

Students' Right to Their Own Language
Conference on College Composition and Communication

Explanation of Adoption

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To Readers of CCC:

This special issue of CCC includes the resolution on language adopted by members of CCCC in April 1974; the background statement explaining and supporting that resolution; and the bibliography that gives sources of some of the ideas presented in the background statement; besides offering those interested in the subject of language some suggested references for further reading. This publication climaxes two years of work, by dedicated members of CCCC, toward a position statement on a major problem confronting teachers of composition and communication: how to respond to the variety in their students' dialects.

A first draft of the resolution on language was presented to the Executive Committee at its meeting in March 1972, by a committee specially appointed by the officers in the fall of 1971 to prepare a position statement on students' dialects. After some amendments adopted by the Executive Committee at its meeting in November 1972, the resolution reads:

We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language -- the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language.

Realizing that the resolution would be controversial, and that it contained many assertions that could best be explained by reference to current research on dialects and usage, the Executive Committee appointed a special committee to draft a statement that would offer this explanatory background. The special committee reported at its New Orleans meeting in 1973, where its initial draft statement was thoroughly discussed. A revised draft was presented to and accepted by the Executive Committee at the Philadelphia NCTE meeting in November 1973. The resolution and background statement were then distributed to members of CCCC, and the resolution was considered at the regular business meeting in Anaheim in April 1974. It was adopted as the policy of CCCC by a vote of 79-20.

Because of the interest generated by the resolution and background statement, the officers decided that it should be sent to members in durable form, as a special issue of CCC, and should be made available to anyone interested in obtaining copies.

All members of CCCC, I think, owe much to the members of the committee that wrote this perceptive statement, which has won the praise of many linguists and rhetoricians. Special thanks are due to Richard Lloyd-Jones, who synthesized the contributions of different committee members into the final text you now have. Special thanks are due, also, to Melvin Butler of Southern University, chairperson of the special committee, whose untimely death prevented him from seeing the publication of the statement on which he and his fellow committee members worked so faithfully. This issue of CCC will be, we hope, a lasting tribute to his efforts.

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Introduction

American schools and colleges have, in the last decade, been forced to take a stand on a basic educational question: what should the schools do about the language habits of students who come from a wide variety of social, economic, and cultural backgrounds? The question is not new. Differences in language have always existed, and the schools have always wrestled with them, but the social upheavals of the 1960's, and the insistence of submerged minorities on a greater share in American society, have posed the question more insistently and have suggested the need for a shift in emphasis in providing answers. Should the schools try to uphold language variety, or to modify it, or to eradicate it?

The emotional nature of the controversy has obscured the complexities of the problem and hidden some of the assumptions that must be examined before any kind of rational policy can be adopted. The human use of language is not a simple phenomenon: sophisticated research in linguistics and sociology has demonstrated incontrovertibly that many long held and passionately cherished notions about language are misleading at best, and often completely erroneous. On the other hand, linguistic research, advanced as much of it is, has not yet produced any absolute, easily understood, explanation of how people acquire language or how habits acquired so early in life that they defy conscious analysis can be consciously changed. Nor is the linguistic information that is available very widely disseminated. The training of most English teachers has concentrated on the appreciation and analysis of literature, rather than on an understanding of the nature of language, and many teachers are, in consequence, forced to take a position on an aspect of their discipline about which they have little real information.

And if teachers are often uninformed, or misinformed, on the subject of language, the general public is even more ignorant. Lack of reliable information, however, seldom prevents people from discussing language questions with an air of absolute authority. Historians, mathematicians, and nurses all hold decided views on just what English teachers should be requiring. And through their representatives on Boards of Education and Boards of Regents, businessmen, politicians, parents, and the students themselves insist that the values taught by the schools must reflect the prejudices held by the public. The English profession, then, faces a dilemma: until public attitudes can be changed -- and it is worth remembering that the past teaching in English classes has been largely responsible for those attitudes -- shall we place our emphasis on what the vocal elements of the public think it wants or on what the actual available linguistic evidence indicates we should emphasize? Shall we blame the business world by saying, "Well, we realize that human beings use language in a wide variety of ways, but employers demand a single variety"?

