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ABSTRACT

To dispel the myths of linguistic deficiency among nonstandard English dialect speakers, evidence that repudiates these myths should be examined. These myths include suggestions that nonstandard dialects are ungrammatical and cannot be used to form concepts, and that speakers of such dialects receive little verbal stimulation as children. The result of this language impoverishment is thought to be poor performance in academic, social, and economic life. Research evidence repudiates these myths by indicating that in less formal testing situations and in natural surroundings, the monosyllabic speakers of formal test situations are actually verbally productive people. Linguists have noted that nonstandard English dialects are highly coherent, logical, and structured. Poor academic performance cannot be caused by the nonstandard dialect alone. Positive instructional techniques include recognizing dialect renditions of oral reading as high level acts of comprehension, utilizing the language experience approach as a bridge between the two dialects, and overcoming negative attitudes toward nonstandard dialects. (MKM)

# Dispelling Myths and Examining Strategies in Teaching Non-Standard Dialect Speakers to Read*

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It is the purpose of this paper to dispel the myths of linguistic deficiency among non-standard English dialect speakers, and to examine the strategies that have proven to be effective in teaching them to read.

The recognition of the communication problems that exist between speakers of different English dialects was astutely summed up by Winston Churchill when he stated that Americans and Britains are separated by a common language. What Churchill did not go on to say is perhaps even more important, that many Britains and Americans believe that American Standard English (ASE) is a sloppy, sub-standard form of English Standard English (ESE). According to the evidence of linguists, however, both English dialects are rule governed, predictable, with regularities and exceptions, and with the capability of expressing any experience common within the two countries. In fact, both represent an effective basis for communication and conceptualization and both are equally liable to poor, good, better, and best use.

What is true for ASE and ESE also holds true for all other dialects. Nevertheless, within the U.S. there is also a dialect heirarchy (Shuy and Williams, 1973). Among the

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educated, ESE is at the top, the vernaculars spoken by white and non-white poverty groups are at the bottom and many other non-standard dialects fall somewhere in-between.

This belief in the superiority of standard forms of English is possibly a carry-over from the theory of racial inferiority which prevailed up through the first few decades of the present century. With the recent reemergence of a racial inferiority explanation for the high incidence of academic failure among economically depressed groups, a counter movement was begun by a group of psychologists and educators. They advanced the theory of environmental deprivation in its place, and such terms as culturally disadvantaged and experientially deprived, were coined. However, this view of environmental immutability has proven to be almost as harmful in its effects as the theory of biologically determined unmodifiability. For it was out of the environmental deprivation theory that the myths of verbal and linguistic deficiency grew.

In an effort to dispel these myths, their components will be described and the evidence repudiating them will be presented. The various ways these myths are maintained in society at large and in the schoolroom in particular will be identified, and finally, the literature which examines various approaches to teaching reading to non-standard dialect speakers will be reviewed.

The Myths

Exactly what are the myths of verbal and linguistic deficiency?

Myth Number 1. People of the lower classes, both non-white and white, have no legitimate language at all. What little speech they use is filled with grammatical errors and incomplete sentences.

Myth Number 2. People of the lower classes, both non-white and white, do not know the names of common objects, cannot form concepts and do not use language to convey logical thoughts. In fact, their speech is primarily a form of emotional expression. It is primitive, simple, and child-like, not merely a sub-standard version of ASE but rather the expression of the primitive mentality of the savage mind.

Myth Number 3. People of the lower classes, both non-white and white, receive little verbal stimulation as children and hear very little well-formed language throughout their daily lives within their ghetto communities. In effect, language as a means of communication and interaction is not used or valued.

Myth Number 4. The end result of this language impoverishment is poor performance in all academic areas in the school and social and economic failure in the community at large.

What is the scientific evidence that repudiates these myths? These myths are based on limited observations and interviews between an adult and child in formal and threatening situations occurring in the classroom or while the child is

being tested. The children are in a situation where anything they say can literally be held against them. The primary response to this evaluative and judgmental situation is the inhibition of verbalization sometimes referred to as disfluence. However, when the interview or test situation is changed -- made more like a party by including the child's best friend, providing snack food, reducing the height difference between the adult interviewer and child, and introducing topics of conversation that are of genuine interest to the child, the monosyllabic speakers of Myth Number 1 are transformed into verbally productive people with increased volume and style who have so much to say that they keep interrupting one another (Labov, 1972a). Thus, a warning signal is sounded for all educators. They must recognize that what the child says may reflect how he or she thinks, but what the child does not say does not reflect that she or he is not thinking, or is thinking poorly or is not able to think at all (Anastasiow, 1971), all components of Myth Number 2.

