

# Language Choices: Responding to Language Diversity and Deviation

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*Editor's note: Children's names are pseudonyms.*

## Languages and Dialects

When I was a schoolboy in 1942–43, the “English” lessons were often about correct usage. The textbook told us we must say “wash” with an *ä* as in /father/ and never say “warsh.” We were also instructed to say, “The balloon burst” and never say, “It busted.” I’m afraid the lessons were remarkably ineffective. “Warsh” was not a pronunciation used in our region. And if a boy was caught saying, “The balloon burst,” someone was likely to “burst” his chops in that small midwestern town.

If this lesson succeeded in teaching anything it was the notion that there is a right way and a wrong way of talking, and the people who made the rules and talked the right way lived somewhere else. This notion of “the king’s English” is still very persistent even though linguists have discredited and abandoned that notion long ago. We now know that all languages change and there is variation in all languages related to region, age, social standing, and several other factors. However, one language or one dialect is not superior to other languages or dialects in terms of communicative power, or logic, or linguistic quality (Harlow, 1998).

It is true that there are social stigmas attached to language usage; some dialects are *prestige* and some *stigmatized* when it comes to employment and many social and economic deci-



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sions. But context is critical here. A prestige dialect may bring you ridicule and exclusion in some contexts, just as stigmatized dialects will bring ridicule and discrimination in others. The verb *burst*, for example, is an excellent word found in dictionaries, but its use to describe a balloon explosion was considered pretentious or effeminate in the town where I grew up.

Dialects serve purposes of social bonding and support, so there are benefits in maintaining one’s family/

neighborhood dialect, as well as costs in abandoning that dialect. Students in my university classes have reported that their friends in rural regions have called them “uppity” or worse when they used their school language back home rather than their community dialect.

Modern dictionaries have accepted and incorporated the realities of language change and regional variation, although not without criticism and attack. Early dictionaries attempted to spell out the “correct” form of

the language, in usage, spelling, and even pronunciation. The goal of modern dictionaries is to describe language as it is used and to reflect the changes in language over time as well as across regions. New words are continually being added to dictionaries, as well as alternative pronunciations for some words, all based upon some accepted degree of frequency of use. (Just because you misspell a word regularly or just one time doesn't mean your spelling is going to be added to the dictionary.)

Although oral language is recognized as continually (but slowly) changing and therefore diverse because of regional and social factors, spelling is treated quite differently. Dictionaries set the standards for spelling correctness, and it is generally recognized that there is only one correct way of spelling the vast majority of words. Actually, spellings do change over time, but much more slowly than oral language, and there are cases in which alternate spellings of words are acceptable; but essentially, spelling is standardized across all dialects of a language, even though oral word choices, grammar, and pronunciations vary across regions and groups.

Spelling standardization is important in order for communication to occur within and across language groups. No matter how a word is pronounced, it is going to be spelled in a standard way in almost all shared publication, unless the author is writing to reflect the speech of some dialect group, as Mark Twain did in *Huckleberry Finn*, for example. Spelling standardization is a feature of all literate societies and makes communication possible across wide regions and vast distances. China is an interesting case in point. China has been a large empire and now a large nation

and region, yet it has many dialects. These dialects are really different languages, because many of them are mutually unintelligible. However, the writing system of China is standardized and is used by all dialects and language subgroups. Whether people speak Hakka or Mandarin or Cantonese or any other dialect, if they are literate, they can read and understand communications written in standard Chinese orthography.

## Language Diversity and Education

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Schools tend to reflect the values and the goals of the middle class—the group that represents the language usage of the public media and the marketplace. Even if they recognize, value, and accept variant dialect language, they are committed to the idea that graduates should be equipped to speak and write in ways that will enhance and not limit their educational and occupational opportunities. The goal of the educational community is to develop language capability that will enable school graduates (all people) to participate in all aspects of our society. I believe

this goal is noble, and desirable, and I would add, correct. Conflicts arise, however, about what this means and how to do it.

The traditional approach was (and in many classrooms still is) to deliberately attempt to change children's language, stamping out variant forms and trying to make students accept and use preferred or "mainstream" ways of speaking and writing. The extreme of this approach is exemplified in the American Indian schools that removed children from their families and the reservation and sent them to boarding schools where they were made to dress, act, and speak according to the dictates of White American culture (Reyhner & Eder, 1994).

The modern approach is to recognize and celebrate the language and culture of the subgroup, but gradually enable them to broaden their capabilities to include the language, and certain behaviors of the mainstream culture. The goal is to develop cross-dialect (as well as cross-language) capability and to be able to code-switch appropriately as you move from one context to another. A prime example is Barack Obama, whose language style and competence are recognized as exemplary according to the highest standards of the prestige culture, yet who can shift his talk into African American neighborhood speech when he so desires.

