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ABSTRACT

This paper recalls the issues that led in the late 1960s to the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) resolution and statement on the Students' Right to Their Own Language. The paper describes some of the main events in the production of the resolution, and then discusses the response to the resolution of the National Council of Teachers of English, parents, and collegiate faculty members. The paper notes that the resolution anticipates the problems of world tribalism illustrated in Middle Europe and the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s. The paper suggests two major moves as the language resolution is reinterpreted to fit the situations of the 21st century: (1) educators should do more to teach young people what language is and how it really works; and (2) educators should emphasize not merely how language defines or reports experience, but how it mediates among people. The draft resolution of March 13, 1972, submitted to CCCC Executive Committee in Boston is attached. (RS)

Richard Lloyd-Jones

Writing the Resolution: An Institutional History

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My assigned role in this paper is to loom as the grey eminence of Institutional Memory. I am to recall the issues that a quarter of century back led to the CCCC resolution and statement on the Students' Right to Their Own Language, to outline some of the main events in producing them, and to suggest some questions left unanswered as we turn to another century.

Recall the late sixties in our 4C's and in the Nation. Almost twenty years old, we were still striving to get a thousand people to our conventions, our journal was edging away from mere reports of convention sessions and was publishing real papers, two-year college people were becoming a major presence at our meetings, and our convention sessions--often extemporaneous class lectures--were dominated by pragmatic issues of class management and program administration. Research and theory as paper topics were in large part yet to come, except possibly in linguistics, whose practitioners still graced our sessions. The technologies that now amuse us--even film--were academic fantasies. In fact, the NCTE Commissions were still young, and the major battles over testing had just been joined. Steve North dates the beginning of the present era of composition teaching as 1963; in effect, by his count the first decade and a half or two decades of CCCC were spent in finding that new identity.

Still, there were important currents flowing. Studies in communication and rhetoric led to greater concerns for contexts in speech and writing. Socio-linguistics and psycho-linguistics--theories of language--began to edge out the formalism of syntax or phonology as our main studies. From philology we had learned that language changed in response to the social and political climate so it was easy to associate dialects with groupings of people, and to recognize that language responds to the realities of power; that dictionaries are history books, not enacted laws; and

that choice in language has to do with the limits of the human brain as much as with anyTHING external to that brain and represented in language. You can go the Bloomfield, or Baugh, or Fries, or Leonard, or Roberts, or Gleason, or the General Semanticists, or Morris, or Saussere, or Chomsky or a host of others to find a source, if you like, but the very number of candidates of several kinds of linguist suggests to me that the ideas that were commonplace among intellectuals were creeping down to the regular faculty, if not to the world at large. Martin Joos' *Five Clocks* and Walker Gibson's *Limits of Language* had been circulated during the planning sessions for the CEEB Institutes and were published in time to be used in numerous institutes for high school teachers during the 60's.

So too the revival of interest in classical rhetoric--primarily Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and Quintillian--supported broader studies of discourse within situations. I don't recall that *kairos* became a popular term until later when praise of the Sophists became allowable, but people in communication, advertising, business writing, technical writing and other applications-oriented courses put heavy stress on readers, on audience expectations, on the cultures of sub-groups, on the situations within which a message was uttered. Later critics may deplore our taking up the broad formulas or structures of classical rhetoric because we usually deny the underlying ontology and epistemology, but as a practical matter the interest aroused by the classics tempted people into later post-modernist analyses. For our purposes now it is perhaps enough to claim that by the mid-sixties a fair number of composition teachers were seeking approaches that honored aptness more than correctness, that elaborated a theory based on the purpose of discourse and the limitations of the participants in any situation.

Within that context in the mid-sixties James Meredith and others were preaching the importance of Black English. Their concern was political, not linguistic, and CCCC members

were divided. By that time there had been sit-ins and marches and murders in sufficient numbers to make clear that issues of oppression and power had to be settled, and language was an emblem of that oppression. Among predominantly white academic societies CCCC was relatively sympathetic to questions of equality, so our business meetings were often a bit heated. Martin Luther King was killed while we were meeting in Minneapolis, and the second day of the Convention was put aside for discussion of the implications of his murder. Still, some who were sympathetic to the political cause were traditional in their approach to language, and racism in CCCC was not merely covert. At Louisville the nominating committee, following the custom of the time, offered only one candidate for chair and we evaded an opportunity to choose Darwin Turner, who had been energetically suggested.