Before these questions can be responsibly answered, English teachers at all levels, from kindergarten through college, must uncover and examine some of the assumptions on which our teaching has rested. Many of us have taught as though there existed somewhere a single American "standard English" which could be isolated, identified, and accurately defined. We need to know whether "standard English" is or is not in some sense a myth. We have ignored, many of us, the distinction between speech and writing and have taught the language as though the *talk* in any region, even the talk of speakers with prestige and power, were identical to edited *written* English.

We have also taught, many of us, as though the "English of educated speakers," the language used by those in power in the community, had an inherent advantage over other dialects as a means of expressing thought or emotion, conveying information, or analyzing concepts. We need to discover whether our attitudes toward "educated English" are based on some inherent superiority of the dialect itself or on the social prestige of those who use it. We need to ask ourselves whether our rejection of students who do not adopt the dialect most familiar to us is based on any real merit in our dialect or whether we are actually rejecting the students themselves, rejecting them because of their racial, social, and cultural origins.

And many of us have taught as though the function of schools and colleges were to erase differences. Should we, on the one hand, urge creativity and individuality in the arts and the sciences, take pride in the diversity of our historical development, and, on the other hand, try to obliterate all the differences in the way Americans speak and write? Our major emphasis has been on uniformity, in both speech and writing; would we accomplish more, both educationally and ethically, if we shifted that emphasis to precise, effective, and appropriate communication in diverse ways, whatever the dialect?

Students are required by law to attend schools for most of their adolescent years, and are usually required by curriculum makers to take English every one of those years, often including "developmental" or "compensatory" English well into college if their native dialect varies from that of the middle class. The result is that students who come from backgrounds where the prestigious variety of English is the normal medium of communication have built-in advantages that enable them to succeed, often in spite of and not because of, their schoolroom training in "grammar." They sit at the head of the class, are accepted at "exclusive" schools, and are later rewarded with positions in the business and social world. Students whose nurture and experience give them a different dialect are usually denied these rewards. As English teachers, we are responsible for what our teaching does to the self-image and the self-esteem of our students. We must decide what elements of our discipline are really important to us, whether we want to share with our students the richness of all varieties of language, encourage linguistic virtuosity, and say with Langston Hughes:

I play it cool and dig all jive
That's the reason I stay alive
My motto as I live and learn
Is to dig and be dug in return.

It was with these concerns in mind that the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, in 1972, passed the following resolution:

We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language -- the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language.

The members of the Committee realized that the resolution would create controversy and that without a clear explanation of the linguistic and social knowledge on which it rests, many people would find it incomprehensible. The members of the Executive Committee, therefore, requested a background statement which would examine some common misconceptions about language and dialect, define some key terms, and provide some suggestions for sounder, alternate approaches. What follows is not, then, an introductory course in linguistics, nor is it a teaching guide. It is, we hope, an answer to some of the questions the resolution will raise.

Understanding Language Varieties

A dialect is a variety of a language used by some definable group. Everyone has a personal version of language, an idiolect, which is unique, and closely related groups of idiolects make up dialects. By custom, some dialects are spoken. Others are written. Some are shared by the community at large. Others are confined to small communities, neighborhoods, or social groups. Because of this, most speakers, consciously or unconsciously, use more than one dialect. The need for varying dialects may arise from a speaker's membership in different age or educational groups. Or, it may arise from membership in groups tied to physical localities. The explanation of what a dialect is becomes difficult when we recognize that dialects are developed in response to many kinds of communication needs. And further complications occur because the user of a specific dialect, as a function of habit, can choose alternate forms which seem effective for given situations.

A dialect is the variety of language used by a group whose linguistic habit patterns both reflect and are determined by shared regional, social, or cultural perspectives. The user of a specific dialect employs the phonological (pronunciation), lexical (vocabulary), and syntactic patterns (word arrangement) and variations of the given "community." Because geographical and social isolation are among the causes of dialect differences, we can roughly speak about regional and social dialects. Regional differences in phonology may become quite evident when one hears a Bostonian say "pahk the cah" where a Midwesterner would say "parrk the car." Regional differences in vocabulary are also quite noticeable as in the words used throughout the country for a carbonated drink. Depending on where one is geographically, you can hear "soda," "soda water," "sweet soda," "soft drink," "tonic," "pop," or "cold drink." Regional differences in syntactic patterns are found in such statements as "The family is to home," and "The family is at home." Social differences can also be detected. Social differences in phonology are reflected in "goil" versus "girl." Social differences in vocabulary are reflected in the distinctions made between "restaurant" and "cafe." Syntactic phrases such as "those flowers" tend to have more prestige than "them flowers," and "their flowers" has more prestige than "they flowers."

