2010

18. A New Culture of Vernacular Literacy on the Horizon

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Chapter 18
A New Culture of Vernacular Literacy on the Horizon

In the last chapter I described the problems and anxieties that stem from our current culture of proper literacy, a culture that makes writing less available than it needs to be. The culture rejects spoken language for writing and indeed is somewhat scornful of speech itself-- speech as "vulgar" compared to dignified writing. This culture imposes a single standard for correct writing that differs from the easiest spontaneous language of virtually everyone--even those in privileged classes. But we've been moving for some time now, it seems to me, to new culture of literacy that will welcome spoken language for writing. And not just mainstream spoken English. In this coming culture, *all* versions of spoken English will be considered acceptable for serious public writing.

Three Stages

I see this new culture of vernacular literacy arriving in three stages. First, mainstream spoken language will be considered acceptable for generally literate writing--but not school and academic writing. Second, mainstream spoken language will be considered acceptable for school writing and academic discourse. Third, *Nonmainstream* and *stigmatized* versions of English will be acceptable for all serious writing. At this stage, there will no longer be a *single* standard for good or correct or valid writing.

We are even now in or approaching the *first stage*--where mainstream spoken language will be acceptable for generally literate serious writing. Already, a significant and growing minority of people from the larger literate and cultured population are realizing that they too can use the kind of informal spoken language found in Krugman, Menand, and even Dowd when they need to write committee reports, letters to the editor, magazine articles, grant proposals, and business memos. Add to that all the informal but serious writing on the web. It won't be long till more or most people realize they can use vernacular spoken language in all kinds of generally literate but serious documents. The question will no longer be, "Is this too informal or speechy to be acceptable?" Instead: "Given our world now where I see little prejudice against the very casual speech language in print, what degree of comfortable vernacular spoken language will do what I want in this text?"

People writing business memos to unknown readers will probably not choose to be as chatty as we saw in the passage from Safire in the last chapter ("I spell it *tchotchki*. Do I need a lawyer?"), but they might well use language like the other examples I showed: Krugman's slang definition ("Currency--pieces of green paper with pictures of dead presidents on them") or Menand's loose syntax for making a recommendation ("lets try to do X, but not be so stupid as to do Y, is the general idea").

> "Larry Sommers [former president of Harvard and currently in Obama's administration] once began a paper on finance by declaring "THERE ARE IDIOTS. Look around" . . . . (MacFarquhar 48)

And of course we see even now that people writing letters to the editor, magazine articles, or committee reports to colleagues sometimes realize that it's rhetorically appropriate even to use Safire's chattiness. More to the point, newspapers and magazines will print that language without cleansing it.

So at this first stage, the single standard for good serious writing will seem significantly relaxed. Yet in a real sense we'll still have a single standard. That is, on the one hand, much that was formerly called "incorrect" will be fine: good serious writing will be able to exploit a range of language running anywhere from today's "correct" edited written English to informal vernacular spoken language--even strong slang for certain rhetorical effects. But on the other hand, only *mainstream* varieties of English will be felt as acceptable--not other varieties or dialects. Relaxation of standards tends to come first from people with authority and cultural capital.

In the *second stage*, this same range of mainstream spoken or vernacular forms of language will gradually become acceptable for school writing and academic discourse. This stage takes longer because academics have tended to be conservative about linguistic standards for writing. What could be a more perfect and trivial prohibition of speech in writing than the bar against *contractions*. We all *say* "can't" but in much academic writing we must write "cannot"--that is, the copy editors will "cannot" our writing. But this restriction is gradually being loosened. Some academic copy editors have given up on the kinds of "anti-speech corrections" that I illustrated in the previous chapter (correcting *"having no sense of"*into *"lacking a sense of"*); the rest will come along. Before long, academics will finally be able to use the kinds of locutions I've illustrated from Menand, Krugman, and Safire--even in mainstream academic journals.

People often use the term "academic writing" for the writing of academics and of college students. But faculty members have traditionally refused to accept from students some of the informal or adventuresome (or sometimes bad) writing that they readily accept from their peers in articles and books. Unconsciously, they invoke "the Picasso principle": you aren't allowed to draw funny looking bulls till you've learned to draw accurate bulls. Some teachers, insist on essays that announce their thesis in the first paragraph--or even five paragraph essays-- when they don't ask that of colleagues in their writing (or even themselves).

The widespread use of large scale timed essay tests (as in NAEP or the various states' versions of No Child Left Behind) have had a big effect on school writing. The effect on *form* has been unambiguously conservative. When you have only twenty or thirty minutes to write an impromptu essay on a topic you haven't seen before, you cannot use writing to *explore* as Montaigne did when he invented the *essai*; you have to quickly announce your claim and provide some crisp reasons to support it. The five paragraph essay is, in truth, the most trustworthy thing to teach if you want to help all your students score adequately on these tests. The effects of the testing on *language*, however, have been paradoxical. The evidence seems to show that graders don't much count off for informal spoken language--not even so much for mistakes (except on tests explicitly aimed at correct language or grammar). But *teachers* very often feel that testing increases pressure on them to emphasize "proper language."

And yet there's a contrary development too. Many teachers, especially in the field of composition, are rushing to invite all kinds of alternative genres and on-line writing from students. And of course in much writing by elementary and even middle school children, vernacular spoken language has been accepted for quite a while. This welcoming stance is

particularly understandable in regions where teachers have invited kindergarteners and first graders to write "by ear."