But we were trying to recruit minorities, and the addition of two-year college faculties--especially those from urban areas--shifted the center of social activism. High prestige universities have never been very well represented in CCCC affairs, but even the faculties of mass enrollment universities or four year colleges generally tended to think of access to education and to related opportunities in rather abstract terms not relevant to them. Their admission standards were modest enough, but they were not so "open" as to recruit the disaffected. Yes, they were hosts to some of the best publicized political demonstrations--especially during the Vietnam War when their own students were more nearly on the line--but the Institutional Mass of those colleges moved by intertia in exclusionary ways. In contrast, the people who daily dealt with first generation college students, with older students, with people generally who felt like outsiders--these faculty mostly in community colleges were ready to relate their teaching of language to social concerns. Sometimes they had little linguistic

training, but "Black English" was a concept they were ready for.

By the time NCTE met in LasVegas in 1971 there had been several attempts to articulate the general feelings about language in terms of the current social and political scene, but we were just feeling our academic way into the problems. *RTE* was still a brand new journal, the report of the first NAEP writing assessment was just out, and the tripod of literature, linguistics and composition (with a spiral movement) was the dominant curricular model. Ed Corbett, Chair of CCCC and representing the officers, asked me and four others (Ross Winterowd, Darnell Williams, Geneva Smitherman, and Myrna Harrison) to draw up a resolution that might be brought to the members to establish policy on the student's right to his own language. We agreed that the statements should meet seven standards:

> 1. We should affirm the right as an ethical principle.
> 2. Then we should assert the practical need for the student to have confidence in his basic ability as established by the language of his nurture.
> 3. If "standard" is mentioned, it should be only in passing....
> 4. We should view language as encompassing tremendous range and emphasize that choices are ethical and rhetorical.
> 5. We should assert that the teacher's obligation is to increase the student's range of choice, not to legislate correct forms.
> 6. We might emphasize that this approach to writing requires more competent teachers, not less, that far from asserting that "anything goes", we demand sophisticated social and verbal judgments from both teachers and students....
> 7. The statement should be brief.

After consultation by mail--Corbett as Chair and Liz McPherson as Associate Chair were kept informed--we offered two versions to the Executive Committee when it began its meeting in Boston in the Spring of 1972--one about 200 words long, the other about three times that. (The longer one

appears in the appendix.) An ad hoc sub-committee chose to write a new resolution over lunch, blending pieces from each draft into a shorter version. The new draft:

> We affirm the student's right to his own language--the dialect of his nurture in which he finds his identity and style. Any claim that only one dialect is acceptable should be viewed as an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another, not as true or sound advice to speakers and writers, nor as moral advice to human beings. A nation which is proud of diverse heritage of cultural and racial variety ought to preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly the need for teachers to have such training as will enable them to support this goal of diversity and the right of the student to his own language.

This version was adopted in principle by a vote of 22 to 1 with one abstention, but with the provision that a task force be appointed to prepare a statement of explanation augmenting some of the material from the longer statement and answering questions about the implications of the resolution because it was feared that the membership might need instruction about both the political and linguistic issues. In other words, the policy had to be approved at a general business meeting and needed support. Anyway, the prime purpose of the resolution was challenge and educate the public at all levels.

After adjournment that afternoon another committee assembled names for the task force including four people from the original committee and adding eight others of various ethnic and racial backgrounds as well as McPherson (*ex officio*) and Bob Hogan and Nancy Prichard from the NCTE staff. Mel Butler of Southern University was nominated to become chair; the others suggested were Milton Baxter, Ninfa Flores, Jenefer Giannasi, Adam Casmier, Richard Long, Elizabeth Martin, and L. M. Myers. At the following NCTE meeting in Minneapolis the resolution was revised slightly--

primarily to use the plural in order to avoid the sexist "he" and to add the passage about "the myth of standard English". Five members of the Task Force (Butler, Winterowd, Smitherman, Harrison, and Giannasi) met to organize the work. Susan Casmier sat in for her husband and former CCCC chair James Barry observed for the Executive Committee. They decided that Harrison would collect sample themes to use for illustrations, Myers would be asked to prepare a bibliography, Baxter, Long, and Flores would be asked to prepare material on the nature of dialects, and I would be asked to join Butler in editing the materials. The background materials and any other bits considered useful were to be distributed to the committee by January 15, 1973, and the group was to assemble in Chicago February 16-18,

