

Standard English and the Teaching of Literacy

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The debate about Standard English as the exclusive form of the language taught in school literacy programs might be moderated by the distinction between linguistic and communicative parity of language forms. Although different forms of language have equally adequate structures, not all forms are equally effective for all purposes of communication. Standard English is not just a neutral form for the expression of independent meaning: it is a discursive practice that makes possible the sharing of particular meanings among privileged members of a community. Effective use of Standard English is an unavoidable curriculum goal. Standard English should be taught, not exclusively, but along with respect for and acceptance of non-standard forms of English that children, and especially young children, have acquired from their communities. Teachers should see non-standard forms not as errors and bad grammar, but as systematic representations of meaning and experience.

La distinction entre la parité linguistique et la communication des diverses formes langagières pourrait exercer une influence modératrice sur le débat entourant l'anglais normalisé comme seule forme de langue enseignée dans les programmes scolaires d'alphabétisation. Bien que diverses formes de langue aient des structures tout aussi adéquates, ces formes de langue ne sont pas aussi efficaces du point de vue de la communication. L'anglais normalisé n'est pas uniquement une forme de langue neutre permettant l'expression d'un sens universel; il constitue également une pratique discursive qui permet aux membres privilégiés d'une communauté de comprendre des sens particuliers. L'utilisation efficace de l'anglais normalisé est un but auquel aucun enseignement ne peut échapper. Il ne saurait toutefois être question de n'enseigner que l'anglais normalisé; les formes d'anglais que les enfants, particulièrement les plus jeunes, ont apprises au sein de leur milieu doivent être également prises en compte et ce, dans le plus grand respect. Les enseignants devraient considérer les formes d'anglais non normalisées non pas comme des erreurs de grammaire ou d'une autre nature, mais bien comme des représentations systématiques de divers sens et expériences.

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Judges says 42,000 Ephramites were slain when their inability to pronounce the /sh/ sound in "shibboleth" revealed them to

their enemies, the Gileadites. In England as late as the seventeenth century, a convicted felon could escape the death penalty by claiming benefit of clergy on account of a successful reading of the "neck verse" from the Book of Psalms (Cressy, 1980, pp. 16–17).

Inability to command particular uses of language may not be life-threatening today (although Milroy & Milroy [1985] cite a recent British case in which a person was wrongly convicted on a criminal charge chiefly because of "naive interpretations of unsubstantiated allegations about the defendant's speech" [p. 175]). However, there is no doubt that our repertoire of language has some influence on our successes and failures in academic, working, and social life. Job interviews often require Standard English speech and candidates may be rejected on the basis of non-standard usage (McClain, Spencer, & Bowman, 1979). Thus schools and other educational institutions teaching English as a first language must ask which uses of language people should possess (Tuman, 1987). The answer will constitute a definition of literacy—the ability to use and to understand the forms of language approved by a society.

"Language uses" can be categorized in terms of the multiple functions that language serves in different social settings: spoken and written, casual and formal, planned and unplanned, message-oriented and audience-oriented. "Language forms" are linked to functions since particular uses of language are served by particular forms; the structure of spoken language differs from that of a carefully planned lecture or a rehearsed speech. Effective use demands control of the form appropriate to a particular use.

The question of what uses and forms people ought to learn arises partly from the form/function relation and partly from geographical and social variation in language forms. One speaks now of Standard Canadian English, Standard American English, and Standard Australian English, each having distinctive phonological, lexical, and even syntactic features. In former British colonies such as India, Singapore, and Nigeria, where English has official status among other languages, even more distinctive versions of English have become the languages of indigenous literatures (Kachru, 1986; Platt, Weber, & Ho Mian, 1984).

A national speech community does not constitute a "monolithic static entity" (Rubin, 1976, p. 389). Instead, its members share, unequally, a repertoire of communicative competencies that imply control of particular language uses and knowledge about social rules for their appropriate deployment. A single form of multi-purpose "pure English," once a goal of linguistic idealists, has been shown by over 20 years of sociolinguistic research to be a chimera.

