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Teaching from Difference

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As a linguistic anthropologist, I was disappointed but not surprised to read the negative reactions to Philip Walzer's article "2 educators offer a new way to teach grammar" (2006). The authors of these opinions reveal many uninformed views concerning language use, and are an excellent example of the way language ideology can bias people against what are otherwise effective teaching strategies.

The most prominent fallacy in their responses is the misconception that there is only *one* version of English ("There are not two types of English." says one; "there is no such thing as "informal English." says another). This is simply false. Linguists call these different levels of formality *registers*. At home we use informal registers, speckling our speech with *gonna*'s and *runnin*'s; when giving a public talk, we use stylized registers, filling our speech with learn'd vocabulary. But *nobody* actually speaks the Standard American English (SAE) they all purport to, and if they did – stiling their speech with enunciated *runnING*'s or preposition-fronting *with whom*'s – they would be looked at strangely.

The varieties of English go further than just register. In SAE, the sentences "Have you a pen?" and "The committee have come to a conclusion." are grammatically incorrect. Yet both are standard for speakers of British English – nobody would challenge their correctness. There are many more Briticisms that Americans would find completely undecipherable. Similarly, African American English (AAE, the "informal" English to which Swords and Wheeler refer) is just another sometimes-undecipherable dialect of English. It would be foolish to deny that these varieties exist.

Furthermore there is nothing *inherently* incorrect or depraved about any of these varieties. All dialects of all languages follow regular patterns; if they did not, we would not be able to communicate using them. The logic of those patterns varies from one language variety to the next. In the British sentence above, the verb ‘have’ agrees with the word ‘committee’ semantically (a committee consists of plural members), rather than via the singular number of the noun. Likewise, AAE uses double negation for semantic emphasis, rather than to adhere to rules of logical scope. French is another language that uses double negation. Any French speaker would be insulted (and rightly so) if you were to call their language illogical, yet somehow people feel it is appropriate to level the same accusation against AAE. Many features of AAE grammar are in fact *more* regular and *more* expressive than SAE, such as dropping the strange and irregular –s in the third person singular verb, or using up to six different forms for talking about actions in the present tense, whereas SAE has only two, and must fumble pathetically over extra words to circumlocute.

The truth is that what makes a language variety “correct” or “incorrect” is the sociopolitical context in which it is spoken. When one says that a language variety is bad, he means that he views the communities which speak that variety as undesirable. Put simply, these language protectionists aren’t taking issue with the language variety itself – they’re taking issue with the people who speak it. All three opinion pieces were far more interested in championing their own affluent speech variety as correct than showing why AAE is inherently wrong (and likely could not if pressed). SAE has gained its infallibility for no other reason than that it is spoken by the most affluent members of our society, whereas the varieties spoken by blacks, poor immigrants, and poor rural whites are called slovenly because they are not. When it comes to language, it is unfortunately the case that might makes right.

To give just one example, the opinion authors belie their ignorance of the many different ways cultures approach literacy. They forget they once had to learn the literacy skills they have, like asking factual questions (“*what*-questions”) while reading, or structuring a paragraph linearly with the thesis first (Heath 2009). But being literate means different things to different societies, and even many majority-white communities in the States approach literature with *who*- and *why*-questions rather than *what*-questions. Other cultures prefer to reserve their theses for last, and approach their main point tangentially (e.g. the Chinese). These different ‘ways of taking’ from a text are skills that we must be socialized into. Dominant white communities, because of a power differential, have the ability to exalt the skills their communities value most, ignoring the strengths of children who are extremely well-developed in others.

Utilizing this power differential to such an effect is what Antonio Gramsci calls linguistic *hegemony*, essentially an attempt to homogenize by convincing those of lower socioeconomic status of the rightness or naturalness of a way of thinking (or in this particular case, way of speaking, writing, and taking information from a text) (Hill 2009). This particular way of thinking is called a *language ideology*, or set of beliefs about language articulated by its speakers as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use (Kroskrity 2009). Here, the opinion authors’ linguistic ideologies seem clear, and are used to justify a broader form of cultural hegemony against immigrant or black minorities who they wish to assimilate.

It is vital to realize that the policies which stem from dominant language ideologies actually serve to *widen and reinforce the power differential* between the dominant culture and the minority one. These ideologies, when adopted by minority groups, do not empower them in any way as policymakers like to believe, but rather contribute to their own impoverishment and oppression. For example, the immigrant mother who believes that SAE is the only acceptable

language variety in the States and refuses to speak her native language to her child – just as the policymakers would have it – deprives that child of *critical* linguistic input (Zentella 1997). The mother herself does not speak SAE well enough to provide an adequate example for her child, nor will the child ever establish a solid foundation in the native tongue. The result is a student that has not been fully socialized into either language, and thus has no basis on which to build more advanced language skills. In her book *Growing Up Bilingual*, Zentella shows explicitly how this can come to pass via a case study of a Puerto Rican girl named Isabel growing up in New York (1997). Isabel spoke a Spanishized form of English, and constantly struggled to master English (but failing because of insurmountable economic obstacles) while never building a solid foundation in Spanish. Isabel had a keen awareness of the importance of English, but by adopting the linguistic ideology of those in power, failed to appreciate the extent to which her English could improve if her Spanish had been treated as a legitimate language variety and taught to her from an early age. As Zentella skillfully words it,

“The language learning capacity of humans does not function hydraulically...that is, it does not require that the brain be emptied of Spanish in order to learn English. Instead, a learner makes use of her first language in order to achieve proficiency in a second language...Thus, the time spent on Spanish in a bilingual classroom not only helps children understand the lesson, it also helps them learn English faster.” (Zentella 1997, 275).

In general, then, dominant and minority communities will be enculturated and socialized into their languages differently. The entire process of language acquisition is a social one, where we learn appropriate manners of interaction, ways of speaking, and ways of taking from a text (Ochs and Schieffelin 2009). For one community to claim ideological superiority ignores the need to address the ideologies of the others if their acculturation is to be successful. Furthermore, Baquedano-López demonstrates that the denial of alternative language ideologies (through such policies as English-only laws) destroys the ability of those targeted to construct their own unique

identity, forcing them to assume identities in a majority context with which they have little practice in navigating and few of the required social skills to bring to bear (2009). Their chances of success in such situations are slim at best. It is easy to see that this hegemonic type of practice is not just ineffectual and self-defeating but also harmful to those having it imposed upon them.

It seems to me, then, that the opinion authors have little real concern for the well-being of these students, and are more concerned with ‘protecting’ (as if the most dominant language variety in the world were somehow endangered) a central marker of their identity – Standard American English. This is evidenced by the fact that they willingly ignore the 97% pass rate – an unheard of figure for minorities – on standardized testing. Success on these tests is key to accessing higher education and greater social mobility, yet the authors ignore such successes when achieved via a competing language ideology from a group which they see as inferior. As James Milroy put it, “...the last bastion of overt social discrimination will continue to be a person’s use of language.” (Milroy, 65).

In conclusion, Swords and Wheeler have the right approach. By affirming the linguistic variety spoken by non-dominant communities, they recognize the need for these children to navigate both the dominant and the non-dominant cultures. By giving them a base in one language, Swords and Wheeler can better socialize these children into a second. As Zentella puts it, we should concentrate on teaching from strengths and value difference as an opportunity to teach (Zentella 1997, 280-81).

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