The *third stage* will seem most momentous. Many people cannot imagine a culture of literacy where nonmainstream and stigmatized versions of English are acceptable for serious writing, for example in business writing, academic writing, and mainstream published nonfiction. But I don't think it will be *too* long till serious texts of all kinds will be written in Black English and various forms of Latino English. Not only that; most mainstream readers will take this kind of written language for granted (despite some nostalgic regrets).

In our present culture, when people imagine these changes (stages one and two bringing lots of slang and "loose syntax" to "formal writing" and stage three bringing stigmatized vernaculars into writing for business, politics, and the academy), they will tend to see nothing but carelessness and falling standards. The sky is falling. The linguist John McWhorter frames his lament in the title of his book: *Doing Our Own Thing: The Degradation of Language and Music and Why We Should, Like, Care*. Lynn Truss is another disaster-monger in her *Eats Shoots and Leaves*. But I'm not telling a story of carelessness and "falling standards." I'm telling the story of a standard that's collapsing or disappearing.

People have remarkably strong but unthought out feelings about language: they often confuse *incorrect* with *bad* and *correct* with *good*. This confusion will gradually clarify itself in the new culture of vernacular literacy. As "*the* standard" falls away--the single standard for one correct language for serious writing--"correct" and "wrong" will lose any meaning as a standard for writing. People will stop calling language *correct, incorrect*, or *wrong*. But they will continue to call writing *good* and *bad*. Readers will look for writing that is clear, well reasoned or inviting to read--and be annoyed at writing that lacks those and other virtues. Writing can have those virtues no matter what version of English is used. So we will still have plenty of "*standards*" like those; we'll lack only *a single standard* for acceptable language. One of the reasons why teachers often comment more on incorrect language than other problems is that these comments are inarguable. When I tell a student that a paragraph should be cut or moved, or that a given reason is unpersuasive, I have to admit that many of smart colleagues might disagree. An assertive student might argue with me.

When many cultured literate people contemplate what I describe, they will fear for the death of good language, good writing, and clarity. Or else they'll settle for the cynical response: "So what else is new? Standards are crashing down everywhere. Soon no one will be able to write correctly or well and so no one will be able to expect good writing!" But the English language and English literature didn't suffer during the various medieval and Renaissance periods when there was no single standard for correct written language. We will see the same thing in the new culture of vernacular literacy. There is a need for some history here.

Looking Backwards at Divergence and Standardization in Writing

Authoritative and even progressive linguists like to opine that a single standard is inevitable. Wolfram, Adger, and Christian speak of the "inevitability of dialect diversity and language standardization" (115-16). In the same passage, they quote Fasold with approval:

> Whether we like it or not, some type of language standardization seems inevitable. This conclusion comes not just from examining the situation in the United States or in

English-speaking areas, but from surveying language situations throughout the world (Fasold 1984).

These are recent, progressive linguists. Another one, Janson, says that without a standard, schooling is impossible [p]. How can a teacher correct someone's language if there is no such thing as correct? If a teacher had students who spoke eight different dialects of English, she would have to accept final drafts written in all of them--many she didn't know very well. This is a Wilder West than what McWhorter warned us against. The death of good writing, the degeneration of the English language. Surely human nature itself resists linguistic chaos and seeks some order and standardization--especially when it comes to writing.

Or does it? Those linguists should not have said that standardization is inevitable; they should have said it's *common*. I'll make my argument from history. We've had Babel in the past and it didn't kill writing or language or civilization.

There was remarkably little standardization for writing in England from the late Middle Ages through Shakespeare. Surely the condition of the English language and literature was not so bad during this period. And we're now on our way to having no single standard--Babel if you wish--and it won't kill us this time either. A single standard for written language that differs from spoken dialects is not built into the universe or the nature of language; it's something that has *sometimes* emerged. In cycles. Usually it's been imposed. If we look at history, we'll see a constant tug of war between the tendency of language to diverge and the imposition of a single standard.

Charlemagne didn't like all the different Latins that people spoke all around the "European Union" of his day--*his* European Union. He wanted something tidier and more linguistically unified. (He didn't know when he was well off. What would he think of the European Union now with twenty official languages?) So around the year 800, he sought out the best authority on Latin he could find. This turned out to be a man named Alcuin in England. One reason for Alcuin's expertise and special authority with Latin was that he knew Latin only from books. His Latin was the (allegedly pure) classical Roman version that had been preserved in manuscripts. It wasn't his native language. Most people in Charlemagne's kingdom spoke Latin as their native tongue--but what they all called Latin can diverged a bit over the centuries, depending on whether they lived in the regions we call Italy, Spain, Germany, or the eastern regions. So as the ruler of a huge empire (the Pope gave him the title "Holy Roman Emperor"), he brought from England the old Latin that had been freeze dried in books--a "high register archaic" Latin (Wright 6)--and imposed it on Europe. From then on, important writing was supposed to be in the book Latin that Alcuin brought. But of course almost no one in Charlemagne's EU talking this new/old "better Latin." Some priests gave sermons in it, but parishioners found them difficult or impossible to understand.

This marked the beginning in European history of a huge gulf between spoken vernaculars and serious writing. And with Alcuin's importation of book Latin, the people's Latin lost its right to be called "Latin." Scholars later came to call it "Romance." So from then on, most serious writing throughout all of Europe had to dance to the tune of a book Latin brought in from the edge of the known universe--England.