The first-language curriculum was easier to design under a singular

view of “proper” English than it would be under today’s pluralist sociolinguistic conception of legitimate, inevitable and desirable language variation. Since people’s access to varieties of use and competence in their exercise vary, educators must ask what forms, uses, and competencies they should promote as a program definition of literacy. On the one hand, function and domain vary in written language: academic literacy implies one kind of competency while functional literacy in particular jobs and activities implies others. On the other hand, literacy is not limited to uses of written language. Competency in reading and writing affects the spoken repertoire (Milroy & Milroy, 1985; Tannen, 1984). “Illiterate speech,” for example, refers to certain unschooled forms of speech that becoming literate would presumably have eliminated. Specification of literacy competencies in a curriculum is complex and controversial given variations between and interactions among oral and written language forms.

One might agree normatively that literacy is the “control of *approved* language forms and uses.” Some people see Standard English as *the* approved form and want mastery in speaking and writing it to be the aim of literacy education. But whereas one might speak confidently about the absolute meaning of “standard” regarding coinage, for example, in terms of language it is but an abstract ideal not easily applied to real communication among real people.

THE NATURE OF STANDARD ENGLISH

As a response to the needs of science and government for a national language to replace Latin, the written language in eighteenth-century Britain was codified on the dialect of the Southeast Midlands by published dictionaries and grammar texts. According to Milroy & Milroy (1985), this developed at least a partial standard for written English and made people conscious of a relatively uniform notion of “correct” English as a desirable social and personal goal (p. 36). In other words, Standard English became an ideology.

This ideology was promoted through public education in the nineteenth century. The elementary curriculum for basic literacy was based on the “doctrine of correctness.” Correct English was defined by the external authority of grammar texts and dictionaries. The standard for all use was the best written model, literary English. Non-standard forms were regarded as deficient forms and liable to contaminate respectable use. Educators spoke of the “vicious” language habits of non-standard

speakers, showing the moralizing tone of campaigns against illiterate forms associated with lower social orders and thereby with other disreputable behaviours that threatened social harmony and the safety of property. This fundamentalist belief in a single, externally patrolled form of English, was officially and professionally discredited in the first half of the twentieth century, yet it can still be detected as a kind of historical residue in contemporary debates about literacy teaching.

Early in the twentieth century the gap between prescriptions in school grammar texts and actual English usage led to an alternative model of language propriety. Linguists' and anthropologists' studies of oral-language cultures showed spoken language could be a rich and sophisticated medium for the encoding of experience and meaning, and encouraged a doctrine of usage that rejected external authority over language. It asserted that: languages changed continually; speech, not writing, was the primary form of language; grammar depended on usage; and correctness was relative.

The question was whose usage should be considered standard? The answer was generally that good usage was associated with education and class. Two influential linguists in the first half of the century took this position. Leonard, in his 1932 survey of American usage, saw the standard residing in "cultivated" and "literary" English as used by educated people (in Finegan, 1980, p. 92). Fries, whose 1940 study of usage was based on letters to the American federal government, believed that Standard English should be defined as the English used by those who carried on the affairs of English-speaking people. More recently, Borodkin (1981) referred to the standard as the language of those who are looked up to. Bizzell (1988) said it was the language of the academy and of its associated upper classes.

To shift the standard from the external authority of grammar texts and handbooks to the more dynamic internal authority of elite users raises complex issues. For one thing, even the best speakers and writers vary the forms they use according to function and situation, so that Standard English, beyond formal writing, must be considered to consist of a range of forms. Furthermore, accepting the usage of one social group as standard at the expense of other social groups was controversial. Twentieth-century descriptive linguistics denied that so-called Standard English, as a written form based in a particular regional and social dialect, possessed any intrinsic linguistic superiority. This scientific claim was regarded as counterintuitive by public opinion, which held that Standard English embodied certain aesthetic, logical, and even moral qualities essential to national and personal well being.

LINGUISTIC RELATIVISM

The twentieth century has been marked by bitter polarization of opinion about Standard English, especially as concerns first-language teaching (Milroy & Milroy, 1985). This polarization crystallized around linguistic relativism, the view that all dialects and forms of a language are internally consistent and viable means of representing their users' experience.

