group of linguists, most vocally James Sledd, who have in turn accused the bidialectalists of being racists, and as Sledd calls them, white supremacists. If you <u>really</u> believe all dialects are equal, Sledd argues, then it is worse than hypocritical to ask children to learn the standard dialect even as a second dialect, since that only perpetuates the elitist attitudes of our society--instead we should encourage every child to retain his native dialect and put our energies into educating the public not to be prejudiced against other dialects.

Now how do we solve this dilemma? It is possible to read all the literature on both sides of the question, and the only conclusion we might draw is that each is calling the other a "racist." I want to propose a way out of the dilemma: I believe the problem is not one of racism directly, but a much broader and deeper problem of ethnocentrism, and that the issue of racism is in fact a red herring, diverting us from a viable solution. Perhaps if we can transcend the name-calling of Sledd and his opponents we can find a real key into the problem of the language of America.

Before I go any further, let me define those two highly volatile terms, "racism" and "ethnocentrism." Obviously the words have many meanings in many different contexts. Therefore I am going to define the words with very strict limitations for the purpose of this discussion.

Ethnocentrism I take to have three related meanings: First, it is the <u>belief</u> that one culture is innately superior to another and therefore so are all the manifestations of that culture, including language. Second, whether or not that <u>conscious</u> belief exists, ethnocentrism still can exist in the form of an <u>orientation</u>, or a stance--we can be so blinded by our own culture that we cannot see the value of another culture. Third, ethnocentrism often

refers to the practices which keep a less dominant group in a subservient position.

Racism is more difficult to define--for one thing it has lost its usefulness because it has become so charged with connotations of witchhunts. Further, I believe the term racism has spurious semantic qualifications simply because there has never been a satisfactory scientific description of race as distinct from other categories into which homo sapiens has been divided. Nevertheless, in popular terms racial groups are those which are set off by certain physical characteristics--skin color for example--which are not necessarily distinguishable among other groups. While I prefer not to use the term, therefore, it is necessary to deal with it here.

Therefore I will define racism in parallel fashion to ethnocentrism, remembering that racism is really a subcategory of ethnocentrism anyway: racism is popularly, first, the belief that one race, whatever that term means exactly, is superior to another. Second, it is the stance of blindness which limits our point of view so that we can see only our own race as good and all other races as bad. And third, racism often means the attempt to perpetuate the lower economic or cultural status of the group looked down upon.

Let me now proceed with my argument that the key to the Sledd-bidialectalist controversy lies in the use and misuse of the term "racism."

There have been innumerable articles and books written about the problem. Let's look at a couple representative samples. Last year, College English published an excerpt from a book by J. Mitchell Morse, The Irrelevent English Teacher, which shows clearly that negative attitudes toward minority varieties of the American language are generally ethnocentric, and only incidentally racist. Morse has this to say about Black English:

> Black English is demoralized language, an idiom of battered minds, the stifling speech of slavery. It served ill for bad purposes well. It cannot serve the purpose of free men and women. Those who would perpetuate it are romanticists clinging to corruption. (College English, March, 1973, p. 839.)

Clearly, to Morse, Black English is not the language of America. There is for him, as for Carl Bereiter, only one language of America, and that is the so-called standard English perpetuated by the schools. But it is important to note two things about Morse's attitude. First, he is not an educational psychologist as Bereiter was; he is a professor of literature, and a highly respected scholar and writer. For that reason he is a good deal more influential among English teachers than Bereiter was. The second point is this: like Bereiter, Morse never condemns Black English because it is spoken by blacks, but rather because it is spoken by people who are descended from slaves and whose culture has been sorely undeveloped. I submit that Morse, and others like him, is guilty not of racism, but of ethnocentrism.

A parallel situation has existed for a long time among teachers of Spanish-American students. It is interesting that the same assumptions are often made by teachers in the southwest that the culture of the Mexican-American is inferior to that of the dominant upper-middle class culture. Clearly here there is no question of race, and yet teachers' negative attitudes toward their students' language-learning abilities have been strongly influenced by their belief that the child's culture is inferior. Spanish children in the southwest are often put into classes for the retarded because they do so poorly on I.Q. tests which require them to use English when many of them never hear English until they get to school. The same thing, of course, has happened to black children in urban schools who have

been thought to have low intelligence because their I.Q. scores are low--the I.Q. tests, of course, written in a dialect and reflecting a culture different from the students'.

One more point should serve to illustrate that the problem of racism in language is not our real problem. Until very recently, the American melting pot has been assumed to be the ideal of American culture. The publication last year of Michael Novak's The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics is a sign of the times. No longer do we need to see the culture of America as a melting of all differences into one homogeneous set of values--of course, America has never been that anyway. It's just that now, it seems to me, we are able to recognize that crucial fact and build on it positively. Likewise with language--we have always been very concerned that the language of America be a homogeneous thing, and we have pretended it is so when it is not, by ignoring the differences.