Wright argues we shouldn't call Latin a dead language any more than we call English a dead language. He insists on the importance of what's obvious: that all our present day European languages of Italian, French, Spanish,

Portuguese are late vernacular *versions* of Latin; moreover they are closer to classical Latin than present day English is to Old English--or modern Greek to ancient Greek. Wright:

> [T]he idea that Latin has not survived as a spoken language is merely wrong; it *has* survived as a spoken language but it has changed its name. . . . [A] living evolving language whose speakers cover over a quarter of the world's land surface can hardly be called dead. (6).

See also Janson on this story.

For another story of the push/pull between divergence and standardization, let's turn to England. In the early West Saxon period,

> there were no attempts at creating a common standard for the written language. On the contrary, each writer employed his own dialect, so there are texts in Kentish, in West Saxon, in Northumbrian, and so on. . . . Even though the writers of Britain probably all knew the strictly standardized written Latin language, they did not try to create anything similar.
>
> This is quite similar to the situation in Greece before the Macedonian conquest, and to some extent also to that of Italy before Dante. Where there is no political unity, the idea of a common standard for a written language is not very close at hand. (Janson 145).

But by about 1000, King Alfred had amassed power beyond his immediate realm and made West Saxon the standard for writing for much of England. Once he'd managed this, scribes copied over various existing written texts into West Saxon. This gave a sense of uniformity--it was an early way of "enforcing standards"--and it had an interesting effect on scholars in recent centuries. It fooled many of them into thinking there was more linguistic homogeneity than actually existed (see also Crystal 55).

But then England lost this standard form of written English. From the Middle English period up through the Renaissance, many writers went back to writing in the dialect they spoke. We see this if we compare the very different languages used by important fourteenth century writers like Chaucer near London, Henryson in Scotland, the poet of *Gawain and the Green Knight* from the north, and the poet of *Piers Plowman* probably from the South Midlands. Linguists can see from Middle English texts--hear, actually--what region of England or Scotland they lived in. But many nineteenth century scholarly editors changed many Middle English texts to conform to an alleged "standard"--which again reinforced the illusory sense that there *was* a standard (Wright 3). Aramaic, Jesus' native language, is another case of divergence in writing: "[Written] Aramaic was originally cast in oral form to be addressed to audiences who did not read" [Horowitz and Samuels 17-18].)

But it's not till the eighteenth century that we get the most powerful, pervasive, and conscious imposition of standardization in writing. This was the age when dictionaries were born. And with them, for the first time in English history, came a powerful ideology of *prescriptivism*. Prescriptivism is

> not in itself a linguistic process . . . [It's] '*language-external*': a cultural, ideological phenomenon which plays itself out *in* language . . . . Prescriptivism . . . has been highly successful as a *social ideology* [my emphasis] while failing to account for linguistic data (Hope 51, 54, my emphasis).

It seems as though humans (always prey to insecurity) have always been tempted to laugh at or even scorn people who speak differently. The Greeks called nonGreeks "barbarians" because their talked sounded like *bar-bar-bar-bar*. In our culture, people can't seem to get tired of laughing at Brooklyn or Bronx speech. But prescriptivism is different for carrying a *moralism* about "wrong" language. This seemed new in 18th century in England--or at least there had never been such a widespread deeply rooted moralism before about language.

This is the period when we see a huge flowering of metaphors of uncleanness, corruptness, and immorality for wrong language. Well before Samuel Johnson wrote his dictionary, Ben Johnson wrote: "Wheresoever manners and fashions are corrupted, language is. It imitates the public riot" (quoted in Kermode). Metaphors for bad writing as *unclean* are still common--among general readers and even in our composition journals. The concept is insidious. I find myself talking about "cleaning up" a text, and I find myself praising writing I like as "clean." Bad language is often called "slovenly." (See Richard Boyd for research on nineteenth century handbooks that talk about "Grammatical Monstrosities" and "Contemptible Miscreants.")

Till the eighteenth century, there was no consistency in spelling and very little consistency in written grammar (even Alfred's Anglo-Saxon wasn't perfectly standard). Shakespeare didn't conform to a single standard of grammar and he signed his own name with something like eleven different spellings. The eighteenth century was the period when those who cared about language wanted to make English not just regular but noble and good--and that meant that it should be like book Latin. Don't split infinitives because they are not split in Latin. (Never mind that Latin infinitives *cannot* be split since they are single words.) The eighteenth century was when *admiral* got it's *d*--to make it sound like *admirabilis*. Till then it had been a fairly common Arabic-based English word *amiral* (*amir* + *al*--"leader the")--common in Chaucer. Yet the English language and English flourished (flourished more, perhaps), before the eighteenth century, without benefit of standardization.

Eighteenth century Scottish rhetoricians laid down guidelines for the proper use of English, and these took firm hold throughout England and the U.S. (Eighteenth century Scotland saw a flowering of rhetorical studies that treated what we think of as regular prose writing in English. Till then, rhetoric--part of the medieval "Trivium"--had focused mostly on ancient Greek and Latin and medieval sermons.) Thomas Miller points out that the native language spoken by these influential rhetoricians, *Scots* or *Scottish*, was ridiculed and scorned by literate English people as forcefully as some people have ridiculed and scorned Black English. Miller suggests that the linguistic and cultural defensiveness of these learned Scots scholars gave them the drive to establish an aggressively *proper* standard for rhetoric and language (Miller, chapters three and four). There's an interesting parallel here to Alcuin's importation of "good Latin" from England to central Europe (thanks to Charlemagne). The most fiercely imposed standards often come from the margins. In 800, England was the wild margin of the European universe; in the eighteenth century, Scotland was the wild margin of the cultivated English universe.