It is not surprising to find two or more social dialects co-existing in a given region. In small towns where a clear social cleavage exists between the wealthier, more educated portion of the population and the mass of people, the difference may be reflected in their speechways. The local banker whose dialect reveals his group allegiance to the statewide financial community still is able to communicate easily with the local farmhand who may rarely cross the county line and whose linguistic habit patterns reveal different allegiances.

In many larger American cities people of the same ethnic origins tend to live in a single neighborhood and have a common culture and thus share a dialect. Through their clothing, games, and holidays they may preserve the values and customs of the "old country" or "back home." And in their restaurants, churches, schools, and homes, one may hear the linguistic values and customs of their heritage preserved. For example, a neighborhood group's cultural orientation may encourage its members to differentiate between action and intention in the immediate future and in a still-further immediate future through "I'm a-do it" and "I'm a'gonna do it." Yet, a neighborhood is not a country, so speakers of several dialects may mingle there and understand each other. Visitors with yet another heritage may render an approximation of such differentiation through "I'll do it now" and "I'll do it soon." Pride in cultural heritage and linguistic habit patterns need not lead either group to attack the other as they mingle and communicate.

Differences in dialects derive from events in the history of the communities using the language, not from supposed differences in intelligence or physiology. Although they vary in phonology, in vocabulary, and in surface grammatical patterns, the differences between neighboring dialects are not sufficiently wide to prevent full mutual comprehension among speakers of those dialects. That is to say, when speakers of a dialect of American English claim not to understand speakers of another dialect of the same language, the impediments are likely to be attitudinal. What is really the hearer's resistance to any unfamiliar form may be interpreted as the speaker's fault. For example, an unfamiliar speech rhythm and resulting pronunciation while ignoring the content of the message. When asked to respond to the content, they may be unable to do so and may accuse the speaker of being impossible to understand. In another situation, vocabulary differences may require that the hearers concentrate more carefully on contextual cues. If the word "bad" is being used as a term of praise, the auditor may have to pay unusual attention to context. Although the usual redundancies of speech ordinarily will provide sufficient cues to permit a correct interpretation, still the auditor has to work harder until he becomes accustomed to the differences. The initial difficulties of perception can be overcome and should not be confused with those psychological barriers to communication which may be generated by racial, cultural, and social differences and attitudes.

The manner in which children acquire language (and hence dialect) competence is unknown in spite of some research and much speculation on the subject. Theories ranging from the purely behavioristic to the highly metaphysical have been proposed. What is demonstrable, and hence known, is that children at very early ages begin to acquire performance skills in the dialect(s) used in their environment, and that this process is amazingly rapid compared to many other types of learning.

Before going to school, children possess basic competence in their dialects. For example, children of six know how to manipulate the rules for forming plurals in their dialects. In some dialects children add an "s" to the word to be pluralized as in "book/books." In some other dialects, plurality is signaled by the use of the preceding word as in "one book/ two book." But in either instance children have mastered the forms of plurality and have learned a principle of linguistic competence. It is important to remember that plurality signals for the nurture dialect reflect children's reality and will be their first choice in performance; plurality rules for another dialect may simply represent to them the rituals of someone else's linguistic reality.

In a specific setting, because of historical and other factors, certain dialects may be endowed with more prestige than others. Such dialects are sometimes called "standard" or "consensus" dialects. These designations of prestige are not inherent in the dialect itself, but are *externally imposed*, and the prestige of a dialect shifts as the power relationships of the speakers shift.