It is only recently that the ethnocentrism displayed by Bereiter, Morse and many others is beginning to give way to the insights we have received from linguistic research. English teachers and professors are becoming more aware of the value of all languages, and of all varieties of dialects of a language. Many of them are able, with the linguists, to recognize that the language of America is not a monolithic entity as described by the innumerable Websters and English school grammars. These academics have lost at least their conscious ethnocentrism about language and so for them the dilemma really revolves around this issue: assuming all dialects are equally good from a linguistic point of view, but recognizing also that there is a recognizable standard variety of that language that the public at large believes is better than all the others, what do we do? Do we teach children the standard dialect as a second dialect, in order to give him the necessary tools for survival in a society whose values are large ethnocentric even

though ours are not? Or do we refuse to compromise our own beliefs and tell the child that since his variety of the language of American is just as good as all other varieties, there is no reason for him to learn the standard dialect--to do so would be compromising his ethnicity or "racial" identity? We are back to the debate between Sledd and the bidialectalists. If they cannot fairly call writers like Morse racist, then how indeed can they call each other racists?

Sledd believes that those who want to teach standard English as a second dialect (the bidialectalists) are racist because they are perpetuating the belief that standard English is superior. It is true, as Sledd points out, that a black child will be prejudiced against on the job market even if his mastery of the standard dialect is impeccable. So, I might add, will a Mexican or an Appalachian white. But it is also true that he will be prejudiced against even more if his language reflects to the prospective employer the culture which the employer is prejudiced against.

The most vocal resistance to Sledd's theory comes from blacks and other groups whose children speak dialects which the schools consider non-standard. In my own contacts with the Detroit Public School system, and in my contacts with students, I have found many people who express the same feeling as the following editorial published in the April, 1971 issue of The Crisis, which is the official publication of the NAACP:

> "the new cult of blackness has spawned many astounding vagaries, most of them harmless, some of them intriguing, and others merely amusing. One which has recently gained a measure of academic and foundation recognition is not only sheer nonsense but also a cruel hoax which, if allowed to go unchallenged, can cripple generations of black youngsters in their preparation to compete in the open market with their non-Negro peers. . . .

> What our children need, and other disadvantaged American children as well--Indian, Spanish-speaking, Asian, Appalachian, and immigrant Caucasian--is training in basic English which today is as near an international language as any in the world. To attempt to lock them into a provincial patois is to limit their opportunities in the world at large." (Quoted in College English, Jan., 1973, p. 582.)

I dislike his use of the term "basic English" and "provincial patois" because it reflects the notion that there is one English that is better than every other. Nevertheless, there are two things of crucial importance in this editorial. First, the editorialist, and he is typical of others who grew up speaking a non-standard form of the language and had to master the standard form, is himself insistent that his children be taught the standard. Second, he sees the problem not as one of racism, but as a problem of ethnicity--we cannot accuse him of being ethnocentric, certainly, because he is aware that the same problem exists for all speakers of the language of America who do not belong to the group who grow up speaking so-called standard English.

What conclusion, then, can we draw from all this? Let me suggest several. First, both bidialectalists and maintenance theorists like Sledd have used racism as a red herring to steer us away from the real problem. We obviously have a problem of ethnocentric attitudes toward language in our society which causes most people outside of academia to conceive of the language of America as a homogeneous entity and therefore to see all non-standard varieties as inferior. Now it is very easy for Sledd to call the bidialectalists racist because he feels they are perpetuating racism, while unaware that the problem is much deeper than that. Likewise, it is

easy for the bidialectalists to call Sledd a racist because his theory would keep black children from climbing the social and economic ladder. Both are missing the point that the issue is not a racial issue at all, though it obviously has racial overtones. It is a problem that is much wider and deeper than that, a problem of a society that is largely ethnocentric, (and what society is not?). The signs of the times are not only that Black is beautiful but that Polish is beautiful and Ukranian is beautiful and Italian is beautiful and Appalachian American is beautiful. But all these beautiful people nevertheless want to learn the standard form of the language of America. I maintain that if we are not willing to teach them that, if we say in our often smug middle-class liberalism that they should maintain their present dialect, then we are making it difficult to ever break the vicious cycle of ethnocentrism. For young people today will hopefully grow up being less ethnocentric than their parents; and having a command of both the standard dialect and the ethnic dialect, they may be in a position to fight ethnocentrism. And who knows, in some distant American Utopia maybe everyone will recognize that the language of America is not monolithic, that all varieties of it are equally good, and it will not be necessary to battle about racism and ethnocentricity. But we are not living in that Utopia yet. The key into the language of America in the 20th century, it seems to me, is the understanding that our language is a diverse one, that the diversity must be respected and perhaps encouraged, but that in order to overcome the ethnocentricity rampant today we must give all people the chance to transcend that ethnocentricity not by melting into some homogeneous American language but by learning the standard variety of the language of America while yet retaining their own unmeltable variety of that language.