The issues of language diversity are puzzling for teachers at every level of education, but especially so for teachers of young children in the process of becoming literate. Oral language diversity and learning to accept spelling and grammatical standardization each present somewhat different issues and will be discussed separately in the sections below.

## Dealing with Oral Language Diversity

Developing capability in a second dialect does not happen easily or quickly. It takes several years of exposure to forms and models of the second dialect for it to begin to be established internally. It turns out that even more is required to bring a person to the point of actually using this new dialect. In a wonderful book titled *The Naked Children*, Daniel Fader writes about a group of very bright, but marginally delinquent, innercity Black youth whom he came to know intimately (Fader, 1971, 1996). He wanted to convince these middle-school children that they could aspire to college attendance and professional lives and careers, despite the conditions of poverty and social difference in which they now lived. He took them to meet a group of African American college students at a nearby university, students who were functioning well in an academic and mainstream community. When these inner city youngsters sat down to talk with the college students they spoke with them, surprisingly, in standard, mainstream speech—which Fader had never heard them use before. He had no idea that they could do that. It was as if a light had suddenly been turned on—both in terms of their speech and in terms of his understanding of how speech develops and is used in people's lives.

One of the lessons of this incident is how powerful motivation and caring and other affective factors are in the development and use of language dialect, codes, and styles. A teacher may nag a child repeatedly to say, "May I (sharpen my pencil, etc.);" rather than "Can I," yet she will observe that on the playground and

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to everyone else in his class he will continue to use, "Can I." However, if he is asked to go to the principal's office to convey a request for the class or the teacher, she may be surprised to hear him say, "May we." When such change occurs depends of course on age, language exposure, and other factors. Code-switching can and does occur in quite young children. I have observed it, on a limited scale, with a few first graders. And most children learn early on not to use swear words or sexual terms in school environments.

Based upon masses of evidence about the nature of language and about how language is learned, the traditional approach to language education (such as drilling on correct forms) is now considered unacceptable by linguists and scholars. A person's language capability consists of both mentally stored items (such as words, sounds/phonemes) and rules. These stored items and rules operate at a subconscious level—even adults are unaware of many of the regularities of their language. Language is in this way rule-governed. All utterances (the language of children, adults, and teenagers) are generated from rules: rules for forming sentences

(grammar), rules for forming words, rules for sounds and sound combinations, and rules for language choices in social contexts. The rules are not directly taught to a person by mentors or teachers; they are formed by the persons themselves out of the language input and language interactions of their experience.

Extensive studies have been made of how children learn language, and it is clear now that language is not learned simply by imitation, as previously thought. Imitation plays a role in a way, because the language that the child hears is the basis of his ideas of how language works, but a child makes sense of that gradually as his rule system grows and expands. At times children will directly borrow words and phrases they have heard when affect factors are strong (those who have said a swear word in front of a child can attest to that). Some have characterized young language learners as little linguists because of the way that they develop their own rules. A small child's set of rules will be very simple at first, but these rules form the basis of his utterances. Examples are the child who expresses negation by using the word "no" plus any other utterance.

He might say things like, “no juice,” “no hungry,” “no tickle,” or “no go bed.” Another example: when children first learn about using /-ed/ for the past tense of verbs, they often overextend this rule to many cases in which it should not apply. Speech examples such as “dooed,” “walk-ded,” “beed” (be + ed), “swimded,” and “runned” are common in the literature of language learning (Brown, 1973).

Another significant finding is the evidence showing that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to change a child’s language simply by telling him to say it differently. Instruction plays a miniscule role in language learning — usually confined to social forms of speech such as “please,” “thank you,” and forms of address (e.g., “yes, ma’am”).

Some linguists have tested the effect that direct instruction has on a child’s language development by providing such instruction to their own children, having them try over and over (until their spouse put a stop to this) to get them to repeat a grammatical phrase, and the result was often still not in the adult form (Braine, 1971).

Teachers are aware of the difficulties of changing a child’s language through instruction, but the practice is time-worn and continuing, as in the use of “please” and “thank you,” and “can” and “may,” cited above. Consider this kind of interaction when a teacher is trying to shift a child’s language from a form in his dialect to a form in her own. If he says things like “wif,” (with) “def,” (death) and “birfday,” (birthday), the teacher needs to realize that these are not errors but dialectic differences. Chances are that all the members of



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the child’s family pronounce final /th/ in the same way. If she is rejecting the child’s word forms (and grammatical structures, etc.), she is rejecting the dialect group that the child comes from, and she is going to be quite ineffective in achieving the change she aims for. The result is a subtle put-down — a rejection of aspects of that child’s culture and language, and the language and culture of his community.