From the above discussion it would appear that the social situation is the most powerful determinant of verbal behavior for these children. If adults wish to find out what children can do with language, then they must enter into the right kind of social relationship with them (Labov, 1972a).

People who conclude that the grammar of non-standard dialect speakers is filled with errors, as stated in Myth Number 1, do not themselves understand the rules of grammar

and are not familiar with the linguistic structure of dialects. For example, in the case of the expression, "they mine", in Black American Vernacular, the absence of the present copula and the conjoining of subject and predicate complement without a verb, is not evidence of a child-like, primitive grammar and the absence of logic. Rather, it is a legitimate grammatical structure, and one which occurs in the standard form of languages such as Russian, Hungarian and Arabic (Labov, 1972a).

The fact of the matter is all linguists are in agreement that non-standard English dialects are highly coherent, logical, and sturctured language systems which vary to some extent from each other and from ASE in grammar and vocabulary. These differences are not deficiencies. All dialects are equal to one another. The differences between them may be great enough to impede communication but not prevent it (Goodman, 1973). Dialect differences emerge among people separated by history, geography, social class, age, and interests. For example, in England one finds dialects from the West Country, Scotland, London, Birmingham, Liverpool and from the West Indian and Asia communities. In the U.S. there are distinct urban and rural speech communities made up of Hispanos, Native American Indians, Blacks, Appalachians, Pennsylvania Dutch, and Texans, to name just a few. No communication problems exist within these dialect communities in either England or America. In effect, these dialect variations are perfectly valid alternatives to ESE and ASE and should not be demeaned, dismissed or destroyed.

William Labov, a well-known linguist in the U.S. and field investigator of Non-Standard language use, debunks Myths Numbers 2 and 3. He reports that black poverty children in ghetto areas are "bathed in verbal stimulation from morning to night...(with) many speech events which depend upon the competitive exhibition of verbal skills...(events) in which the individual gains status through his use of language" (1972a, p. 62). An example of such an activity may be found in different black communities throughout the U.S. under the various names of 'Sounding', 'Signifying', or 'Playing the Dozens'. This activity requires strict adherence to rules of ritual insults and includes a whole variety of rhyming couplets. It is essentially a contest of verbal skill and quickness of thought, and is subject to active audience approval for replies which are fast, colorful and appropriate, and disapproval for those that are not (Labov, 1972b). The play-party game, a folk song-dance combination, is part of the rich oral language tradition of the Appalachian whites. The rhyming verse described in Borstal Boy by Brenden Beham, may be an equivalent example of the skillful use of language by a non-standard dialect speaking group in England. Not only is there evidence of high verbal production and valuing of verbal behavior, but there is also evidence of the high level cognitive skills required in these activities but completely ignored by Myth Number 2.

In summing up what has been said so far in Labov's words, it appears that,

> The concept of verbal (and linguistic) deprivation has no basis in social reality; in fact, black children in urban ghettos receive a great deal of verbal stimulation, hear more well-formed sentences than middle-class children, and participate fully in a highly verbal culture; they have the same basic vocabulary, possess the same capacity for conceptual learning, and use the same logic as anyone else who learns to speak and understand English (Labov, 1972a, pp. 59-60).

What appears to be true of urban blacks is also said to hold true for other non-white and white non-standard dialect speakers (Goodman, 1973).

How, then, can the conclusion stated in Myth Number 4 be justified: that educational, economic and social failure is due to the so-called language impoverishment of the lower-class, different dialect-speaking child?

It has been established that in the U.S., segregated ethnic groups perform more poorly in school than any other group (Johnson, 1975). The equivalent may also be true in England as well. By tracing the educational failure of the child to his or her personal characteristics--specifically to the language he or she uses--the focus of responsibility

for this failure is taken away from the school and placed on the 'deficient' child, the 'deficient' family, and the 'deficient' community. Since, according to the linguists, there is no reason to believe that the language is deficient then there is no reason to believe that any non-standard vernacular is in itself an obstacle to learning. Using this line of logic, it is not feasible to hold to the position that the standard language is the only medium in which teaching and learning can take place. This is not to say that everyone should not have the right to learn the standard language and culture in reading and writing and speaking. What is being said is that this acquisition should be the end result of the educational process, not the beginning of it.

