

Changing Misconceptions About Dialect Diversity: The Role of Public Education

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Introduction

Concern for educating the public about the nature of language is hardly new. A century ago, one of the founders of modern linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure (1916/1986) asserted that “the study of language is in some degree or other the concern of everyone,” and that the primary task of the linguist is to “denounce absurd notions, prejudices, illusions, fantasies” about language and “to eradicate them as completely as possible” (p. 7). Furthermore, the field of sociolinguistics has spent a half century attempting to change misconceptions about language diversity. While there has been some progress in changing perceptions of dialect diversity among professionals in allied disciplines, public controversies about language differences—ranging from the deficit–difference debates of the 1960s (Labov, 1972) through the Ebonics controversy of the 1990s (Baugh, 2000; Rickford, 1999; Wolfram 1998) to linguistic profiling in the 2000s (Baugh 2003)—have taught us that little has changed in terms of the public perception of language diversity.

There are several reasons for the persistence of entrenched attitudes about language diversity in American society. To begin with, beliefs about language are among the most deeply rooted ideologies in society, rivaling religion, morality, and nationalism in terms of partisanship. Several decades after sociolinguists started their active campaign for linguistic equality, Lippi-Green (1997) could still observe that “discrimination based on language variation is so commonly accepted, so widely perceived as appropriate, that it must be seen as the last back door to discrimination” (p. 73). A second reason for sluggish progress in changing public opinion is that there are no established traditions for public education

about language diversity; such education simply does not fit within current paradigms of informal or formal education. Notwithstanding the current emphasis on multicultural curricula, the topic of language diversity is still largely absent from formal educational curricula. Finally, there is a notable absence of programming featuring language diversity in public media such as TV and radio. As Bell and Garrett (1998) note, “The media reflect and influence the formation and expression of culture, politics and social life” (p. 4) while they offer “a rich source of readily accessible data for research and teaching” (p. 3). Programs about language diversity, however, rarely appear on TV or radio, unless they are related to a controversial crisis.

Guiding Principles of Public Education

The challenge of providing public education about linguistic diversity is to capture and present information that is compelling and accessible to a broad-based audience. Like any program in the media, programs on language diversity need to be guided by principles about what will attract audiences who have choices about what they watch or read. The principles adopted by the North Carolina Language and Life Project in its audiovisual productions on language diversity are described below.

Language and Human Interest

Language differences are naturally intriguing; people notice and discuss them. Aspects of language variation are often so transparent that it can be assumed that most viewers will readily notice and comment on these differences. Television viewers, for example, enjoy seeing and hearing diverse language varieties in lively, natural settings, and will stay tuned if language diversity is presented in a generally appealing format.

Language and Entertainment

The notion that language material should be entertaining may seem somewhat superficial to those accustomed to classroom instruction and academic presentations focused on the transmission of knowledge, but language-related media productions do indeed compete with other types of entertainment. One of the reasons that the documentary *American Tongues* (Alvarez & Kolker, 1986) has been effective for 25 years is its entertainment value. More importantly, the striking dialogue and humor serve as a nonconfrontational way to open candid discussions about language differences at the heart of linguistic diversity.

Language and Personal Relevance

Virtually everyone has a personal story of miscomprehension, misperception, or misjudgment based on language differences. In many cases, these experiences have come to symbolize interaction with different social groups and are one of the first items commented on when characterizing groups and individuals. Effective media presentations illustrate how language differences are relevant to people's lives on a personal, interactional level.

Language and Sociohistorical Legacy

Language cannot be isolated from other cultural and historical contexts. One can hardly study culture and history without considering the iconic role of language in the sociohistorical and sociocultural development of diverse populations. As one Cherokee language speaker put it in *Voices of North Carolina* (Hutcheson, 2005), "Language is culture and culture is language." When language diversity is associated with other aspects of history and culture, such as settlement history and folkway traditions like music and dancing, a meaningful context for broader cultural and social issues is established for the presentation of language differences. Although the general public may neither understand nor value the obsession of linguists with technical structural detail, people can appreciate and identify with the symbolic role that language plays in historical, regional, and cultural developments.

Positive Presentation

Although language issues can be highly symbolic of cultural, political, and educational controversies, positively framed presentations about language differences

have a greater likelihood of being received by the public than do presentations that directly confront seemingly unassailable ideologies. Associating linguistic issues with positive cultural images, avoiding red-flag labels and hot-button controversies, and using strategic sequencing in the presentation of information can foster the reception of potentially controversial linguistic ideas (Wolfram, in press). For example, a documentary on North Carolina language varieties (Hutcheson, 2005) used strategic sequencing, positive narrative framing, visual historical landmark associations, and upbeat local music to introduce the subject of African American English, the most controversial dialect in the United States. African American English was intentionally introduced following the presentation of two regional varieties of English (Outer Banks and Appalachian) and two other sociocultural language varieties (Cherokee and Lumbee English). The synergistic effect of the visual images, the music, and the narrative set a highly positive image of place, setting, and language.