Interestingly, however, the eighteenth century prescriptivist drive did not seem to regularize prestige *speech*. Until late in the nineteenth century, there was no single standard for elite spoken English in England. Even prominent figures like prime ministers Gladstone and Peele spoke publicly in their strong regional accents--including, no doubt, some "nonstandard" bits of grammar; so too Thomas Arnold, headmaster of Rugby school, and Thomas Hardy. But with the Education Act of 1870, elite schools were open to the general public (or at least those

who could pay), and this somehow led to the promulgation of an elite "proper" *spoken* English. Anyone from any part of England who wanted a highly respected social standing had to learn to speak it. This form of speech has sometimes been called "Public School English"--and perhaps more widely termed "Received Pronunciation" (RP. See Jones). "BBC English"--with its pronunciation ruled over by an official BBC Board--represented a slight watering down of RP. But now on the BBC, we hear lots of regionalized accents. The grammar, however, is still very standardized.

Why Standards? The Larger Story of Standards and Language

The linguists I quoted who think that standardization is *inevitable* might use against me those very stories I just told--as evidence to support their claim. The stories describe the imposition of a single standard for writing. Linguistic divergence and multiplicity was lopped off in 1000 by King Alfred and in the eighteenth century by a range of prescriptivists. And in 800, Charlemagne's importation of Alcuin led to a single standard of writing in Latin. But the stories support my claim too, that standardization is *not* inevitable: there were long periods of divergence--periods that sometimes followed an imposed standardization. They show that linguistic divergence and multiplicity--the lack of a single standard for writing--is also normal. Language and literature can thrive in those conditions.

Indeed if we stand back and look at the history of human spoken language--using a both microscope and a telescope--we see a continual tug of war between divergence and standardization. Consider the root process by which languages continue: babies and toddlers learn the language around them. But babies and toddlers always get things wrong: they use the wrong word, the wrong meaning for a word, the wrong syntax, and the wrong pronunciation. But their mistakes are continually corrected toward what's right--namely the standard--for that family or group. Divergence is overcome.

But as standard-lovers continually recognize with a sigh, the job of rooting out errors is never done:

> Johnson admits that as his work proceeded he came to see that language could not be "fixed" and its continual change could not be halted. The lexicographer finds that the dictionary cannot "embalm his language." The sharing of language by all classes means that language, like manners, must inevitably be depraved, for example by its use in commerce; and its depravity must spread to all its users. The maker of dictionaries cannot cure obsolescence or prevent novelty; all he or she can hope for is to palliate what cannot be cured. Having understood that, says Johnson, "let us make some struggles for our language." (Kermode)

Pesky children never get things *exactly* right. Perhaps the most basic linguistic principal of all is what linguists call the "idiolect": in truth, no two speakers of "the same language" actually speak exactly *the same language*. Every speaker of, say, English, speaks a version whose grammar, syntax, and lexicon are *slightly* different from everyone else's. To put it bluntly, there is no such thing as "English" or even "Northeastern middle class" English, or even "English as spoken in your family." All these "languages" are fictions, abstractions, generalizations--pictures of an "average" language that doesn't match any person's actual language.

Of course these idiolectal differences are small because people commonly nudge children and other people to "talk right." It's convenient to maintain the fiction that different people

speak "the same language" and to refer to discrete languages like "English" or "French" as singular entities. Languages more or less hang together. But let's not forget that these singular languages are really fictional averagings of *plural* languages. That is, we don't just have Midwestern, Appalachian, and African American Englishes--or "World Englishes": it's really *Englishes* all the way down.

The idiolectal tug of war between infants and their families enacts a general process that continues after babies grow up. Individuals are a force for divergence while groups tend to keep individuals in check; groups tend to be a force for conservation or conservatism. And of course the same dialectical tension exists between small groups and large groups.

But we must not think that this tug of war is always one sided. *Sometimes* the individual or the small group wins. Individuals or small groups who talk "wrong" are *usually* be pushed back in line--corrected, ignored, or not understood. But if their "wrongness" is sufficiently effective or attractive in that context--or if the individual or small group has special power or prestige--the wrongness can catch on. The large group gives in and changes its standard to match the small group or even individual.

Someone had to have been the first person to use *cool* to mean "good" or to use "villain" to mean bad (it used to be a neutral word for a man). Idiosyncratic usages can infect and take root. No doubt "cool" for good started out as a *metaphor*, for every new metaphor is a word used with a "wrong" sense. For a different metaphor, some Roman must have been the first to say he said he had a *"scruple"* about doing something that nagged his conscience. But "scruple" just means "pebble." He wasn't talking about pebbles, but his listener understood him: he was saying that something was nagging him in his mind the way a pebble nags in your sandal.

If those sound like small and trivial examples, consider this. If human speakers always pruned away new shoots, we would all still be speaking the language that Adam and Eve spoke in Eden or in the Rift Valley of Africa. (Indo-European was just a local debased parochial offshoot of "true language!") Only wrongness explains the existence of different languages. It's time and space that fertilize the roots of wrongness:

- *Time*. After fifty or a hundred years, people even in the same village usually talk a somewhat different language. The dynamics are many and interesting, but more often than not, young people are the force for change, and elders a force for conservation.
- *Space* too brings divergence. When people from this village move over to the next valley-- or country or continent--their language often diverges from the language they left behind.