The English language at the beginning of its recorded history was already divided into distinct regional dialects. These enjoyed fairly equal prestige for centuries. However, the centralization of English political and commercial life at London gradually gave the dialect spoken there a preeminence over other dialects. This process was far advanced when printing was invented; consequently, the London dialect became the dialect of the printing press, and the dialect of the printing press became the so-called "standard" even though a number of oral readings of one text would reveal different pronunciations and rhythmic patterns across dialects. When the early American settlers arrived on this continent, they brought their British dialects with them. Those dialects were altered both by regional separation from England and concentration into sub-groups within this country as well as by contact with the various languages spoken by the Indians they found here and with the various languages spoken by the immigrants who followed.

At the same time, social and political attitudes formed in the old world followed to the new, so Americans sought to achieve linguistic marks of success as exemplified in what they regarded as proper, cultivated usage. Thus the dialect used by prestigious New England speakers early became the "standard" the schools attempted to teach. It remains, during our own time, the dialect that style books encourage us to represent in writing. The diversity of our cultural heritage, however, has created a corresponding language diversity and, in the 20th century, most linguists agree that there is no single, homogeneous American "standard." They also agree that, although the amount of prestige and power possessed by a group can be recognized through its dialect, no dialect is inherently good or bad.

The need for a written dialect to serve the larger, public community has resulted in a general commitment to what may be called "edited American English," that prose which is meant to carry information about our representative problems and interests. To carry such information through aural-oral media, "broadcast English" or "network standard" has been developed and given precedence. Yet these dialects are subject to change, too. Even now habit patterns from other types of dialects are being incorporated into them. Our pluralistic society requires many varieties of language to meet our multiplicity of needs.

Several concepts from modern linguistics clarify and define problems of dialect. Recent studies verify what our own casual observation should lead us to believe -- namely, that intelligence is not a factor in the child's acquisition of a basic language system. In fact, only when I.Q. is at about fifty or below does it become significant in retarding the rate and completeness with which children master their native spoken dialect. Dialect switching, however, becomes progressively more difficult as the speaker grows older. As one passes from infancy to childhood to adolescence and to maturity, language patterns become more deeply ingrained and more a part of the individual's self-concept; hence they are more difficult to alter.

Despite ingrained patterns characteristic of older people, every speaker of a language has a tremendous range of versatility, constantly making subtle changes to meet various situations. That is, speakers of a language have mastered a variety of ranges and levels of usage; no one's idiolect, however well established, is monolithic and inflexible. This ability of the individual speaker to achieve constant and subtle modulations is so pervasive that it usually goes unnoticed by the speaker and the hearers alike.

The question, then, is not whether students can make language changes, for they do so all the time, but whether they can step over the hazily defined boundaries that separate dialects. Dialect switching is complicated by many factors, not the least of which is the individual's own cultural heritage. Since dialect is not separate from culture, but an intrinsic part of it, accepting a new dialect means accepting a new culture; rejecting one's native dialect is to some extent a rejection of one's culture.

Therefore, the question of whether or not students *will* change their dialect involves their acceptance of a new -- and possibly strange or hostile -- set of cultural values. Although many students *do* become bidialectal, and many *do* abandon their native dialects, those who don't switch may have any of a number of reasons, some of which may be beyond the school's right to interfere.

In linguistic terms the normal teenager has *competence* in his native dialect, the ability to use all of its structural resources, but the actual *performance* of any speaker in any dialect always falls short of the totality implied by competence. No one can ever use all of the resources of a language, but one function of the English teacher is to activate the student's competence, that is, increase the range of his habitual performance.

Another insight from linguistic study is that differences among dialects in a given language are always confined to a limited range of *surface* features that have no effect on what linguists call *deep structure*, a term that might be roughly translated as "meaning." For instance, the following groups of sentences have minor surface differences, but obviously share meanings:

Herbert saw Hermione yesterday.
Herbert seen Hermione yesterday.

Mary's daddy is at home.
Mary's daddy is to home.
Mary daddy home.

Bill is going to the circus.
Bill, he's going to the circus.
Bill he going to the circus.

Preference for one form over another, then, is not based on meaning or even "exactness" of expression, but depends on social attitudes and cultural norms. The surface features are recognized as signs of social status.

Language Varieties and Learning

The linguistic concepts can bring a new understanding of the English teacher's function in dealing with reading and writing skills. Schools and colleges emphasize one form of language, the one we called Edited American English (EAE). It is the written language of the weekly news magazines, of almost all newspapers, and of most books. This variety of written English can be loosely termed a dialect, and it has pre-empted a great deal of attention in English classes.