Inductive Education

The most effective and permanent education always takes place when learners discover truths for themselves. Inductive, incremental education that begins with a positive, nonthreatening profile of language diversity provides a much more effective opportunity for an authentic discussion of language issues than do direct statements of opposition to entrenched ideologies. Furthermore, deductive linguistic proclamations by talking-head experts about the legitimacy of language diversity rarely lead to the honest discussion of language differences. In the final analysis, effective public education takes place when audiences come to understand the truth about language diversity for themselves.

Venues of Public Education

Programs in public education may range from teachable moments arising from current news events to targeted formal education programs adopted by schools and other institutions. News events, such as the Ebonics controversy of the 1990s, and instances of linguistic profiling in the last decade provide relatively immediate, spontaneous opportunities for radio and television interviews, op-ed columns, and popular articles in trade journals and books focused on language diversity. At the same time, there are many everyday events related to language differences that may be vetted through

the media. The public presentations of linguist Geoff Nunberg are exemplary in this respect; he does a regular feature on language on the National Public Radio show *Fresh Air* and has written numerous commentaries for the Sunday *New York Times* “Week in Review” and other periodicals. The relative popularity of the web-based Language Log, language-focused channels on YouTube, and special-interest groups on Facebook, Twitter, and other virtual social networks also underscore the potential for disseminating information about language diversity to the public. The advantages of immediacy afforded by these venues are apparent, but they do not replace conventional media outlets such as television and radio.

Television documentaries and DVDs offer a more enduring venue for public education, but only a few have been produced for widespread broadcasting on public television, notably *American Tongues* (Alvarez & Kolker, 1986), *The Story of English* (Cran & MacNeil, 1986), and *Do You Speak American?* (MacNeil & Cran, 2005). The earlier documentaries are now quite dated, but short clips available on YouTube are still relevant and can be used quite effectively in discussing language diversity. Similarly, the recent documentary *Do You Speak American?* is effective when clips are used selectively (Reaser & Adger, 2007). The North Carolina Language and Life Project (NCLLP) has produced a number of documentaries offering portraits of regional and ethnic varieties of English that have aired on national and local affiliates of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) (Cullinan, in press; Hutcheson, 2001, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2009; Rowe & Grimes, 2007) and on the Documentary Channel, in DVD format. Selected clips are also available on YouTube. Although the programs mentioned above were produced in high-quality, professional formats for television, current video-editing software available at most universities makes these types of projects quite feasible for students and faculty who wish to produce local documentaries at modest expense. For local audiences, such locally produced videos may be just as effective as professionally produced documentaries in terms of disseminating information about language diversity.

In recent years, linguists have taken advantage of museum exhibitions to educate the public about language and culture, from the National Museum of Language to community-based museums featuring local language, culture, and history. With the cooperation of community-based preservation societies and museums,

the NCLLP has constructed several permanent exhibits that highlight language diversity (Gruendler & Wolfram, 1997, 2001), as well as several limited-time exhibits (Vaughn & Grimes, 2007). There are also outreach and engagement activities related to popular writing, ranging from articles and popular trade books (Rickford & Rickford, 2000; Tannen, 1990, 2006; Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1997; Wolfram & Ward, 2006) to collaborative, community-based dialect dictionaries (e.g., Locklear, Wolfram, Schilling-Estes, & Dannenberg, 1999; Schilling-Estes, Estes, & Premilovac, 2002).

Curricular Programs

Although informal public education is critical for changing popular misconceptions about language diversity, it cannot stand alone. It must be accompanied by the regular integration of such information into the public school curriculum. Unfortunately, formal education about dialect variation is still a relatively novel and, in most cases, controversial idea. This author has taught school-based dialect awareness programs since the early 1990s (Wolfram, Adger, & Detwyler, 1992) and has taught a program annually on Ocracoke for almost two decades, but school-based programs have still not progressed beyond a pilot stage (Reaser, 2006; Sweetland, 2006). Reaser and Wolfram (2007) developed a middle-school social studies curriculum that connects with language arts; similar units could be designed for other levels of K–12 education as well. The examination of dialect differences offers great potential for students to investigate the relationship between linguistic and social diversity, including diversity grounded in geography, history, and cultural beliefs and practices. There are a number of creative ways in which students can examine how language and culture go hand in hand as they address language diversity.