The Task force met as scheduled at the palmer House, although my notes suggest that only a bare majority of the committee was there the whole time and several people were present only in the form of written statements. I have no record that Myers or Baxter took part at all. A large part of the meeting was devoted to identifying what needed to be explained, elaborating a question-answer format as an efficient form of exposition, and deciding how best to explain the issues that were identified. Given the tension of the times, the immediate stimulus to the actions, and the make-up of the committee perhaps it is no wonder that even though most of the questions deal with linguistics, the social context is often near the surface.

The answers to the questions were roughly established at the meeting, but the (relatively few) drafts mailed ahead of time, the materials worked up quickly at the hotel, and unresolved fragments from the discussions still had to be altered into a document. Liz McPherson, Nancy Prichard, and I were assigned the chore of editing the pieces into a booklet, although we received promises from others that they would produce prose to fill gaps. We were instructed to keep the tone "restrained and non-pronouncemental", to direct the

explanations to people who were "linguistically naive, if not linguistically intolerant," and to avoid repetition in using materials submitted by different members. Jen Giannasi agreed to create a bibliography. Eventually we all did as we promised; the three editors tried to honor as fully as possible the exact language provided by task force members. Partly we felt they deserved it; partly we wanted all of the participants--heavy laborers and casual commenters--to sign the final report. Long ago I discarded the papers that would tell me who did what, but analysts of style might have fun trying to identify separate authors and seeking inconsistency in the kind of concern.

The Executive Committee reviewed the text at the CCCC convention in New Orleans in 1973--our largest convention up to that time, 1200-1300 attendees, the program planned by Dick Larson. On the basis of the reactions at the time and by mail, some rather extensive, a revised and somewhat fuller version of statement was presented and approved for publication by the Executive Committee at the NCTE meeting in November of 1973 in Philadelphia. It was then presented for approval to the Annual Business Meeting in Anaheim in April. The vote was 79-20. As it happens, attendance at the Anaheim convention was less than half that of the New Orleans one; we have never since had such a small group. Some of the four-year college program directors grumbled about being coerced by two-year college people, by radicals, or by Californians, and some quit being members, but I suspect that most of the people who came to the meeting (in spite of distance and the unwillingness of some colleges to pay to send faculty members to Disneyland) were hard core CCCC people. Real members, not just subscribers.

Some may have voted for the resolution primarily because of the political implications, some primarily because of the linguistic and discourse implications, but I think most of the 79 yes votes represented both values. More than any other academic organization I've watched, the CCCC has been

moved by a collective social conscience. Sometimes the group has to be prodded to do right, but most members assume that rhetoric--composition, writing, whatever--is entwined with ethics. In varying degrees we agree with Cicero and Quintillian that the good writer is also a good person. Odd, erratic, fallible, marching to a different drummer, perhaps, but still good.

Still, having stipulated that, I am more interested in how the language statement defines our attitudes toward language. NCTE did not adopt our resolution, but created a substitute with greater elaboration, especially in differentiating oral and written language. The changes were probably sound, but the effect was to dampen the force of the policy. Partly NCTE members exercised greater caution in stating the issues because school teachers are more immediately exposed to popular pressure.

The social issues worried many parents, but the linguistic ones seemed outrageous to them. "Correctness" was an absolute, a basic value. Parents did not associate the term with mere social power but with Truth. They would have pursued a universal grammar delivered from Sinai, if they could have had it, and generally teachers were not much different. After all in the 30s even NCTE was still publishing pieces grounded in the old concerns for elocution exhorting teachers to force the sounding of the "g" in "-ing" words and to root out "dem" and "dose". Even in the 60s and 70s "Who" and "Whom", "Can" and "May" and "Nouns are the names persons, places, and things" made daily lessons. Even those teachers who had moved on to bigger issues could not afford to rile the opposition. For most teachers generative grammars were unheard of, and formalistic, anthropological descriptions were still revolutionary in most schools. Some highly literate people refused to use Webster's Third because it was "relativistic" and a threat to the integrity of English.