The Powers that Perpetuate

In attempting to identify those issues in our society and in the school curriculum which help to perpetuate the myths of verbal and linguistic inferiority, it may help to review the role of a standard language. A standard language serves several important purposes: (1) It helps to unite a diverse goup under one flag; (2) It helps to facilitate the socialization process; (3) It helps to create a cohesive community of people by increasing the opportunity for communication between them; and (4) It helps to facilitate commerce.

Since all languages such as English, are, in fact, a family of related dialects (Goodman, 1973), who, then, determines which language and/or dialect shall prevail in commerce,

education, and the mass media? It is a decision made by the most powerful and prestigeous in a country. In effect, it is a political decision. For example, during the reign of Phillip XII of Spain, everyone was expected to speak with a lisp as the King did. This same pronuciation prevails today.

In Great Britain, ESE is still sometimes referred to as the King's or Queen's English. In colonized African countries, it was the victor, not the majority who determined which language would be the 'norm'. In the new, emerging African nations, dialect decisions are still being made by the most powerful.

The powerful and the rich of society determine what is acceptable and standard in all aspects of social behavior. The enforcement of that decision may be by direct or more subtle means of pressure, involving political, economic and social consequences as rewards or punishment.

What inevitably appears to happen in competitive, class-oriented societies, is a process of social stratification with the powerful and rich at the top--the 'good' people who speak the 'best' language--and the poor and powerless at the bottom--the 'bad' people who speak the 'worst' language and who are culturally disadvantaged, deprived and deficient. The degree that a person's speech differs from the standard one will determine his or her place in the dominant society's heirarchy.

In effect, dialects vary in the social prestige which they carry and this variation is a reflection of the social

status of the people who use them. Low status people speak low status language and high status people speak high status language because that is the status the general society assigns to all aspects of their culture. Those who struggle for upward social mobility must rid themselves of the stigmatizing lower-class dialect as a basic first step in that climb.

This, then, is the prevailing attitude which pervades our society. Many of our educators--school teachers and administrators--just like the rest of the population--have internalized this social-class value system. It should be of no surprise, therefore, to learn that research in the U.S. has indicated that teachers' attitudes toward minority group members and toward non-standard dialects are generally negative (Guskin, 1968; Labov, 1965; Coates, 1972; Blodgett and Cooper, 1973; Ford, 1974; Crowl and MacGinitie, 1974).

For example, in a study of teachers' perception of dominant and minority group members (Coates, 1972; Zimet and Zimet, 1978) teachers did not attribute any attractive personality characteristics to minority group members in contrast to the many attractive characteristics they had applied to to members of the dominant culture. In further support of the negative views held by society, the teachers reported very low achievement expectations and very high expectations for hostile and rebellious behaviors. Teachers also have been reported to react negatively toward students who speak a different dialect than the standard one, even those teachers

who had been dialect speakers themselves. In fact one researcher found that teachers unconsciously used forms which they themselves stigmatized in the speech of others (Labov, 1965). For example, Black English speaking students were rated as lower-class, belligerent, delinquent, less intelligent and less able to do well academically than Standard English speaking students, when the work evaluated was identical in content (Blodgett and Cooper, 1973; Ford, 1974; Crowl and MacGinitie, 1974).

This same negative attitude is reflected in curriculum decisions which forbid the use of non-standard English in the classroom. It is not to be spoken; it is not to be seen in print; for all intents and purposes, it does not and should not exist. In fact, the major effort of education in the U.S. has been to eliminate non-standard English usage and to force children into performing in a linguistic system other than their primary one. (The recent development of bilingual programs is an effort to change that convention.) The absence of multiethnic curriculum materials however, also reinforces the schools' attitude of rejecting the child's language and culture (Zimet, 1976).

The educational ramifications of this all-pervasive negative attitude is twofold: (1) it influences educator's expectations, assessments and interventions; and (2) it forms the basis of how these indiviudals view themselves and their culture.

This policy of exclusion has been justified because it is believed that such an intervention in the socio-cultural development of the poor will make them more ready for the majority culture and all the economic advantages of the middle class. Instead of producing the desired effects, these efforts have increased the distance between these children and the school. There is a distrust and a dislike for school experiences which have demeaned and ignored their culture. There is little to wonder about when one takes note of the low self-esteem and the high drop-out rate among these children.

One does wonder, however, why the goal of economic opportunity for all must carry with it the price of a multicultural society. The school should be designed to serve a multicultural society and to prepare children for full participation in that society.

Linguists tell us that language is a form of social behavior and we have no business interfering with a people's social relationship to their own community (McDavid, 1969). "One uses the language which helps to preserve one's life, which helps to make one feel at peace in the world and which screens out the greatest amount of chaos" (Creswell, 1965, p. 71). Rejecting that part of a people's life--their language and one of their most intimate possessions--has serious psychological ramifications that should not be dealt with lightly. Any program aimed at helping people to break out of the cycle of poverty should be both linguistically and humanly sound.

