



Magazine Feature

EVERYONE HAS AN ACCENT

A North Carolina professor advocates teaching respect for dialects.

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Tanya's family has finally settled in. Now, after the long trek across the country, she faces one more hurdle -- the first day of school. Tanya takes a deep breath as she enters a new 5th grade classroom, full of unfamiliar faces and voices.

The teacher senses her awkward isolation and steps forward. "Class, we have a new student who moved here over the summer." He smiles at Tanya. "Would you like to tell us a little bit about where you're from?"

Tanya begins to speak, but a buzz erupts in the classroom before she has finished her first sentence.

"You have a funny accent!"

"Where did you learn to talk?"

"Did you hear how she said her name?"

Even the teacher can hardly keep from chuckling at the way Tanya speaks, though he hushes the others quickly. No one seems to notice Tanya's bewilderment or her withdrawal at the assault on her speech. And no one bothers to acknowledge or address the prejudice reflected in the responses.

Tanya's experience is repeated every day in classrooms across the country. The Appalachian child from Kentucky who moves to Detroit, the urban child from Boston who moves to rural Texas, the Native American child from the Navajo reservation who moves to Tucson -- all are subject to charges that they "talk funny."

Everyone notices dialects, and lots of people seem to be fascinated by them. But is it simply a matter of curiosity? What really lies beneath the laughter and the impetuous comments people make about how others speak?

THE DIALECT GAME

Linguists use the term *dialect* to denote patterns in the way people use language. These patterns include pronunciation (or "accent"), vocabulary and grammatical structures that reflect the user's cultural and regional background. Dialect is not limited to spoken language; users of American Sign Language employ variations that reflect their regional and social backgrounds as well.

The lingering firestorm over Ebonics in the Oakland, Calif., schools a few years ago suggests that there is a lot at stake when it comes to dialect differences, in education and elsewhere. Pay attention to the labels used to describe "accents" or dialects in the media, in the classroom, and in social gatherings everywhere -- *funny, thick, bad, foreign, hick, weird, corrupt*. A moment's reflection exposes the level of judgment and prejudice about dialects and, by extension, their speakers. Consider the following recorded examples:

- "They hear this Brooklyn accent, they think you grew up in the slum, hanging out on the corner."
- "Wisconsin people, they're really bad, they sound like they're Norwegian."
- "It's ignorant, it sounds ignorant, they gonna hear this and say, 'Look at them two beautiful girls; if they'd keep their mouth shut they'd be great.'"
-- *from the video American Tongues*
- "What makes me feel that Blacks tend to be ignorant is that they fail to see that the word is spelled A-S-K, not A-X."
-- *from "The Oprah Winfrey Show"*

The societal norm seems to be that attitudes about language differences don't even have to be disguised. Well-intentioned people who would be hesitant to make overt statements about race, gender or class openly mock and disparage language differences. In *English with an Accent*, author Rosina Lippi-Green says that dialect discrimination is "so commonly accepted, so widely perceived as appropriate, that it must be seen as the last back door to discrimination. And the door stands wide open."

A recent column published in newspapers across the United States responded to the recognition of dialect differences with the headline, "There's a word for it; the word is 'wrong.'" Some people would like to stamp out dialects, imagining the development of a homogenized "standard" English devoid of any local character. But present studies of dialects in the United States actually show that, despite forceful efforts to rid students of their variant speech patterns, some dialects are becoming more, rather than less, distinctive.

TRUTH AND FICTION ABOUT DIALECTS

There is a popular belief that dialects are simply corruptions of "real" or "good" English that reflect basic ignorance of well-known grammar rules. But the truth is that dialect structures are in themselves quite natural and neutral. Their social impact comes solely from their association with different groups in our society. If people belong to a socially oppressed group, they can count on having their language stigmatized; if they belong to a prestigious group, their language will carry prestige value.

Most people are unaware that a few centuries ago, the pronunciation of ask as ax was perfectly acceptable among the socially elite classes of England. And early masters of English literature, including Chaucer, routinely used the "double negative" -- as in *They didn't go nowhere* -- without any fear of sounding illogical or conveying unintended meanings. Contrary to the common belief that standards of language are fixed forever, they respond, like any other aspect of culture, to the dynamics of social change.

Within this fluid state, all dialects involve intricate, detailed patterning governed by the scientific laws of language structure. The western Pennsylvanian who says *The house needs painted*, the Southerner who pronounces pin and pen the same but bit and bet differently, and the urban African American who says *They always be acting nice*, all follow specifically detailed patterns of their dialect that can be captured and described in terms of specific "rules" or "laws" of language.

Variation in speech is at the core of social and historical identity, interwoven into the fabric of cultural differences. Would the isolated Appalachians really be as Appalachian without the lingering voices of their Scots-Irish heritage? Would urban African American preachers be as effective with their congregations if they used only the structures of standard English in uninterrupted monologues? Would young Northern Californians seem as urbane without the sentence intonation that makes their statements sound like questions?

Some English dialects are more readily recognizable than others and evoke more comment, but the fact remains: *It is impossible to speak English without speaking some dialect of the language*. Skilled dialectologists trained to detect the nuances of language variation affirm that the notion of a "pure" English, safeguarded in dictionaries and grammar books, evaporates as soon as we open our mouths to speak.

The misinformation and misunderstanding about dialects in our society is not simply a matter of innocent folklore. People's intelligence, capability and character are often judged on the basis of a sentence, a few phrases or even a single word. Studies show that children as young as 3 to 5 years of age show

strong preferences -- and prejudices -- based on dialect variations among speakers. Teachers sometimes classify students' speech as "deficient" when it is simply different from the testing norm. In the workplace, perfectly capable workers who speak non-mainstream dialects may be denied occupational opportunity because they "just don't sound right for the job."