Linguistic relativists do not see correctness in language as the exclusive property of a single standard form. Thus appropriateness of usage became an additional goal of schooling. A 1952 report by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) defined good English as "that form of speech which is appropriate to the purpose of the speaker, true to the language as it is, and comfortable to speaker and listener" (in Finegan, 1980, p. 105). Usage could now be classified not just culturally but more neutrally, according to function. Like a chameleon, good language attracts least attention to itself when it is appropriate to user, context, and purpose (Borodkin, 1981, p. 16). In Krapp's words of 1908, good English is "that which hits the mark" (in Finegan, 1980, p. 83).

Linguistic relativism influenced educational practice. "Sub-standard" language was later softened to "non-standard," and, more recently, to "non-mainstream language and dialects." This contrasts with the "language of wider communication," formerly called "Standard English" (Smitherman, 1987).

The general public, however, has found it difficult to accept the educational implications of linguistic relativism. Not distinguishing scientific description from social aspects of language use, many people have seen statements of linguistic parity as endorsements of permissiveness in usage and as debasement of the English language as a cultural heritage. Tolerant pluralism as a strategic principle for language learning, including competence in Standard English, is criticized by both journalists and academics.

Before he became better known for his advocacy of cultural literacy, Hirsch (1977) argued against linguistic relativism in its 1970s manifestation as the "bidialectalism" movement in the United States. In 1974 the NCTE published a tract called *The Students' Rights to Their Own Language*, which asserted that teachers should respect the language forms their students brought with them to school (Daniels, 1983, p. 170), and that in teaching Standard English, no attempt should be made to erase other dialects. Hirsch (1977) maintained that bidialectalism was impossible when one of the dialects involved was the powerful grapholect, Standard English.

Tuman (1987) offered a sophisticated critique of the relativist proposal for language and literacy. He noted that the position had its own mystification in that it was advanced in written, highly literate, Standard English. It was all very well for sociolinguists like Labov to maintain that street language was as effective a means of communication as academic school language, but Labov advanced his argument through the medium of Standard English (pp. 125–130). Tuman argued that this undermined the relativist's proposition that different language uses were equally valuable.

Both Hirsch (1977) and Tuman (1987) misrepresented the relativist position. To assert that dialects are of equal merit on internal criteria is not to claim that they are functionally equal. To suggest that linguists and sociolinguists proposed that Standard English should be demoted to merely one of several forms for educational purposes is to use the straw man technique. The NCTE's 1974 proposal did not detract from Standard English as the language of instruction. James Sledd (1984, 1988) trenchantly argued that no one ever wanted to abolish the teaching of Standard English "in right ways for the right reasons to students who wanted to learn it." "Absolute opposition to such teaching," he declared, "does not exist but has been invented in a deceitful ploy to discredit real opposition" (Sledd, 1988, p. 172).

Smitherman (1987), who had been involved in drawing up the 1974 NCTE policy on students' rights to their own language, made the same point. She called for a national (American) policy on language that would "reinforce and re-affirm the legitimacy of non-mainstream language and dialects and promote mother tongue instruction as a co-equal language of instruction along with the language of wider communication" (p. 32). She made it clear that, despite affirmation of non-mainstream languages and dialects, "there is no question, nor has there ever been any, about the need for linguistic competence" in the language of wider communication (Standard English) (p. 32).

Freire (Freire & Macedo, 1987), discussing his radical pedagogy for emancipatory literacy, argued that although literacy teaching should be approached through the community language, there was no doubt that full literacy required mastery of the dominant forms of language. This was true whether these dominant forms were a foreign, colonial language such as Portuguese in the former colony of Guinea-Bissau, or a standard form of the language in a country like the United States. The standard language was the language of power, and subordinate groups becoming literate had to learn it to gain access to power.

A relativistic view of language thus did not argue against the importance of Standard English as an approved form of language that had to be

taught and learned in a literacy program. Instead, it changed the context, in that the standard form was now seen not as intrinsically meritorious in its own linguistic right, but as the "language of wider communication," which for pragmatic reasons students needed to learn. Society reacted negatively to pluralistic notions of language in the mistaken belief that linguistic equality meant communicative equality. Detractors failed to distinguish between language as a system, that could be studied rigorously and dispassionately, and language as a medium of communication, whose use was subject to social and political valuation. The rise of sociolinguistics, emphasizing the academic study of language use in social contexts, has ended the isolation of linguistic study from the pragmatic concerns of language policies. Careful study of language in its social context has produced insights about standard forms and contributed to more informed debate about the role of Standard English in literacy teaching. In the next section these insights will be discussed under two headings: Standard English as a Discursive Practice, enlarging the concept beyond linguistic form; and Standard English as the Language of Domination, bringing out political dimensions of teaching for literacy.

