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ABSTRACT

Because an instructor's attitude toward students' language is a crucial factor in determining whether students will be active participants in the educational process, it is important for teachers to be aware of dialect differences. Labelled by many as "nonstandard," Black English is a dialect derived from Gullah, a creole based on English and West African languages. Black English: (1) is not spoken by all Blacks all of the time--many Blacks are bidialectal; (2) shares many features with other dialects of English; and (3) is a legitimate linguistic system that has its own rules. Several studies, as well as classroom observation, reveal that teachers often fail to understand alternate dialects and allow dialect difference to interfere with their assessments of their students' abilities. For example, although a study of children and adults in two southern cities revealed that the pronunciation of "skr" for "str" is a common Black English dialect alternation, one student, a good reader, became deeply embarrassed when his teacher repeatedly corrected him during oral reading for pronouncing the "skr" alternation. This type of practice causes students to form negative attitudes about school. Teachers can help their students by understanding that all dialects are logical, rule-governed systems; being courteous and supportive; correcting only for meaning; pointing out the advantages of code switching; and serving as appropriate models. (Twenty-seven references are attached.) (ARH)

DIALECT DIFFERENCES: DO THEY INTERFERE?

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Abstract

The instructor's attitude toward students' language is a crucial factor in determining whether students will be active participants in the educational process. By extending their knowledge of the structure of certain dialects, teachers can improve their linguistic awareness. The lecturer will present phonological, syntatical and semantic elements of Black communications and describe their educational significance.

Introduction

All English speaking people speak a dialect of their native language. A dialect is a language system identifiable to a particular region. According to McDavid (1969), dialect is "...a variety of language generally mutually intelligible with other varieties of that language, but set off from them by a unique complex of features of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary." While dialects vary regionally, they also vary across social boundaries. Social variation in language is often classified as standard and nonstandard. Maxwell (1974) contends that language used by most educated speakers of a given region to carry out their important academic, economic and political business is the standard of that region. Naturally, what is standard in one region may not be standard in another region. Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter and Ted Kennedy all speak a dialect of their native language (Stice, 1987). Their dialects are the standard for their region of the country. (If the South had won the Civil War, Bryant Gumbel might speak like Lester Mattox instead of Walter Kronkite.)

Historical Perspective

I want to focus on a dialect that has been labeled by many as nonstandard. According to Turner (1949), Smitherman (1977), Hoover (1985) and Alexander (1985) and others, this dialect had its beginnings in the indigenous languages of Western Africa. Both in slavery times and now, the Black community placed high value on the spoken word. Alex Haley in his epic Roots, described the griots who could recite generations and generations of family history. The oral tradition, then is part of the "cultural baggage" the African brought to America. Even now in the Black community, high respect is given to those who are most adept at speaking--whether it be rapping, or testifying, or

preaching, or delivering a speech to learned colleagues.

African slaves in America initially developed a pidgin-a language of transaction that was used in communication between themselves and Whites. Over the years the pidgin became widespread among the slaves and evolved into a creole--a real native language. This creole involved the substitution of English for West African words, but within the same basic structure and idiom that characterized the West African language patterns (Turner, 1949).

Gullah is a creole, for it became a native language when the pidgin speakers were cut off from their mother tongue--brought to this country and did not return to Africa.

Black English is a product of Gullah--it is a part of the decreolization process. Black English, as described by Smitherman (1985, p. 44) "...is a systematic, rule-governed language system developed by Black Americans as they struggled to combine the cultures of Africa and the United States." It is an identity for a people.