To many collegiate faculty members who supported the resolution new methods of describing linguistic surfaces seemed self-evident. They had had courses in the history of English so they accepted linguistic mutability and probably associated semantic change with politics whatever they made of Grimm's Law or phonological change. They enjoyed etymology and read the OED for fun. A few were trying out semiotics, others various psychological and sociological approaches to meaning and structure. That is, they were hearing the signals of a paradigm shift, but weren't quite sure how to move. Or to change the figure, the supporting statement offered a linguistic halfway house. They could reject the certainties of the Anglisized Latin grammar of Bishop Lowth or Eton College without quite addressing the intellectual uncertainties fostered by the new descriptions.

The social implications were more straightforward. The rights of minorities--especially of children required to attend public schools--required even-handed treatment of all students, and the old grammar texts challenged fairness by subterfuge. The old Shibboliths of correctness made good excuses for irrelevant discrimination, so for social reformers the old grammar had to go. As often happens with political imperatives, however right, the prohibitions became extreme and overwrought far beyond anything in the supporting text of Resolution. Some people even wanted to deny any role for Edited American English and wanted it banned. And that brought counteractions even from people sympathetic to the social reforms.

The academic issue of linguistic choice was quickly obscured by the social one, probably even before the statement was formulated. And the social issues persist even though the details have changed in 25 years, so we still have trouble seeing calmly how we have re-categorized variation in language. One of the unintended side effects is that the tripod curriculum (which included linguistics) and departments of English Language and Literature (which

included philology) have largely disappeared. BA's in English, even new PhD's, may have virtually no systematic study of the language as such except as a bye-product of foreign language study, a notably regressive experience. If we are lucky they have seen Robert McNeill's Story of English on video, or perhaps have read something like Bill Bryson's Mother Tongue. Chances are that they have prepped for standardized usage tests to satisfy national urges for assessment. In a way we have bred a generation of linguistic ignoramuses in order to avoid having to recognize that language reveals the tensions of a society.

A coincident effect of our tacit acceptance of dialects is that we increasingly challenge the canon of literary texts. I don't imagine that the canon has ever been as immutable as the old College Board lists made it seem, but as we recognized social and ethnic identification in dialect, we also saw it in literary choice. Feminists and social sub-groups have made it evident that we had favored literature by white males who identified with church and court. That is hardly strange since such people were also the ones who were literate, but it is also a bias. The odd notion that political correctness is new hides the fact that the old choices were also political, but they defined the power group differently. The whiners are merely the old guard of inherited power ill equipped to find reasons for their preferences. Those classes of people who were silenced by illiteracy, in turn a product of political policy, now write. Like Thomas Hardy we are forced to wonder what the mute had thought in the past, but we suspect that it prevailed in the long run. Now that the mute speak and write in many tongues, we aren't sure of what to think or what will prevail. Cultural and linguistic pluralism set off parallel reexaminations of what we taught as correct literature or correct usage.

In an odd way the Language Statement anticipates the problems of world tribalism illustrated in Middle Europe and

the former USSR. Oppressive regimes can mask cultural differences, but they can't quite root them out short of genocide. Even the vanishing Armenians rise again. The USSR forced Russian on the Soviet Republics as the legal language, but the Independent States can't wait to redeem their own languages. Language choice follows one's sense of identity. Most people identify with those they know face-to-face--family and the like. They become patriots, part of a larger social order, when they are confident about their base and can believe that they and their intimates will be best served in union with semi-strangers. This relationship can be emblemized by language choices. We share a dialect with those closest to us, and (if we are not threatened) we accept strangers who speak our language even with odd variations. We even recognize and welcome that some dialects are virtually colorless, serve as a common, all-purpose medium of exchange for those who live in worlds of high abstraction and power, but we still hear with emotion those who speak (or write) our dialect. Mandarin does not serve us all.