STANDARD ENGLISH AS A DISCURSIVE PRACTICE

So far Standard English has been treated as a matter of linguistic structure. Correctness according to either external rule or approved usage was judged on forms—pronunciation, word choice, grammar, spelling, or punctuation. However, more recent work has extended the meaning of "Standard English" to include, in addition to the form in which thought is expressed, the nature of the thought itself. This extension results from the abandonment of the assumption that language simply represents reality to the "mirror of our minds" (Rorty, 1979). In this "representational" view, language was a neutral vehicle for the expression of thought, making Standard English a formalized means for the transmission of pre-existing thought in a conventionally acceptable form with polished surfaces. Language can alternatively be seen as a key component of the cultural formation of knowledge. Words as socially constituted symbols act to bring meaning into being. Meaning is, therefore, a function not of nature but of culture and language. This raises the possibility that a particular form and use of the language, such as Standard English, is itself a kind of meaning as well as a way of expressing meaning. In this sense, literacy is more than linguistic competence; it is competence in ways of knowing and thinking, or in certain discursive practices. This view of language as a cultural formation underlies Freire's conception of emancipatory literacy (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Gee (1987) discussed literacy as a discursive practice, using the term "discourse" to classify language uses. Thus a discourse is not just a way of using language, rather it embraces a way of "thinking and a way of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or "social network" (p. 3). Standard English, therefore, is more than just a dialect form of speech and writing; it is a way of looking at the world, a way of shaping experience, an ideology. To use Standard English is to engage in a discourse practice that represents the "worldview of mainstream and powerful institutions of our society" (Gee, 1986, p. 720). To learn to control Standard English is to be socialized into "mainstream ways of using language in speech and print, mainstream ways of taking meaning, of making sense of experience. Discourse practices are always embedded in the worldview of a particular social group; they are tied to a set of norms and values" (Gee, 1986, p. 742).

To show that a particular literacy, such as competence in the precise and objective use of words in "essay-text literacy," is an artifact of a particular culture or discourse community, rather than some natural end-point of literacy, Gee (1986) contrasted "modern consciousness" of technological societies and "bush consciousness" of the Athabaskans of Northern Canada and Alaska. To the Athabaskans, explicitness, detachment and precision—qualities of the academic essay, widely regarded as the pinnacle of western literacy—are inconsistent with their patterns of communication, patterns that value interpersonal relationships and deliberate ambiguity.

Standard English must therefore be thought of as a set of discursive practices, that, in "modern consciousness" societies, include academic discourse and at least the discourses of the professional domains. Standard English is not monolithic because it has to adapt itself to the ways of thinking, acting, and expressing that these domains represent.

In another sense too, Standard English as a discursive practice is not a singular, fixed entity. Bizzell (1988) noted that the discourse practice of Standard English can and does change. Referring to academic Standard English, she cited as examples of change colleges' use of holistic marking methods that permit some measure of non-standard writing style, and the inclusion of minority writing in school anthologies. However, despite this flexibility, students who wished to continue in the majority of college writing programs in the United States still had to master academic literacy. James Sledd (1988) noted that Standard English was changing because of the growing importance of high technology in a world increasingly dominated by multinational corporations whose language differed markedly from the standard form taught in schools and colleges.

The point of extending Standard English from a concern with a set of formal language conventions governing structure to a concern with discursive practices representing an orientation to knowledge and the world is that such extension may move the teaching of literacy from preoccupation with surface forms to more adequate conception of communicative competence in approved uses of language. To be literate in the sense of having the command of both spoken and written Standard English in one's linguistic repertoire is to have the ability and right to participate in certain discourse communities. This question of the right to participate raises the second consideration in literacy instruction, the political dimension of Standard English.