Teachers want very earnestly to assist children in becoming capable in using mainstream language, but the way they can accomplish this is not by treating dialectic expressions as errors and trying to change them through correction and repetition. They will need to understand that living in a literate environment — hearing mainstream language (including much literature read aloud) and reading books and

stories mostly written in mainstream language—will enable children gradually to build an inner capability for mainstream dialects. There is one more requirement, however, for children to switch codes and use mainstream language themselves (especially in oral speech), and that is affect — feeling, caring, and emotion. It will help if children are put into many socially diverse contexts during their school careers, with opportunities to interact with many different speakers in different contexts (including speakers of their own dialect) and many opportunities to discuss, debate, and role-play within their own classrooms with some discussion, as they reach upper grades, of the nature of language differences (Lindfors, 1987).

The one-to-one instructional time of Reading Recovery provides a rich environment for language learning.

Even though Clay advises intervention teachers to keep their language brief and to avoid overtalking and overexplanation, the intense 30-minute daily sessions are nevertheless a powerful vehicle for language learning for several reasons. The setting provides a safe risk-free environment with a trusted adult who knows the child's thought processes and his preferences quite well. Interactions occur within a shared focus of attention. Teachers tailor their prompts and responses to fit quite well to what the child is thinking as he attempts to solve problems. The child receives immediate feedback to his utterances or actions through teacher language that provides useful models. Typical classroom language patterns, such as question-answer, are avoided and children instead experience a more-natural pattern of shared comment or comment and response. Genuine conversation is encouraged prior to creating a story and at other times during the lesson. And, of course, the language of books is itself a powerful language model. This environment is more similar to the language-learning environment of the home than the classroom, yet it also shares the linguistic intensity of rich classrooms in which children are engaged in rich literacy experiences.

## Language Diversity and Writing, Spelling, and Reading

Language diversity issues with written language are somewhat different from oral language, since spelling and writing conform to invariable standards and conventions. Children, of course, cannot master these conventions all in one piece, so the issue is how to introduce them to correctness without punishing them

for their language differences, efforts, and approximations. In the 1970s, researchers showed that children invent spellings from their efforts to encode the sounds of language as they hear it (Read, 1975) and from other strategies. This discovery has led educators to allow and foster these kinds of approximations in conjunction with other kinds of reading and writing activities that help children become aware of and learn standardized spelling and writing forms. Parents, and some educators, cringe at invented spellings. They might accept these efforts for a short time, but they want to see correct language and spelling from school children sooner rather than later. Teachers who understand the benefits of learning through discovery, on the other hand, bristle at any approach that requires children's writing to be correct from the beginning.

Reading Recovery approaches this problem in a different way. Marie Clay was very aware of children's creative approaches to writing during the emergent stages of literacy. She has published on this topic and has been a leader for the kind of classroom interactions that build upon and draw power from children's constructive learning, both in writing and reading. (See Clay, 1975, 1987, 1991, and two pieces published posthumously, 2010a, 2010b). However, she also discovered in developing Reading Recovery the power of close integration of reading and writing under skillful individual tutelage (Clay 1993, 1998). When children use their own stories as a reading text, the strategic activities they develop and use while doing this are a powerful learning mechanism. In one procedure, the teacher writes

the child's story on a sentence strip then cuts it into phrases or individual words for the child to reassemble. The child has to use what he knows about written and oral language to search for words, check his decisions, and monitor his performance. For this to work, the stories have to be written in conventional forms (for the most part, more on this later); the teacher must be very aware of what the child knows and is learning to do; and she must be skilled in offering carefully timed guidance and support while the child is engaged in the actual writing of his story and while he is reading and reassembling the pieces.

The amount of help offered by the teacher will vary considerably in this activity (as in all Reading Recovery activities). The child always composes the story that will be written. But when the child is beginning a series of lessons, the teacher may actually write all the words, with the child forming only the two or three letters that he knows. Very soon, however, the child will know and write whole words and use Elkonin boxes to listen for and write the individual phonemes in words; soon after, he will start to write words by using analogy to other words he knows and by drawing upon his emerging knowledge of letter combinations and variant forms. Meanwhile, the writing of the story is always in conventional spelling, although the grammar may still reflect the child's dialect and choices for some time. The educative power of these procedures depends highly on the teacher's knowledge of what the child knows and is coming to know, and on her skillful ability to offer—or refrain from offering—help of the right kind at the right time.