Teaching Strategies

As far back as 1953, the United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) made the following recommendations:

> It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue. Psychologically, it is the system of meaningful signs that in his mind works automatically for expression and understanding. Sociologically it is a means of identification among the members of the community to which he belongs. Educationally, he learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar medium.

The way to teach new forms or patterns of language is not to eliminate the old forms but to build upon them (Creswell, 1965). In effect, the school's goal should be bidialectalism. Becoming bedialectal, however, has been recognized as more difficult than becoming bilingual. The interference between two closely related dialects such as non-standard and ASE is far greater than between two completely different languages. We know that human beings do not hear or see every sound or sight in the world. Their senses are highly selective and they hear and see only what they have learned in the process of acquiring their primary language. If certain grammatical concepts do not exist in their dialect, it is likely that they are unaware of the sound segments that

signify these concepts. People, therefore, must be trained intensively to hear the significant sound segments in a word, particularly those representing grammatical concepts so that they might penetrate their consciousness (Lin, 1965). This might be done by an inductive technique in which pupils compare their own speech patterns with the patterns of the standard language then isolate the differences, and practice the use of these patterns as a part of 'role playing' in a second language--not as a replacement of their first language.

Although correctly speaking and writing in another dialect is very difficult, it would appear that most urban dwellers are able to understand the speech of a person who does not speak their particular dialect. In fact, several studies have demonstrated that when children who speak non-standard English read ASE and vice versa, they code shift (Ames, Rosen, and Olson, 1971; Rosen and Ames, 1972; Weber, 1973; Hall and Turner, 1974; Kachuck, 1975; Lamberg and McCaleb, 1977). In other words, they translate the material into its equivalent in their own dialect. Children who change the sentence to conform to their language are demonstrating an active intelligence (Anastasiow, 1971). It would appear, then, that the so-called errors in oral reading comprehension tests are not errors at all but instead a dialect-shift, demonstrating in fact, a high level of comprehension. Thus, teachers are alerted to modify their scoring procecures when using formal and informal oral reading measures. In order for teachers

to make these judgments, it has been recommended that they know their pupil's dialect (Harber and Beatty, 1978).

A very strong case has been made for using the Language Experience Approach in teaching dialect speaking children to read (Hildreth, 1965; Hall, 1965; Serwer, 1969; Stockler, 1971). This method builds upon the use of reading materials created by writing down children's spoken language. It accepts and recognizes that what children have to say and how they say it is important. Not only is this approach consistent with the UNESCO recommendations, but it fits in with what we know about the process of learning to read. Before children can read, they need to learn that their speech sounds can be represented by print and the print they are asked to read is meaningful to them (Anastasiow, 1971). It should also be kept in mind that words children use in their own speech are easier for them to read in print than words they do not use (Hildreth, 1965). Since the myths of linguistic deficiency and inferiority have been debunked, it is apparent that the elements for success in learning to read are present. These children possess a rich oral language tradition and are linguistically active within their own communities.

In keeping with this approach, Baratz (1969) found very strong evidence for the use of curriculum materials written in Black English. Some attempts have been made to study the effectiveness of reading texts produced by the major publishing companies that were written in the dialect of the

children using them. But these books met with a great deal of community resistance and had to be withdrawn (Harber and Beatty, 1978). In recognizing the negative attitudes toward dialects, it is predictable that such a reaction would occur without appropriate communication with parents and other significant members of the communities in which they were introduced. The alternative, that of preparing dialect renderings of conventional materials, might also meet with resistance unless efforts were made beforehand to educate and prepare the community. Then it might be possible to involve community members as well as the children in preparing these materials.

Not only is it necessary to educate everyone about the validity of dialects, but is is also important to capitalize on the strengths that exist in these children. Educators need to start them at their current level of ability, respect them and their language, apply teaching strategies that are appropriate to the situation, and make realistic expectations of the children. Changes in the children will not be immediate however should educators be disposed to make these major curriculum adjustments. Time may be needed for the child's and parent's distrust of school experiences to be overcome before any appreciable changes will come about.

## Conclusion

The myths of racial inferiority and linguistic deficiency have been dispelled. There are some useful guidelines to follow in teaching children whose language is different

from the standard. What is needed is the will to overcome our own negative attitudes towards non-standard English dialects and apply what is already known so that children will no longer be the victims of our biases.

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