Many names for Black English exist. Among them are Vernacular Black English, Nonstandard English, Black Dialect, Ebonics, Negro Nonstandard English, Black Language and dialect. According to Hoover, all or most of these terms are considered pejorative terms. Instead, Hoover prefers the term Black Communications, because she contends that it is more than just speech. Black Communications includes:

1. A speech code with grammar, phonology, lexicon, intonation, and semantics,

2. Speech acts such as testifying, sounding, marking, signifying, and rapping, which initially was language used for power exchange--Black talk from a Black man to a Black woman for the purpose of winning her emotional and sexual affection,

3. Style that includes call and response, dramatic repetition, as in Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech,

4. Nonbverbal behavior such a silence in response to a ridiculous question, kinesics or side by side stance in conversation, and oculesics or eyerolling, and,

5. Sociolinguistic rules for speaking such as the avoidance of the use of "boy" for man and "girl" or "gal" used to refer to a maid or the term "you people" to refer to Blacks (Hoover, 1985).

Abrahams (1972) calls it a system of speaking behavior, and he expounds upon the personal Black English that Blacks speak solely to each other after they are assured of one another's friendship, loyalty and trustworthiness. This personal Black English may "... change grammar, vocabulary, intonational pattern or conversational dynamics depending upon the situation and topic being discussed."

While there is disagreement about what the dialect is called, there is agreement among researchers and linguists on three very important points. I hope you will remember these points if you do not remember anything else I say:

1. Not all Blacks speak this dialect all of the time. Many Blacks are bidialectal, for they engage in code switching or code shifting.

2. Black English shares many features with other dialects of English.

3. Black English is rule-governed--it is a legitimate linguistic system that has rules.

These three points are attested to by Sledd (1965), Maxwell (1970), Burling (1973), Labov (1975), who wrote a book entitled The Logic of Nonstandard English, Wolfram and Fasold (1974), Stoller (1975), Pearson (1977) Smitherman (1977), Barnitz (1980), Yellin (1980), Alexander (1985), Scott, (1985) and Stice (1987).

Distinctive Features

Phonological features are those distinguished earliest by listeners as the sounds of dialect speakers. Final consonant cluster simplification is one such example. Words ending in s plus k, p or t drop the final consonant, and you might hear the following:

test ⟶ tes

desk ⟶ des

wasp ⟶ was

When these words are pluralized, you may hear words that highly stigmatize their speakers as dumb or ignorant. Once the final consonant is deleted, the regular pluralization pattern follows as in gas ⟶ gasses.

tes ⟶ tesses

des ⟶ desses

was ⟶ wasses

The system is rule-governed.

Appalachian English, another nonstandard dialect spoken by some people who live in the mountains of Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina and South Carolina use a hyper-correction on these words and pluralize them to testes, deskes and waspes. "She stretched it all across the deskes and everything" (Wolfram and Fasold, 1974).

The pronunciation of ask as ax /aks/ is another very interesting feature. Ax appears clearly in Gullah as well as in Black English. The Oxford English Dictionary, volume 1, page 488, affirms that until 1600 A.D. the literary form (appropriate to literature as opposed to everyday speech or writing) was ax. In fact, ax is still used in England today everywhere in midland and southern dialects and also in Ulster, a province of northern Ireland.

This system shares features with many other dialects.

One of most distinctive syntactical differences is the use of the verb to be. Be is sometimes written and pronounced as bees or be's (Smitherman, 1977). Wolfram and Fasold (1974) call it the invariant be. Be is used to indicate that a condition occurs habitually, and it is omitted if the condition is not repeated or recurring. For example:

The coffee bees cold.	Every day the coffee is cold.
The coffee cold.	The coffee is cold today. (It might not be cold tomorrow.)

That teacher, he be hollerin at us and stuff.	Can capture all three tenses simultaneously--present, past and future. This sentence could mean He is always or constantly hollerin at us, He frequently or often hollers at us, and He sometimes or occasionally hollers at us. (Smitherman, 1977)

Consequences of Ignoring Dialect Differences

The term alternation is used to describe the special way dialect speakers say cetain words. Again, alternation is not a pejorative term, for it merely signals another way of saying something.

I did some extensive studying of the alternation skretch for stretch in children and adults in Columbia, South Carolina and in Savannah. I sampled children--nine and ten year olds who were on the foodstamp roles in an all Black school and in integrated schools. I chose these children because they would be more likely to make the alternation. I wanted to know how extensive the alternation of skr for str was. The literature said that it was common in Negroes in South Carolina.