Time and space, between them, give rise to different dialects and even different languages. In some cases, time trumps space: the home language may change faster than the "colonial" version. When I studied at Oxford in the '50s, I used to say "I guess," and people made fun me for using an odd "colonialism." Then I found it in Chaucer.

So there is a tug of war between individuals branching out and parents and teachers trying to impose small scale conformity. But how do we get large scale standards? Sometimes the force is wielded by individuals with power--like Charlemagne or the Korean king who imposed a brand new writing system (see pp x) or Ataturk who changed language in Turkey (p x). People in charge tend to feel more secure when things are standardized. And with authority, they can impose it. Sometimes the force comes from a group--though the group may be spearheaded by individuals. When one tribe or country overruns another, it sometimes wipes out the conquered language--even when it doesn't wipe out the people.

Nationalism has probably been the biggest force for linguicide and standardization. When divergent groups are somehow induced to think of themselves as "a nation," they seem willing to kill off local languages. Nationalism often fuels campaigns for linguistic "purity." A number of thriving languages--many of them with rich literatures (such as that of the Albigensians)--were lost during the "formation" of France. The "English Only" campaign in the U.S. seems to derive from a potent mixture of nationalism and insecurity--fear of the "alien." The current hegemony of English around the globe may be killing more languages than local nationalisms have managed in the past--though it's probably a close contest.

Webster wanted an "American English," but he celebrated it as the most "pure [form of English] in the world--closer to Chaucer and the uncorrupted English that existed before 1066." [?Lepore?] I find it odd for speakers of English to argue for purity in language since English is probably the most impure bastardized language there's ever been. It's slept with every language it ever encountered, even casually. The strength of English comes from how many babies it's had with how many partners. For example, because English kept sleeping with Norse at different points in history, we have *canal, kennel,* and *channel*--all born at different times of the same Norse father. John Trimbur points to the neglected story of how the U.S., ever since the Revolution, has pushed out other strong languages to make English into a *de facto* required exclusive language--and how the composition profession is complicit in that process. (See his published essay and his newly shared one.])

In our mainstream monolingual U.S. culture, most people assume that we *need* convergence and single standards. *"Without a standard, no one would understand each other. Everything would grind to a halt!"* But when it comes to the different versions of English used in the U.S., misunderstanding seldom derives from difference itself. When people misunderstand each other's English, it's more often a case of *psychological* interference. People who speak the dominant version sometimes listen to other versions through a stance of disapproval of what they think of as *alien* and bad English. And people who *speak* stigmatized versions would sometimes just as soon not be understood. When stigmatization is not in force, humans usually take dialectal variation in their stride and understand each other without struggle. Most real misunderstanding comes not from "wrong grammar" but from strong *accents* used by people who grew up with an entirely different language and are still learning English. (Literate people like to say, "If you don't spell right, readers won't understand you," but there's plenty of recent research showing that it's actually quite easy to understand wildly misspelled writing.)

Even in cultures where fully different languages are spoken (rather than merely different dialects), people tend to learn a good deal of each others' languages if there's not too much stigmatization going on. As Mary Louise Pratt argues, bi-lingualism and multi-lingualism are the rule rather than the exception in human communities. George Steiner points out that almost every culture has a "Babel myth": a story of the gods *punishing* humans by giving them divergent languages. But he argues that language difference is actually one of the greatest human blessings.

So my simple point is this: there's nothing inevitable about having a single standard for spoken or written language. Standardization is not built into the way humans use language. What's most inherent in human language use is divergence and small scale convergence--as in a family and community or region. Large scale standardization is not inherent in language; it usually requires political or military force.

Looking Forward to a New Culture of Literacy with No Single Standard for Writing.

So we've seen past periods in various countries where there was no single standard for correct writing: people wrote in their own spoken versions of a language. I see this situation coming to pass in our future too--and starting to emerge in our present. We're already seeing prestige writing beginning to welcome more of the language of easy informal speech: we're seeing more and more "pieces of green paper with pictures of dead presidents on them." McWhorter is right that prestige writing is more and more "infected" with a "low" register of spoken language. A certain amount of academic writing is becoming more speech-inflected. Perhaps the prominent academic excursions into deconstruction and postmodernism helped break down the notion that there's only one right dialect and register for academic writing. Many teachers, editors, copy editors, professionals, and members of the general public, are finally "getting" what many good professional writers have been doing for a long time--and a certain number of good academic writers too: exploiting some comfortable, speech-inflected language to make their writing clearer, stronger, and livelier.

But of course the speech that has begun to infect writers in the *New York Times* and *The New Yorker* and other mainstream sites is mostly *mainstream* speech--some version of standard or standardized English. Prejudice, racism, and classism die slowly. Still we are starting to see more and more respected publication of works with stigmatized versions of English. Lots of mainstream readers read books like *The Color Purple* and *Push*. And as publishers know well, mainstream readers are not the only readers and buyers. Consider Geneva Smitherman writing in Black English in her columns in *College English*. We see more and more writing with code-switching and code-meshing that calls on Black English, Chicano English, Spanglish, Caribbean versions of English, Hawai'ian versions of English, and Australian indigenous-inflected versions of English.   (See Ahmed's *Rotten English* for an anthology of published writing in mostly stigmatized version of English--and also the appendix I have provided for a list of other works that use nonmainstream versions of English.)