It is this world we now approach. Linguistic separatism that merely insists on "our" dialect raises higher the walls that separate us. We can play with all sorts of technical questions about language, but the issue now is survival in a world where enormous power can be exercised small groups of fanatics. We need small groups--small classes, small neighborhoods, small businesses, small grocery stores, small colleges. But in our heritage we have also learned that if we don't stand together, we hang separately. There are too many of us and we stand too close to each other not help one another. Thomas Carlyle worried about the neglected Scotch widow at the end of the street who declared her unity with the rich folks by spreading her typhus; we worry about bombs and assault rifles. We need our dialects to grow in, but we need to understand the dialects and languages of others as well. The right to one's own

language implies an obligation to listen to the languages of others. Twenty five years ago perhaps we did not make enough of that point.

As a nation we are oddly ambivalent about privacy and the power of the state. "Am I my brother's keeper?" remains an unanswered question because the relationship between the individual and the corporate "people" is unstable. Only confident people can respect difference and privacy; fearful ones trifle with paranoia. Yet, confidence depends on the sort of trust implied by marks of intimacy in language, many of the variations fearful ones want to root out. They want to coerce a conformity that apparently merely confirms hostility and deeply embeds tribalism--or at least nationalism of a divisive sort.

As the language resolution is reinterpreted to fit the situations of the 21st century, I suggest at least two major moves. We should do more to teach young people what language is and how it really works. I hope no one thinks that means grammar exercises or quizzes on usage. Our agenda should include English-Plus. We also should stress inter-relationships among languages--second natural languages, mathematical, tactile, graphic, visual, and musical languages.

Second, we should emphasize not merely how language defines or reports experience, but how it mediates among people. Even as we point out the consequences of choice in language, we need to help out students read the choices made by other people so we all can more effectively discover what views we share and what we don't. Only then can we reach meaningful social accommodation, which is, after all, the goal of the Statement. Language is not an absolute, but a flexible instrument of the people who use it.

Richard Lloyd-Jones, April 1, 1993, CCCC Annual Meeting

Appendix
Draft Resolution of March 13, 1972, submitted to CCCC Executive Committee in Boston.

The Executive Committee of the CCCC affirms the student's right to his own language as it is used by teh student' family and immeidate friends--those people who are the source of his own sense of personal worth. In the forms of this language her fashions his understanding of the world and learns to recognize the people who share his particular niche in the world. Ethically the teacher should support the personal security that comes to the student from understanding the language as it is spoken by his friends. For most teachers who meet students of backgrounds different from their own, this obligation to understand the student's language requires training and work beyond that needed to teach "correct English." Even in the narrow geographical senses often used to describe variations in English (e.g. Southern English, Boston English), the dialects are inadequately described, but int he larger social sense by which variations in English might be correlated to social standing, ethnic groups, vocations, or even differences in immediate social situations the dialects are misrepresented as well as usually undescribed. The teacher, then, needs at least training in dialectology and sociology as well as remarkable social sympathy to help the student explore the language he uses everyday.

In practical terms beginning with what the student already uses and can be persuaded to explore is the the best base for a teacher to use in extending the studnet's range of available choice in language. The teacher's willingness to take seriously the lanaguage of the student should increase the will and the strength of the student to learn of dialects and styles other than his own. Variations exist not as a second language but as part of the system of choice inherent in the variousness of English. The variables in rhetorical systems--what sort of person talks to what kind of people under what cirucmstances for what purpose--determine the choices of what form of language should be chosen. A student may choose words to reveal his allegiance to family and friends; on the other hand, he may choose his structures to declare a commitment to formal analysis and intellectual detachment. Undoubtedly, whatever the goal of a particular piece of writing teachers and students alike will have to struggle with the false association of language forms and social groups or persuasive effect, but that study can be a healthy way of encouraging all people to look more closely at the limits of language.

The assertions of this resolution place a great responsibility on teachers; it is much easier to teach by the rule book, to seek out some goal of always applicable correctness or even of social dominance. The dialects of English--even separate individual styles--each in their own ways are very demanding and precise, so a teacher must call for the discipline of definite decisions to adjust to public need while still encouraging the student's freedom to explore the private recesses of his own mind. As the student and teacher increase their awareness of the excellence within variety, they will increase their capacities for empathy with many kinds of people. Both can discard the notion that all responsible speakers of English use but one dialect (however local custom describes it); this is an observably false dictum reflecting stuggles for dominance between social groups.