All children were interviewed on the playground and taped. They were asked the following questions:

1. What is the name of the TV show that has Oscar the Grouch and Big Bird on it? (Sesame Street)
2. When David Banner turns into the Incredible Hulk, suddenly he is not weak anymore, he is very _____. (strong)
3. When you swing at a ball and you miss it, you call that a _____. (strike)
4. When you pull a rubberband, but do not pop it, what are you doing to the rubberband? (stretching it)
5. Repeat this sentence and add you own ending "Oh no, the stranger is destroying our __."(Any word can be inserted here.) Dandy, 1981

What I found was that in the integrated school, only one in three black children made the alternation. In the all Black school one in two children made the alternation. Also, in the integrated schools I found a few White children who make the alternation. I concluded that skr for str is really a dialect alternation. Most schools at that time did not know that this is a dialect feature, and they would send children who made this alternation to speech correction classes. This is a very negative practice. It is comparable to sending all southerners to speech correction for saying /pin/ for /pen/.

There is another very serious practice that is common when teachers do not realize that the alternation is a dialect feature. This true story illustrates my point.

A Dialect Rejection

All eight members of Joey's group were more eager that usual to go to reading group. Today was special. For Alice, the student from the University was going to read with them. All semester she had been working individually with these third graders, helping them with handwriting and spelling and correcting their papers. But today she was going to "teach" the highest reading group--th best readers in the class. And her supervisor was going to watch.

Joey rushed back to the table to get the seat next to Alice. He wanted to ask her if he could be the first to read.

"Have you ever felt as if nobody loved you?" asked Alice, as a means of introducing the story. Various students responded with times they had felt rejected. Lamar reported about the time he ran away from home. Tanya told of the time she got mad with her sister. Joey wriggled in anticipation.

At last Alice called on Joey to read. Confidently he began: "Maxie. Maxie lived in three small rooms on the top floor of an old brownstone house on Orange Skreet. She ..."

"Not skreet, Joey. Say street."

"Skreet."

"Read the sentence again."

"Maxie lived in three small rooms on the top floor of an old brownstone house on Orange Skreet. She had lived ..."

"Joey, you're not pronouncing the word correctly. I'll read it for you. 'Maxie lived in three small rooms on the top floor of an old brownstone house on Orange Street. She had lived there for many years, and every day was the same for Maxie.' Now continue, Joey."

Joey, looking puzzled, proceeded cautiously: "Every morning at exactly 7:10, Maxie's large orange cat jumped onto the middle windowsill and skretched out ..."

"No, Joey. You're doing it again. Say 'stretched'.

"Skretched," Joey was speaking in a muffled tone now.

"Go ahead, Joey," coaxed Alice.

But Joey could not be coaxed. He did not read any more of the story. Suddenly, he had lost his place. (Dandy, 1982)

What do you think Joey will do the next time he is called upon to read? The emphasis in reading in this situation should be on reading for meaning. However, Alice's constant interruptions broke the flow of the story line, brought attention to reading word by word, and much more seriously, deeply embarrassed Joey, one of the "best readers in the class".

Joey was correct in reading for meaning. And he should not have been interrupted. Asking him to instantly rearrange his phonemic inventory to use a sound he does not usually make would be like asking virtually any southern speaker to say /pen/ instead of /pin/ or asking a Spanish speaker to say /shōōs/ instead of /chōōs/ in the sentence "I want to buy some shoes."

It is important to remember that a dialect is as much a part of you as your own skin. Changing it requires

1. A teacher who is aware of specific dialect differences and therefore can differentiate between a difference and a speech problem.

2. A sensitive teacher who has earned the trust of the speaker.

3. A speaker who is able to distinguish between the two sounds and reproduce both.

4. A desire on the part of the speaker to be able to shift from one dialect to another.

Above all, embarrassment only exacerbates the situation. It provokes negative attitudes which thwart learning. According to Comer (1986) a noted child psychiatrist and Associate Dean at Yale Medical School:

> Many so-called reformers do not understand how people learn. They think of learning as a mechanical process; they don't seem to understand how much it depends on imitation, identification with authority figures, on internalization of attitudes and values through relating emotionally to others. They do not give enough attention to the kind of climate that must be created to make that possible.