It gets more personal: Views about dialects also affect how we feel about ourselves. As one speaker from New York City put it, "It's not them feeling superior, it's me feeling inferior, and I hate when I feel like that. And when I speak, uh, horribly, I feel stupid and don't have confidence in myself, and it's holding me back." If someone has been told enough times that she speaks badly, it's just a matter of time before she starts believing that she is as worthless as her speech.

WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

For over a decade now, a small group of linguists and educators have been piloting programs specifically designed to instruct students about dialect. The goal of these "dialect awareness" programs is straightforward: to provide accurate information about the nature of dialect differences and promote understanding of the role of dialects in American society.

Learning about dialects is hardly at odds with the acquisition of standard English grammar. In fact, part of the education process involves mastering appropriate styles of speech for different occasions, including those situations where standard English is required. At the same time, growing evidence supports the conclusion that respect for and knowledge of a student's community dialect aids rather than hinders the acquisition of standard English.

The social and educational ramifications of dialect awareness programs can be far-reaching, as students as well as teachers confront stereotypes, prejudices and misconceptions about dialects. In pilot classrooms ranging from 4th grade through secondary schools, in locations as diverse as central Baltimore and isolated Ocracoke Island on North Carolina's Outer Banks, these programs teach students the truth -- and the consequences -- of dialect differences.

Since nothing is more central to education and human behavior than language, dialect awareness programs should not be a tangential adjunct to so-called "core" knowledge. In light of pervasive misunderstandings about dialects -- as well as the illusion of a homogeneous "broadcast English" -- it is essential to provide instruction specifically targeting language diversity at the local, regional and national levels. It is a curious and even dangerous omission when the unique sounds of a culture are silenced.

The current pilot programs on dialects are interwoven with social studies, language arts, history and science. In each of these subject areas, some of the most central issues of social equity are associated with variation in language use. Teachers can readily adapt some of the dialect awareness strategies to their existing curricula, emphasizing the need for understanding and tolerance.

One important theme in dialect awareness programs, particularly in social studies and language arts, is the "naturalness" of dialect variation. As students listen to a range of representative regional, class and ethnic speech samples, comparing them with each other and with their own dialects, they can appreciate the reality of diverse speech traditions. In the pilot programs, students view vignettes of real-life situations from the popular video documentary *American Tongues* (see Resources), exposing them not only to dialect differences but also to some of the raw prejudices about dialects.

Teachers then raise questions for discussion: "What do you know about dialects?" "How do you feel about them?" "How are dialects portrayed in the media?" Such discussion often causes students to confront the stereotypes and prejudices that often surround specific speech patterns. It is not surprising that an evaluation of the dialect awareness curriculum on Appalachian English conducted a few years ago in Western Carolina showed that the most-cited learning experience was concern for the "unfairness" of dialect prejudice. As one 8th grader put it, "It's not right for people to make fun of the way people speak, and I will try to do that less."

Another important theme concerns the patterning of dialect. In order to identify and classify detailed dialect patterns, students must use cognitive skills and techniques of inquiry that link language arts with the science curriculum. For example, a dialect awareness lesson might require students to analyze sets of dialect data -- such as information about words and phrases for the second person plural pronoun (e.g., *yous*, *you'ns* and *y'all*).

On the basis of the data sets presented or collected, students must determine the specific language pattern, or "rule," that describes precisely the patterning of the structure. In the process, they formulate a hypothesis about the language "law" and confirm or disconfirm it on the basis of its generality and predictability -- the cornerstone of scientific inquiry.

Other dialect awareness activities focus on specific structures in a range of regional and ethnic dialects to illustrate these regular patterns -- such as the use in Appalachia of the *uh* sound (usually transcribed as *a-*) before words ending in *ing* (*She's a-fishing today*), the use of *be* in urban African American English to denote habitual activities (*She be fishing all the time*), or the absence of the plural *-s* inflection (as in *four mile*) in rural Southern dialects.

To discover how natural and inevitable dialect differences are -- and how they change over time and place -- young dialectologists can collect examples of distinctive speech in their own environment. For example, virtually all communities have some local and regional names for over-the-counter foods (*sub, hoagie, hero*) and drinks (*soda, pop, cola*). From such a simple starting point, the inquiry can take on wider dimensions as students interview parents, grandparents, friends and others about local words and work together in documenting, organizing and analyzing the findings.

Students begin to grasp the inner workings of dialects most effectively when they get a chance to observe and analyze their own speech patterns alongside those of others. Urban African American children revel in the patterning of Appalachian forms while learning about the use of *be* in their own dialect. At the same time, students in isolated Southeastern coastal communities learn new respect for the use of *be* in urban African American English while learning about their own use of *weren't* for *wasn't*, as in *I weren't there* or *She weren't ready*.

The opportunity to compare and contrast dialects offers students much more than a lesson in grammar. As an 8th grader from the unique Ocracoke dialect area of North Carolina's Outer Banks put it, "I never realized that our dialect rules were so complex. It makes me proud that I learned about my dialect."

For her teacher, Gail Hamilton, dialect studies have opened a new window on old assumptions. "I didn't realize there was a pattern," she says. "As an English teacher, when they would talk I would cringe at what I considered 'bad grammar.' Showing me that there is a specific pattern, a method of speech, is something that now I'm proud they know."