On top of this, there is a range of different *World Englishes* around the globe and these have begun to infect lots of serious writing--particularly in business documents. Consider the countries where English calls itself home: the U.S., Britain, Australia, and South Africa. English is not the same in these countries. Microsoft Word will spell check your text for something like a dozen varieties of written English. And in fact *most* speakers of English in the world are African and Asian and don't have English as their first language. There is a growing movement in these places to prefer teachers of English who are *not* from the English metropole "homelands" and don't have English as their first language. These teachers speak a version that's closer to what is used in that region. Most of the differences among World Englishes-- whether in South Africa or central Africa, are born of pressure from spoken languages. (*English Today* is a useful and interesting journal that covers these developments, and many articles are written in an informal style.)

As mainstream writers start to use more of their mainstream informal spoken mainstream English in serious writing, this gives speakers of, say, Black English a *bit* more linguistic wiggle room in their writing. For the interesting thing about mainstream *spoken* English is how much more plural and variable it is than "correct writing." Let me quote again the linguists on the multiplicity in what we call mainstream spoken English:

> If native speakers from Michigan, New England, and Arkansas avoid the use of socially stigmatized grammatical structures such as "double negatives" (e.g., *They didn't do nothing*), different verb agreement patterns (e.g., *They's okay*), and different irregular verb forms (e.g. *She done it*), there is a good chance they will be considered standard English speakers . . . . [I]f a person's speech is free of structures that can be identified as nonstandard, then it is considered standard. (x,,x12)

Let me emphasize this crucial principle of negativity: if you avoid certain no-no's, you have a great deal of leeway or freedom. Geneva Smitherman and her colleagues discovered how this principle opens an important door for speakers of Black English. In quantitative research, she found that writing with *styles* and *rhythms* of Black English was no problem for mainstream readers--as long as it avoided *no-*Black *grammatical* constructions. She and her team researched multiple years of NAEP exams taken by high school students around the country and showed that student writing with what she called "Black expressive *discourse style*" correlated with *higher* scores--as long as it avoided no-no "BEV [Black English Vernacular] *syntax*" (94).

So as we continue down the linguistic path we're on--as our culture loses the fear of *mainstream* speech for serious writing--more space will open up for nonmainstream speech in writing. But there will be a significant period of time during which speakers of stigmatized languages will have to know how to avoid certain stigmatized surface features of grammar if they are writing for many mainstream readers. In other words, we're moving fast towards a situation where speakers of mainstream English won't have to avoid their spoken vernacular for serious careful writing; speakers of stigmatized Englishes will have more leeway for their spoken vernacular, but they'll still have to be careful to edit out certain taboo features of their syntax and lexicon.

Further progress towards the acceptance of stigmatized vernaculars will come gradually. For one thing, there will be more and more good writers of stigmatized versions of English who get an immediate audience of mainstream readers. This comes easily when the stigmatized language is in the mouth of a character. Then gradually narrators or "authors" use this language. First with fiction and poetry, and then more slowly in some "literary nonfiction," and finally in more serious nonfiction. Alice Walker has been a prime mover. There will be gradual increase in the (presently small) number of mainstream readers who read works that are not so easy or inviting. A prime example is offered by the Jamaican poet, Louise Bennett. She writes in a version of English that's difficult for mainstream U.S. and British readers. She is so committed to her local readers and to the nobility of her language (just like Dante) that she insists on it despite any loss of mainstream readers. Her work is good enough to make many mainstream readers put in the extra effort. (See the poem of hers that I quoted earlier, p x, about taboos against vernacular language.) I predict that as this loosening process goes on, we will find more writing by speakers of nonmainstream English who have not till now written much or thought of themselves as writers. Some of what they write will be very good and will win over more readers.

Some will be published by commercial publishers, it is above all on the world wide web that more people will find more writing in stigmatized versions of English that they want to read. It is on the web and in email and chat rooms that we see a new Wild West where there are no official sheriffs with badges--no institutional sanctioned people enforcing a single standard for important written English. On the web, the line between "spoken language" and "written language" is often fuzzy, and it will be getting fuzzier. Of course conventions and

fashions grow up, but (except for certain sites), there are no publishers, editors, copy editors, and teachers to enforce a single standard. Anyone can write any language and any version of English. On line and on the web, you don't have to learn to write right first and *then* try to find readers. You can write however you wish--and see who comes and reads:

> Digitization makes possible a world in which anyone can claim to be a publisher and anyone can call him- or herself an author. In this world the traditional filters will have melted into air and only the ultimate filter--the human inability to read what is unreadable--will remain to winnow what is worth keeping in a virtual marketplace where Keats's nightingale shares space with Aunt Mary's haikus. (This from an important figure in the publishing world, Jason Epstein 4 NYRB)

This process of writing what you want and putting it out there helps people become braver about working on their writing. It helps move them down the path to become better and better writers.

With no one imposing any standard for correct writing--and no institutional power or teacher power--we get a *naked rhetorical open space.* In this Wild West, the only power is *rhetorically based*: the power that emerges from the confrontation between writers and readers. But in a rhetorically open space writers get to write whatever they want. But readers get to ignore whatever *they* want. There may be no single standard for correct language, but that doesn't mean readers will read anything.

In short the absence of a *standard* doesn't mean *no standards*--no judging, no criteria, no care about quality. People judge every time they read or don't read something, and when they judge, they use standards or criteria--conscious or not. On the web we see plenty of blabbing-- "garbage" if you prefer. But we see plenty of good writing and plenty of judging by readers of what to read. Of course prestige and reputation and even friendship will play their role; they are part of any rhetorical space. We like to read what is written by friends or people we admire.