Unfortunately, in many schools in America today, there is not a healthy emotional climate for dialect different speakers--those who historically have not been well served by the schools.

Teachers' Linguistic Attitudes

Let's go back to Joey--don't you think he will now have some hostility towards Alice who embarrassed him in front of his peers? What will probably be his reaction the next time he is called upon to read?

Teachers' linguistic attitudes play a significant role in teaching those who speak a dialect. For Alice, a dialect difference did interfere with her assessment of Joey's ability to read. Joey was correct in reading for meaning, but Alice was unaware that skretch for stretch was a dialect difference, not a speech problem or a reading problem.

Crowl and MacGinitie (1976) studied vocal stereotyping of sixty-two experienced White teachers from twenty-two states and found that they judged the content of anwers spoken by Blacks as inferior to the content of answers spoken by White students even though all answers were correct.

The teachers listened to tapes and were instructed to grade each answer in terms of how well it really answered the question. They used a scale of ten to one, ten being excellent and one completely wrong.

The findings were that the same oral answer was evaluated differently when spoken by different persons whose

ethnic group was identifiable from their speech. A similar study was conducted by Williams (1976), and similar results were found.

If teachers engage in vocal stereotyping, the potential cumulative influence of a student's speech on the teacher's judgement of the student could be significant, particularly when one considers the frequency of student-teacher interaction in the classroom. Even though teachers may not be recording marks in a grade book every time a student speaks, it may be that the teacher makes some kind of judgement about what kind of person that student is, and these subtle judgments may ultimately affect the teacher's behavior toward the student.

Studies by Good (1987), Allington (1980) and others report that there is a high probability that a dialect different student may

1. Be seated fartherest away from the teacher,
2. Have less eye contact with the teacher,
3. Be called on less frequently, called on last or not at all,
4. Be given less time to respond,
5. Be given fewer prompts when answers are incorrect,
6. Be given more frequent criticism,
7. Be given less praise for correct answers, and
8. Have responses interrupted more frequently.

Given the possibility of an unhealthy emotional climate, the paucity of dialect different instructors, and the probability of lack of dialect awareness, the outlook is bleak for dialect different students.

Do Dialect Differences Interfere?

The answer is yes, if teachers allow them to. Attitudes towards language and the users of language can influence the teaching-learning process. Negative associations seem to shape some to the expectations that teachers have about language--especially if they are unaware of dialect differences. Attitudes about language are often formed unconsciously. That negative attitudes leads to

negative results is evident. (My last sentence included a subject verb agreement error--another feature I did not even address.)

What can you as an instructor/advisor do? Here are some suggestions that have been proposed in two texts designed to assist in working with dialect different speakers.

1. Understand that all dialects, regardless of social valuation, are logical, rule-governed systems capable of carrying any human meanings their speakers may intend (Farr and Daniels, p.49).

2. Be honest about your not being aware of particular dialect differences. Listen to your students, allowing them to articulate their messages without interruption (Finch, p. 81).

3. Be courteous in asking them to repeat words unintelligible perhaps only to you. And never ridicule or allow other students to ridicule speech of a student.

4. Be supportive of students, encouraging them to practice standard English, pointing out the advantages of code switching. Show an interest in their dialect. You might find some similarities between their dialect and your own.

5. Provide an appropriate model for students. Allow them to see you reading, writing, speaking and practicing the skills you are trying to teach them. Do not forget the value of peer tutoring and student interaction in the learning process.

6. Your attitude and your expectations will be the most significant factor in determining the academic progress of dialect different students.

Dialect differences will only interfere if you permit them to do so. Remember, a dialect is just like skin--removing it is an extremely painful process. It is much easier to add a layer and become bidialectal.

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