If a speaker of any dialect of a language has competence (but not necessarily the ability to perform) in any other dialect of that language, then dialect itself cannot be posited as a reason for a student's failure to be able to read EAE. That is, dialect itself is not an impediment to reading, for the process of reading involves decoding to meaning (deep structure), not decoding to an utterance. Thus, the child who reads

Phillip's mother is in Chicago.

out loud as

Phillip mother in Chicago.

has read correctly, that is, has translated the surface of an EAE sentence into a meaning and has used his own dialect to give a surface form to that meaning. Reading, in short, involves the acquisition of meanings, not the ability to reproduce meanings in any given surface forms.

Reading difficulties may be a result of inadequate vocabulary, problems in perception, ignorance of contextual cues that aid in the reading process, lack of familiarity with stylistic ordering, interference from the emotional bias of the material, or combinations of these. In short, reading is so complicated a process that it provides temptations to people who want to offer easy explanations and solutions.

This larger view should make us cautious about the assumption that the students' dialect interferes with learning to read. Proceeding from such a premise, current "dialect" readers employ one of two methods. Some reading materials are written completely in the students' dialect with the understanding that later the students will be switched to materials written in the "standard" dialect. Other materials are written in companion sets of "Home" version and "School" version. Students first read through the "dialect" version, then through the *same* booklet written in "school" English. Both methods focus primarily on a limited set of surface linguistic features, as for example, the deletion of *-ed* in past tense verbs or the deletion of *-r* in final position.

To cope with our students' reading problem, then, we cannot confine ourselves to the constricting and ultimately ineffectual dialect readers designed for the "culturally deprived." We should structure and select materials geared to complex reading problems and oriented to the experience and sophistication of our students. An urban eight-year-old who has seen guns and knives in a street fight may not be much interested in reading how Jane's dog Spot dug in the neighbor's flower bed. Simply because "Johnny can't read" doesn't mean "Johnny is immature" or "Johnny can't think." He may be bored. Carefully chosen materials will certainly expose students to new horizons and should increase their awareness and heighten their perceptions of the social reality. Classroom reading materials can be employed to further our students' reading ability and, at the same time, can familiarize them with other varieties of English.

Admittedly, the kinds of materials we're advocating are, at present, difficult to find, but some publishers are beginning to move in this direction. In the meantime, we can use short, journalistic pieces, such as those found on the editorial pages of newspapers, we might rely on materials composed by our students, and we can certainly write our own materials. The important fact to remember is that speakers in any dialect encounter essentially the same difficulties in reading, and thus we should not be so much interested in changing our students' dialect as in improving their command of the reading process.

The ability to write EAE is quite another matter, for learning to write a given dialect, like learning to speak a dialect, involves the activation of areas of competence. Further, learning to write in any dialect entails the mastery of such conventions as spelling and punctuation, surface features of the written language. Again, native speakers of *any* dialect of a language have virtually total competence in all dialects of that language, but they may not have learned (and may never learn) to punctuate or spell, and, indeed, may not even learn the mechanical skill of forming letters and sequences of letters with a writing instrument. And even if they do, they may have other problems in transferring ease and fluency in speech to skill in writing.

Even casual observation indicates that dialect as such plays little if any part in determining whether a child will ultimately acquire the ability to write EAE. In fact, if speakers of a great variety of American dialects do master EAE -- from Senator Sam Ervin to Senator Edward Kennedy, from Ernest Hemingway to William Faulkner -- there is no reason to assume that dialects such as urban black and Chicano impede the child's ability to learn to write EAE while countless others do not. Since the issue is not the capacity of the dialect itself, the teacher can concentrate on building up the students' confidence in their ability to write.

If we name the essential functions of writing as expressing oneself, communicating information and attitudes, and discovering meaning through both logic and metaphor, then we view variety of dialects as an advantage. In self-expression, not only one's dialect but one's idiolect is basic. In communication one may choose roles which imply certain dialects, but the decision is a social one, for the dialect itself does not limit the information which can be carried, and the attitudes may be most clearly conveyed in the dialect the writer finds most congenial. Dialects are all equally serviceable in logic and metaphor.