It was just this kind of open space for naked rhetorically-based power that I was trying to set up in 1973 with *Writing Without Teachers.* I was troubled by the power of teachers to impose on students their unilateral criteria for good and bad writing. It seemed to me that the criteria I saw used by many teachers and institutions were deeply flawed. I wanted a space where writers confront readers across a space without institutionally sanctioned criteria. And I tried to set up a naked empiricism of response: careful accounts by readers of what the written words caused to happen in their minds. The writer's job is to write; the reader's job is to give what I called "movies of the reader's mind."

In the oceans of writing on the web, there's plenty of mainstream vernacular spoken English--careful and careless. How much writing is there in stigmatized versions of English? I don't know; I'm not a web denizen. Perhaps there's less than doom mongers fear. We know that people are slow to exploit freedom. Haswell showed that most students write remarkably correct and conventional texts when they are first introduced to freewriting. When the cell door is left open, inmates are sometimes slow to walk out. But writing in stigmatized versions of English for a world-wide audience is on its way to a computer near you.

What Will It Be Like in this Culture of Vernacular Literacy?

In our present culture of proper literacy with its single standard for correct serious writing, potential writers get this message:

> First you have to learn to write right. Once you learn to do that, then we'll find out if you can write anything good.

In a world without a single standard, the message will be more like this:

> Write whatever you want and however you want. Use any kind of language--including your spoken language. You'll find that it's easy to put it out where readers can find it. But if you want any of them to read what you write, you may have to learn to write better. Still, people actually read the damndest things on the web. If you put out what I or other "experienced writers" call junk, some people may read and even reply-- perhaps even many people. But whether or not they read or respond, the main thing is that you get to write it and post it for everyone in the world. And if you do this, you'll be learning to be a writer and getting better at it.

And teachers? What will we do in a world where there is no longer a single standard for correct written English--where it's legitimate to write in any version of spoken English? Our plight will be dire. We'll have to learn to tell the difference between *right* and *good*--between right writing and good writing. There are stages in learning to do this. First we'll learn to judge and give feedback on the *thinking* in a piece of writing--while not paying any attention to whether the surface conforms to the conventions of the dialect we call correct, edited "standard" written English. Most good English teacher can already do this. It's only members of the larger public who are incapable of keeping their attention on the meaning in a text once they find misspelling or "bad grammar." But it's trickier to judge and give feedback on the *style* in a piece of writing once we say that anyone's vernacular spoken language is okay.

But we'll no longer be trying to serve two masters; correctness and quality. We can put all our attention on quality. Many teachers feel obliged to "correct errors," yet it's the least satisfying and interesting part of our job. We know that speakers of stigmatized languages often get most of their feedback on issues of correctness and get too little help with the substance of their thinking. But many mainstream students are also held back by too much preoccupation with correctness as they try to sort out their thinking.

Consider the main substantive criteria that most teachers use in evaluating essayist prose of any sort: Are the ideas good? Is the thinking sound and the reasoning persuasive and more or less valid? Is the organization effective? Are the sentences clear and strong? The important point is that *all these goals can be achieved in any version of English*. Teachers will learn to focus their attention on these substantive criteria and teach them and give students feedback on how well they meet them.

But of course surface features will have to be faced too. The surface of writing is what readers see first--at least if there's something about the surface that they don't like. Even when readers will accept *any* version of English (including currently stigmatized features), writers will still need to work on copy editing.

Spelling. There is a huge psychic investment in spelling in our culture, and that makes it difficult for many people to think rationally about it (see Gunther Kress for very useful work on it). Many people get upset--even angry--at deviations from "correct" standard spelling. If I try to suggest a literacy where multiple spellings are acceptable, I find people throwing up their hands and envisioning mere anarchy. They have trouble seeing the difference between *"wrong*

spelling" (which will no longer be a meaningful concept) and *random, careless, variable* spelling that needlessly distracts or annoys readers. For writing to work well, the spelling should give a good picture of the version of English that the writer wants readers to experience. And of course typos are always a problem. (See *Holy, Wholly, Holey,* [check title] for a dictionary of dictionary disagreements about spelling.)

There is no official orthography for most nonmainstream versions of English, but conventions grow up--especially with the growing amount of publication in versions like AAL and Hawai'ian Creole English. In the publication processes so far, I'm curious about the role of author choice and copy editor decision. Different writers may use somewhat different spellings, but it helps readers if there is a fair consistency within a text so as to avoids needless difficulty for readers.

There was an interesting disagreement among writers of poetry in Hawai'ian Creole English. Joe Hadley was an early good poet in Hawai'ian Pidgin and he argued for a spelling that emphasized the distance between so-called "pidgin" and mainstream English. So what he wrote was correspondingly difficult for mainstream English readers. His most famous poem is "Chalukyu Insai" and it starts out:

yuno smaw kid taim

sooo mach mo pridi no

wai yofala laik skreip damounten ladet

waistaim

I find it a lovely poem--about going to the mountains to find peace inside. I once heard him read it. It could be translated like this:

Look You Inside

You know, small kid time

So much more pretty now

Why you fellows like to scrape the mountain(s) like that?

Waste of time

Most later Pidgin poets chose an orthography easier for mainstream readers. Here's the opening from Juliet Kono's "A Scolding From My Father."

What kind Japanee you?

Nothing more worse in the world

than one Japanee

who like be something

he not

No matter how much you like--

no can!