The teacher has to decide how to respond when the child says or writes something that deviates from written language conventions. If the child's spelling is incomplete, for example, he writes *mall* with one *l*, or writes *game* without the silent *e*, the teacher can say, "Almost right, but it needs..." (the one more thing it needs)," then later link that to another word he knows or perhaps point it out during reading. If the spelling reflects his pronunciation (e.g., he writes *with* as "wif"), the teacher says something like, "That's how it sounds, but

and my brother doos too." I restated his sentence to confirm, but unwittingly I said, "My sister do funny things and my brother *does* (conventional pronunciation) too." "Not does, doos!" he protested. That was easy enough, I wrote it as *does*, but when we came to *too* I explained that in this sentence it needed another *o*. Then when cutting up the sentence, I wanted to challenge him to notice final letters; I asked him if we might cut a letter off the end of one of the words. I was zeroing in on the *s* of things, but he said, "You can cut an

lowing such consultation, she may ask the child to try to pronounce the word conventionally if she finds that this is a speech goal that is within his zone of proximal development.

Children with immature articulation may also have other language issues. Jack was a child I taught who as an infant had had intense ear infections that blocked his hearing. When he was about 3-1/2, tubes were put into his ears and normal hearing was possible but the delay severely affected his speech and grammar. One day his story began, "We went at Toys R Us." At this point, I gently suggested, "Could you say, 'We went to Toys R Us?'" "No, we went at Toys R Us." I kept at it, "When grownups write that they usually say, 'We went to Toys are Us.'" "Look!" he said, "This is my book and this is my story and I want to say, 'We went at Toys R Us.'" "Fine," I said. I was chuckling inside and very pleased with his ownership of his story and the writing process. But just as he was about finished with his story, he said, "You know, we could say, I went to Toys R Us." I don't remember which version he decided to write, but it was a story that he reassembled proudly for his teacher and for his parents. I don't know whether I was right or wrong in that intervention, but I would not do the same thing in a case of dialect difference. Jack was learning about standard language grammar and pronunciations from his classroom, his teachers, and his parents and was receptive within a trusted environment with a strong emotional bond. He felt very free to express himself but he was learning and making small changes over time.

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this is the way we write it," and has him write it in the story as *with*. If the word is a homonym unknown to the child, the teacher might say, "There is another way to write that word; this is the way we need to write it here." If the child's grammar (sentence structure or word choices) reflects a dialectic form, that is usually accepted and written in the dialectic form early in the child's series of lessons, though later that may change.

These decisions are not easily made and sometimes lead to interesting interactions. When I was first learning to teach in Reading Recovery, one of my scholars composed the sentence, "My sister do funny things

*o* off that word (*too*); I didn't want it on there anyway."

Children who still have speech immaturities present similar but somewhat different issues. Inability to articulate certain sounds (e.g., /r/'s and /l/'s) is not dialect—his family does not talk this way—and the child is usually aware of the adult forms of the words; he just cannot say them (Petty, Petty, & Salzer, 1989). Such children usually accept the teacher's guidance, "This is how we write it." The teacher should, however, consult with the child's speech therapist to learn the patterns of his speech differences and the progress he is making to master language or speech difficulties. Fol-

Accepting children's oral language forms is one decision teachers have to make; helping them deal with spelling and writing of language is another. A third decision is how to deal with reading performance when there are mismatches between the child's language and standard language in books. First of all, if the child's grammar is significantly different, don't use that book. One semester I was teaching two African American boys, individually of course. Sammy had stronger entering scores than Owen, but when I used a caption book containing the language, "I am ..." (coloring, swinging, etc.), they responded quite differently. Owen read these sentences easily, whereas Sammy started out, "I'm is playing." The verbal mismatch was clearly a roadblock, so we continued by talking about the pictures in that book and I got another book right away.

Different pronunciation of words during reading is not a real problem. The intervention teacher will know the child's language characteristics, so she knows what he is trying to say if he pronounces *red* as "wed" or *like* as "wike." And the same is true if he says, "dat guy," instead of "that guy," or many other dialectic pronunciations. Occasionally, a teacher will hear one she might not understand, but that is a time to ask about dialects and find out from the child what he meant. I don't believe these differences in pronunciation should be counted as errors on any test involving the reading of continuous text—on running records, for example. On a word test the teacher may or may not be able to tell what the child intended due to the lack of context, but I believe that the known

speech patterns of the child should be honored in scoring.