STANDARD ENGLISH AS THE LANGUAGE OF DOMINATION

Language knowledge and use in any society are unevenly distributed (Rubin, 1976, p. 391), and societal language policies and practices may contribute to these inequalities. Standard English, as an example of what Mannheim (1936 in Jarvis, 1987, p. 37) called "achievement of the upper classes," can be used to control access to power and position under the guise that its promotion is a neutral and efficient form of national and international communication, since it is the language of advanced thought, and the repository of cultural heritage. The English teacher's insistence upon Standard English serves a gate-keeping function (Gee, 1987, p. 743), guarding "the portals to comfortable consumerism and privileged power" (Gilbert, 1980).

The counterargument is that learning Standard English provides access to the power and privilege of its traditional discourse community (Hirsch, 1977). However, such access is not equal. There is unavoidable advantage to those whose language was declared standard and a similar disadvantage to those whose speech was declared divergent or deficient by comparison to the standard.

Andrew Sledd (1988) used this political perspective in his description of how Standard English requirements discriminate against the lower classes. His analysis of two college tests of written English showed that many questions "mercilessly assess the social status" of students, by requiring them to identify sentence "errors" that would be common and acceptable in the dialect speech of minority groups such as blacks. Speakers from backgrounds in which non-standard verb forms, subject-verb disagreement, and non-standard pronoun forms are rarely heard would have an advantage in answering such test items because they are being tested in their own dialect. Speakers from non-standard language backgrounds would find it harder to pass such tests. In Sledd's

words, "these exams, especially in English, will regularly include sufficient discriminatory devices to guarantee advantage to those who already have it" (p. 503). Sledd maintained that non-standard forms such as, "There's no seats in the back," are perfectly comprehensible but are stigmatized in education to "keep the humble at their stations" (p. 503). Wolfram's (1974, in Milroy & Milroy, 1985) study of a widely used school test found that on one sub-test of the Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities, 27 out of 33 items were susceptible to non-standard dialect forms. Such non-standard speakers could give answers that, though legitimate in their own speech, would be marked wrong in the scoring (p. 169).

The educational requirement to learn a standard language and to learn in that standard form, whether the standard be a colonial foreign language as in Portuguese overseas possessions or the dominant form of a national language as in the United States, constitute oppression. The language requirement denies access to the dominant culture except to those persons willing and obedient enough to embrace the dominant culture and to learn its language despite inefficient instruction. It is Freire's (Freire & Macedo, 1987) strong accusation that by their exclusive use of Standard English, American schools cause illiteracy.

Gee's (1987) explanation for discrimination in language teaching was gentler. He distinguished primary discourses from secondary ones, with primary discourses being uses and forms of language acquired through experience and used mainly in face-to-face communication among intimates, and secondary discourses being used for communication among non-intimates, and which are learned with some conscious awareness. Since such "conscious" learning is harder than the acquisition of primary discourses, secondary discourses—those associated with literacy—are more difficult to master. It follows, therefore, that advantage in the learning and use of secondary discourses, preferred in classrooms and in the teaching of literacy, lies with those whose primary discourses resemble more closely the secondary ones to be learned. In other words, the use of Standard English discourse in education confers an advantage on children from upper- and middle-class backgrounds and a corresponding disadvantage on children from lower-class backgrounds.

STANDARD ENGLISH AND THE TEACHING OF LITERACY: RECOMMENDATIONS

Standard English is not a simple concept. It has residues of a claim to an exclusive and neutral association with correctness as defined either by

external, fixed authority or by the preferred usage of approved models. An opposing claim would deny it linguistic superiority alongside other regional, social, and functional varieties but permit its privileged status for teaching purposes on pragmatic and social grounds. A particularly difficult issue is that this distinction between linguistic and social criteria for language evaluation has not been clearly presented in the debate between relativist and more fundamentalist positions on what varieties should be approved and taught. The teacher's task in literacy instruction is both complicated and more effectively explicated by the extension of Standard English to include not just the form in which meaning is expressed but also the nature of that meaning itself. Finally, to regard Standard English as an instrument of domination is to invest its teaching with ethical dilemmas that have deep roots in opposing views of education as socialization or as liberation. Certain recommendations for literacy teaching are possible:

1. Regardless of what professional linguists and some professional educators say about parity among varieties of English, society in general values Standard English. Moreover, once the distinction between linguistic parity and communicative parity is clarified, it is hard to avoid the pragmatic conclusion that the teacher's responsibility is to help individuals to gain access to Standard English literacy. The challenge for curriculum developers is how to make the standard language available as a resource to all (Milroy & Milroy, 1985). This would be true whether Standard English were conceived to be a matter of surface forms or whether it were seen as a more complex discursive practice. Making the standard language available to all is unanimously supported by those who see education as a means of socializing young people into existing society and by those who see it as a force for transforming society. In the former case it is a means of penetrating the linguistic screens to higher levels of education and of surviving job interviews (Gilbert, 1980). In the latter case, mastery of Standard English is seen as the means by which subordinate groups can gain access to power and influence. Effective criticism of the dominant discourse requires, as Tuman (1987) suggested, a voice that itself commands literate discourse.

2. Although mastery of Standard English should be an aim of English language arts instruction, this aim should be based on a humane consideration of what is involved in moving from a non-standard language background to standard forms. Language can be seen as having two functions: the efficient communication of experience and thought, and the expression and definition of personal and community consciousness. There is tension between these functions. Teaching the standard language for reasons of efficient communication should not

mean the loss of individual identity and consciousness. Smitherman (1987) claimed that the indigenous language is the community's authentic voice and the foundation for the total linguistic repertoire. Macedo, in his discussion with Freire (Freire & Macedo, 1987), observed that "critical mastery of the standard dialect can never be achieved fully without the development of one's voice, which is contained within the social dialect that shapes one's reality" (p. 129). There is support here for early literacy teaching that accepts the language children bring to school from their homes and communities, and allows and encourages them to use it in speaking, writing, and even oral reading. In multicultural societies where English is dominant, this acceptance would apply to foreign languages as well as to non-mainstream varieties of English.

This acceptance still poses a difficult dilemma for the teacher, as Harman & Edelsky (1989) noted. First, to the extent that such approaches to early literacy succeed, it increases the risk that children will be alienated from their home communities. Literacy, in the sense of a "modern consciousness" orientation to the world, may estrange children from their roots. Second, at some point the road to literacy "forks." Invented spelling ceases to be charming; non-standard written expression meets disapproval. Children are expected to make the transition to conventional written forms; the initial acceptance of children's indigenous language is not "unconditional" (p. 398). Harman & Edelsky (1989) offer some suggested solutions to these "repercussions" of effective literacy teaching based in respect for linguistic pluralism. They suggest that all discourses be treated as interesting and legitimate objects of study, and that children be helped to examine critically their own and other forms of language, including Standard English.

3. Attempts to resolve the tension between language as an expression of consciousness and language as effective communication would seem to raise the question of teachers' attitudes to language variation. To maintain the fiction that Standard English is in some linguistic sense superior to other forms of expression, as much traditional literacy instruction either assumes or implies, is unhelpful. That all varieties of English are inherently sophisticated systems for expressing the experience of those who use them appropriately seems both scientifically defensible and instructionally helpful. To show children that Standard English is not a superior system, but merely the approved form for wider communication in the English-speaking world, would provide a healthy atmosphere in which sensitively to teach the approved language of literacy. As Cheshire (1982) recommended, to develop more positive attitudes to language variation among teachers, the first step would be

to help them gain information about the structure of non-standard dialects they might encounter in their classrooms (p. 64).

A FINAL WORD

This analysis of Standard English and its relation to literacy teaching might contribute increased civility to the frequently acerbic debate about teaching of the first language. That the aims of all interest groups include mastery of Standard English, and that differences among their proposals reside merely in the grounds on which that form of language should be granted primacy in instruction, should be reassuring. Attempts to implement the recommendations, difficult though they may be, might give more learners confidence that their own language is a valid starting point for building a linguistic repertoire that includes approved uses and forms in addition to and not at the expense of local forms. The learning of Standard English would be enhanced not by shibboleth hunting to maintain an intrinsically pure system against misuse, but by teaching Standard English as a socially authorized discourse within a particular culture. More humane instruction based on this premise would produce fewer literacy casualties.

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