This change *may* reflect some drift of the Pidgin toward mainstream English. And perhaps there was a role played by a publishing house understandably interested in sales. Bamboo Ridge spearheaded a splendid renaissance of prose and poetry in Hawai'ian Pidgin. (But see Charlene Sato [?] for the story of creoles sometimes increasing their distance from what they are likely to feel as a destructive magnet of the mainstream language.) Interestingly, there happens to be a standard orthography for Haitian Creole. I can't resist attributing to the French tradition there and the French preoccupation with "rational" standardization.

Grammar. Readers who don't object to any version of English can still be annoyed by grammar that is needlessly random and careless. But this is a tricky issue. Inconsistency in grammar--as in register--can be conscious and effective. Teachers will have to think about whether the student is using a hybridity of grammar skillfully on purpose--or even benefiting from effective accidents. I used Krugman to stand for the many good writers who jump effectively back and forth from one level or register or grammar to another. Canagarajah--with his eye on World Englishes and the international scene--explores the widespread and effective use of more hybridity and code meshing. A teacher's job will be to help students decide how much hybridity or inconsistency of grammar to use--and how to be skillful in using it.

So you needn't worry, dear reader, that I'm pretending that good writing will be *easy* when the culture accepts the language of everyone's spoken vernacular. My argument is only that it will be *easier* than it is now: there'll be more of it and we'll end up with more good writing.

Punctuation too. In this new culture of vernacular literacy, literate readers will no longer insist on calling punctuation wrong in those few places where there is a conflict between the grammar rule and the rhetorical tradition and the needs of careful reading aloud.

The Long View

Consider the possibility that we've been going through a brief parochial historical interlude during which the forces of standardization in written language have been peculiarly strong. The eighteenth century brought this climactic frenzy of standardization and prescriptivism, and with it a remarkable resistance to spoken language for correct writing. But when we think of how long it took for Dante's Italian and the other vernacular spoken languages to become acceptable for writing, the eighteenth century was just yesterday.

And now we're entering a period of change. The standard is dissipating--and much more quickly than in Dante's era. With the internet, literacy is on the road towards accepting various versions of spoken language. Globalism is somewhat loosening the grip of many nationalisms. It's nothing less than tragic how English is wiping out so many languages, but in the process, English is getting more than ever multiple and inflected by spoken language.

In most historical periods, schools have had the job of trying to hold the line against change--against *degeneration*. In multilingual and multi-dialectal societies, teachers have traditionally been front line troops in this battle (see --- in *Literacy: A Critical Sourcebook*). But now teachers don't have a prayer of stopping this remarkable process of divergence and the dissipation of a single standard. My suggestion, on the contrary, is that we teachers help move the process along.

I'm not saying we should invite or reward careless or bad writing. (One exception: many people need *help* from teachers in learning to write carelessly so as to exploit the benefits of freewriting or talking onto the page for *exploratory* or *early draft* writing). I see our goal as good writing, and that takes enormous care. But we can now make space for *more* writing that's *better* by inviting more versions of English. We can empower more students to write well by opening the door to the various spoken languages they know best. Still, for the time being, if we want to help our students to succeed in the present culture of proper literacy, we also need to help them edit out the grammatical no-nos that make mainstream readers call the writing wrong.

People in our present culture will continue to confuse writing in different and spoken dialects with *bad* writing. But even though we cannot legislate cultural values directly, we can do it *indirectly* by inspiring more good writing in different vernacular spoken languages--writing that people will want to read. Think of Dante.

I don't see us *so* far away from a world where *everyone* can say

> I have something I want to write. I know it will be hard work to get my thoughts and words clear and strong. I'm sure I'll be frustrated trying to craft it till it's good--and even copy edit. But I'm looking forward to the job because I know that the *medium* I'll be using--the clay I'll be trying to shape and manipulate--is *my own language.*"

A Concluding Vision

Let's imagine what it will be like after we've eventually arrived at this new culture of vernacular literacy. In this world, there will be no prejudice against *any* language for writing (not even against "correct" prestige written English). It's true that a few vernaculars are not so easy for quite a few readers to read (e.g., some Caribbean Creoles), but in the absence of prejudice, most vernaculars of English can be read with ease by most English speakers.

So much for readers, but what will it be like for writers? Here's how a writer might experience waking up in this brave new world:

> How wonderful. When I want to write something, I just open my mouth and write down whatever language comes out. I talk into my fingers. It doesn't matter what brand of talk-language I have--whether it's Texas hill country English or Hispanic/Latino inflected English; it doesn't matter how I choose to spell the words. What I put down will count as officially correct for writing. Hooray! Writing is a piece of cake!

But then months pass while she gives into the excitement and does lots and lots of writing. Further reactions gradually emerge:

> Uh oh. There's a big problem. Writing is a piece of cake. But what if I want someone to read what I wrote. In this new world, readers see my talk-language as perfectly acceptable and comprehensible. But they usually to stop reading after only a few minutes and tell me things like, "This is unclear," "This is disorganized," "This isn't very interesting" "This isn't carefully thought out."

> Oh dear. You mean I can use whatever language that comes out of my mouth-- but I *still* have to make it interesting, clear, and thoughtful? That's hard. I thought writing was going to be easy.

> Still, things are much better than they were. I used to have to meet two goals when I wrote: to get my writing correct and to get it good. Often my struggle to get it correct interfered with my struggle to get it good. Now I can forget about correctness and use whatever language comes easily and naturally. I can concentrate on the more important and interesting goal: making it good. I can put all my attention on how to get my writing smart, strong, clear and interesting to readers.

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