Miscues in reading because of dialectic pronunciation or because of speech immaturities should not be considered differently in scoring, but there are differences in the ways that these behaviors will change or progress over time. The child with immature or motor-control difficulties with speech will hear conventional pronunciations from everyone around him, including family and most schoolmates. His emerging consciousness of difference will act

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as a spur to bring about change when he gains control over troublesome sounds and sound combinations. Of course, a speech interventionist may also help this change occur. The young dialect speaker will be immersed in dialectic speech; he will hear dialect speech from his community members and family as well as many school peers. It is up to the school to create environments in which the child can interact, communicate, speak, write, and read language of more than one form and dialect, but including great amounts of mainstream language. It is also important for him to hear

and respect role models from his own community, so that he sees his own dialect as respected and valued. The ability and the desire to be bi-dialectical and to code-switch are aided and enhanced by a strong sense of self-confidence and self-assurance. The opposite of this can be seen in many older dialect speakers who have always felt self-conscious and hesitant to communicate in situations with mainstream speakers because they continually received overt or tacit messages that their language was inferior and undesirable.

Although a teacher should not penalize divergent language during reading and writing as errors, she should take note of the differences in order to observe change over time. It is both interesting and instructive to observe change during a child's series of lessons with an interventionist or as a child progresses through grades in school. Degrees of change, or little change, should be of interest to classroom teachers and other educators working to create context for growth and improvement for all students. I had the opportunity to meet Jack (the child who insisted on writing "We went at Toys R Us") when he was in the seventh grade. I met him unexpectedly at a public meeting and chatted with him. There was no hint of difference in his speech and his school progress was outstanding. I also had a reunion with the lad who insisted on "My brother 'doos.'" He had finished high school, served overseas in the Army, and was enrolled in college classes while working full time with abused children. His command of mainstream language was impeccable. But I can tell from his Facebook page that he can code-switch like crazy.

## Summary

The most-important principle in dealing with a child whose language differs from your own is to respect the child's language. If it is a dialectic form, it belongs to him and his family and community and serves an important role, not only in communication, but also in social bonding. If it is an issue of immature speech forms or speech mechanisms, it is most likely what the child can produce at this time and change will come somewhat slowly. In both cases, the teacher needs to understand the child's speech habits and capabilities and observe for change over time. In the case of immature speech, the teacher should consult with speech therapists to understand the child's speech and related issues (e.g., etiology, family patterns, etc.) and become familiar with speech intervention goals.

Teachers need to understand that dialects are not inferior forms of communication of thinking or wrong language—they are different language. Acquiring competence in a mainstream language is a desirable goal, but it should not and cannot be achieved by abandoning the language of the child's speech community. The teacher will need to make the child aware that some words that he says are written differently than they sound; however, asking the child to write in a different grammatical form is asking him to change his dialect, and this should be avoided. The exposure to literate language through books, through teacher modeling, and through other media will eventually develop an internal awareness and receptivity to mainstream

language forms, especially if children are in classrooms that offer rich language and literacy experiences and interactions. Change will not occur, however, without a strong motivation to use such forms in personally meaningful situations.

Reading Recovery teachers should remember the power of language interactions during the 30-minute sessions. They should work to make their instructional language brief, relevant, and helpful. (I remember one of the children I taught when learning to teach in Reading Recovery — she would shrug her shoulders exasperatedly as I nagged her with comments that were overdone and probably interfered with rather than helped her thinking.) And they should work to establish brief, but

genuine, conversations to help the child create a story or occasionally to think about the meaning of a book that has been read.

There is nothing wrong with gently helping a child become aware of differences in language, but this has to be done in an environment of acceptance, respect, and mutual interest in differences. The teacher should expect and respect resistance, as resistance to change is a rather general human characteristic. In the case of spelling, children will be aware early on that there is more than one way to represent a sound or to read a letter combination. "This is the way we write it," is sufficient explanation. Any attempt to explain language rules or patterns will not only be ineffective but well may



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be confusing. I learned this lesson during my first Reading Recovery teaching experiences. For his written story, a student was starting a note to his mother, “Come to the party now.” I explained that he needed to start with a capital letter, a large *C*, and when he proceeded to make the *o* just as large, I launched into an explanation of capital letters. This was cut short when he put his head down and started over, saying, “I’m making them all little ‘cause you’re bossin’ me too much.”

This leads to the last bit of advice, which for most teachers is quite unnecessary. Expect surprises, and enjoy children’s language and your interactions with them. It is a rare opportunity for the teacher, just as it is for the child. And it gradually develops insights and understandings for both the teacher and the child.

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