One of the greatest advantages of a curriculum on dialects is its potential for tapping the linguistic resources of students’ own communities. In addition to classroom lessons, students learn by going into the community to collect current dialect data. In most cases, the speech characteristics of the local community make dialects come alive in a way that is unmatched by textbook knowledge. The NCLLP program fits naturally with North Carolina’s standard course of study for eighth-grade social studies, which includes the curricular themes of culture and diversity, historic perspectives,

and geographical relationships as they relate to North Carolina. In addition, the dialect awareness curriculum helps fulfill social studies competency goals such as these:

Describe the roles and contributions of diverse groups, such as American Indians, African Americans, European immigrants, landed gentry, tradesmen, and small farmers to everyday life in colonial North Carolina. (Competency Goal 1.07)

Assess the importance of regional diversity on the development of economic, social, and political institutions in North Carolina. (Competency Goal 8.04).

Aligning materials with state-based competency goals helps teachers accomplish their goals for their students, both in terms of the standard course of study and more abstract goals, such as teaching students to be better writers (Sweetland, 2006). Students are not the only ones who profit from the study of dialect diversity. Teachers also find that some of their stereotypes about languages are challenged and that they become more knowledgeable and enlightened about language diversity in the process of teaching the curriculum (Reaser, 2006).

Two research studies specifically address the effect of curricular dialect awareness programs on student attitudes, content knowledge, and the acquisition of Standard English. The first, by Reaser (2006), measured the effect of a dialect awareness curriculum (Reaser & Wolfram, 2007) in middle-school classrooms on the basis of a pre- and posttest that included true-false questions about language knowledge (e.g., Dialects are rule-governed and patterned) and language attitudes (e.g., Some people are too lazy to learn Standard English). Responses to all of the survey questions showed change in the direction of increased tolerance toward and/or knowledge about dialect diversity, and 98% of the students involved in the study reported that they had learned something surprising about dialects that would change the way that they thought about language. The curriculum has now been endorsed by the Department of Instruction in North Carolina and made available online for teachers throughout the state.

The second study to address the effects of dialect awareness programs (Sweetland, 2006) examined the

question of whether such programs lead to gains in the acquisition of Standard American English. The study was based on a 10-week elementary language arts curriculum that integrated sociolinguistic activities with contemporary language arts pedagogy to improve writing achievement. The program used multicultural children's literature to teach about regional and social language variation and incorporated dialect-based grammar instruction (contrastive analysis) into the writing process. The results showed that children who participated in the sociolinguistic writing process curriculum demonstrated "greater skill in Standard English than peers" (Sweetland, 2006, p. 235). The results of these studies underscore the positive effect of dialect awareness programs, both for their own sake and for the enhancement of the acquisition of Standard American English (Rickford, 2002; Rickford & Rickford, 2007; Siegel, 2005).

Dividends of Public Education

An important outcome of formal and informal public education programs about dialect diversity is their entry into the mainstream of discussions about language differences. For all of the natural interest that language piques, there has been little informed public discussion of language as a reflection of cultural and historical legacy. Though it may seem like a relatively minor and incidental step, mainstreaming the discussion of language differences constitutes a major accomplishment. Entire television channels are dedicated to history, geography, and the public interest, but language diversity is rarely represented despite its emblematic role in the development of peoples and cultures in time and place.

Another benefit of public education about language diversity is the opportunity to confront dominant language ideologies—in particular, the principle of linguistic subordination, in which nonmainstream varieties of a language are dismissed or stigmatized. Knowledge is power in exposing language myths, prejudice, and discrimination.

Finally, one of the practical outcomes of public education is an understanding that language diversity is integral to and symbolic of a full range of cultural behaviors based on region, history, culture, ethnicity, identity, and personhood. In the final analysis, to understand language differences is to understand human behavior.

Realistically, pervasive attitudinal and social change related to language will not come quickly. It will take generations, as does any change involving fundamental belief systems. But the door of change is starting to crack open, and the emergence of a range of formal and informal educational programs can only help open the door wider to changes in our understanding of language diversity.

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Resources

Language Log

Language Log is a collaborative language blog created in 2003 by Mark Liberman and Geoffrey Pullum. Contributors include many well-known linguists, who blog about language-related topics of their choosing.

<http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/>

<http://twitter.com/languagelog>

National Museum of Language

The National Museum of Language, which opened to the public on May 3, 2008, examines the history, impact, and the art of language.

<http://www.languagemuseum.org>

North Carolina's Standard Course for Eighth-Grade Geography

North Carolina's standard course of study for eighth-grade social studies includes themes of culture, diversity, historic awareness, and geographic relationships. The dialect awareness curriculum described in this digest helps fill some of the related competency goals (see 1.07 and 8.04).

<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/curriculum/socialstudies/scos/2003-04/050eighthgrade>

Talking NC: Education Media from the North Carolina Language and Life Project

Talking NC is the media store of the North Carolina Language and Life Project at North Carolina State University. It features award-winning documentary films and audio recordings, related books, and other products.

<http://talkingnc.com>

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