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Inviting the Mother Tongue: Beyond "Mistakes," "Bad English", and "Wrong Language"

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Inviting the Mother Tongue: Beyond “Mistakes,” “Bad English,” and “Wrong Language”

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Every time I say something the way I say it, she correct me until I say it some other way. Pretty soon it feel like I can't think. My mind run up on a thought, git confuse, run back and sort of lay down. . . . Look like to me only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind. (Alice Walker 183-4)

. . . Alice Walker's . . . subject . . . writes herself to a personal freedom and to a remarkable level of articulation in the dialect voice in which Hurston's protagonist *speaks*. (Henry Louis Gates, Jr. 169 emphasis in the original)

[T]he eradication of one tongue is not prerequisite to the learning of a second. (Keith Gilyard 160)

This essay grows out of feeling torn between conflicting goals or obligations. I think most teachers of first year college writing courses also feel this conflict, and I experience it acutely as director of a university writing program. On the one hand, I feel an obligation not to force all my students to conform to the language and culture of mainstream English. (See “The Students’ Right To Their Own Language” [Committee].) On the other hand, I feel an obligation to give all my students access to the written language of power and prestige.

The written language of power and prestige. This is not a very precise formulation, and I will use an equally imprecise but common label for it: Standard Written English (SWE). Precision is not possible here. The conventions of SWE, or what is called correct by prestige readers, can vary from one setting to another--from business to journalism to the academy and even within disciplines. (For example, some will say that SWE forbids all run-ons, fragments, split infinitives, or any use of a capital after a colon; others will say such usages are correct if used well.) But for the purposes of this paper I can side-step such ambiguities and use a highly pragmatic definition of SWE. I say here what I say to my students: “Standard Written English is the usage, grammar, syntax, punctuation, and spelling that will pass muster with most university faculty around here as correct or at least acceptable. Faculty members will differ from each other a bit, but on *most* of these language matters, they will agree.

The most common attitude toward “wrong” language is to want to get rid of it. Citizens of all sorts--whether they are teachers in the schools, college faculty, members of the mainstream general public, spokespersons for culture, or legislators--are likely to agree that a teacher’s job is to “*improve*” students’ language. And students often feel the same goal for themselves--as we ourselves are likely to feel in relation to our own speaking and writing: if the words that come naturally to our mouth or pen are labeled wrong, we feel ourselves to have a problem.

Historical conditions can intensify these impulses to improve language. There has been a series of influxes into higher education of diverse populations whose native dialect was not the correct or accepted one:

[T]he push for “proper” grammar and word usage has been shown to coincide with a dramatic change in the demographics of the college population brought on by relatively more open admission policies in the years after the Civil War (Ohmann 234). No longer could the homogeneous student population of the pre-War years be assumed, as more and more young people from non-elite backgrounds came to fill the universities in search of access to the privileges of high socio-economic rank (Berlin 73; Rudolph 151). [Boyd 57-58]

During this period, as Robert Connors tells us, textbooks emphasized grammar to an unprecedented degree:

Between 1865 and 1895, such elements of mechanical correctness as grammar, punctuation, spelling, and capitalization, which would never have been found in textbooks before 1850, came to usurp much of the time devoted in class to rhetorical instruction and most of the marking of student writing (Connors 65). [from Boyd 57].

After World War II, returning GIs created another wave of “new students” into higher education. Then came open admissions in the 1960s. And now we live in yet another time of extensive immigration into the country and into higher education. In our college and university classrooms, we find an unprecedented number of speakers of nonmainstream dialects and students for whom English is a second language. In addition, it seems to many college faculty and outside commentators that even the monolingual natives--students who grew up with the mainstream dialect--arrive in college with “bad English.” Historical situations like these, then, can fuel desires to preserve the standard or accepted or prestige language intact--to keep it from being misused, debased, corrupted. No wonder we hear strong calls for “English Only.”

But I am *not* trying to get rid of what people call wrong language, errors, carelessness, or nonmainstream language. On the contrary I’m trying to make a safer place for all of it. I may sound perverse to some readers, but my main goal in this essay is to show how the *writing classroom* can be a safer place for such language than most sites of language use--a place where,

for a good deal of the time, students can put out of mind any worries about whether anyone might consider their language wrong or incorrect.

The problem is that students cannot have that crucial experience of safety for writing *inside* our classrooms unless we can also show them how to be safe *outside*--that is, unless we can also help them produce final drafts that conform to Standard Written English. It is because I care so much about making room for the mother tongue and making the classroom safe for what people call wrong that I want to insist that my students learn to produce SWE too. (By "mother tongue" I mean dialects of English, not languages other than English.)

How can we possibly pull this off--especially in a one-semester course for first year students? Especially if it's their only writing course, or their only course except for some "writing intensive" courses or a junior year writing course--a common situation in colleges and universities. Before I offer some concrete proposals, I need to explore the two goals themselves: safety inside our classrooms for the mother tongue and language people call wrong, and also the ability to produce correct SWE.

Because the second goal is so clear and simple, let me start with it: correct Standard Written English. Teachers of other subjects sometimes penalize students more for what they call wrong language and surface mistakes than for other weaknesses in their writing. Issues of correctness become even more weighty from the perspective of race. Lisa Delpit is surely right when she criticizes white "liberal" teachers for handicapping students of color by ignoring their need to master the dialects of power:

To imply to children or adults . . . that it doesn't matter how you talk or how you write is to ensure their ultimate failure. . . . [T]here is a political power game that is also being played, and if they want to be in on that game there are certain games they too must play. ("Silenced Dialogue" 292).

But what about my first goal of safety? It's not that I love language that people call wrong *because* they call it wrong (though my wife thinks I do). What I love is the mother tongue. Most people cannot really feel comfortable or at home writing, and cannot use writing as naturally as speaking, unless they are taught to write in their home voice--that is, in whatever language comes naturally to hand and mouth. People can't learn to write well unless they write a great deal and with some pleasure, and they can't do that unless they feel writing to be as comfortable as an old shoe--something they can slip into naturally and without pinching.

After all, we experience our language or dialect not just as something we use but as a deep part of *us*. Our home language is not just inside us; we are also inside it (see Pierce, Norton, and many of the essays in the volume by Severino, Guerra, and Butler). The metaphor of "mother

tongue” is no joke. How do you think I’ll feel if you shout at me, “Aaahhh, your mother tongue wears combat boots,” or “Your mother tongue spends her life on her back”?

I grew up in the comfortable white middle class. Both my parents went to college and they respected teachers--professors more so. They admired most things intellectual, and along with that, “good” language. Indeed, my mother was a bit disappointed when I came home from two years’ study at Oxford with no English accent, thus revealing a not so uncommon feeling that American English is inferior to British English (meaning “good” British English). I also grew up, I should add, with another mother who spoke Black English.

Despite my linguistic blessings, I have come to notice something interesting when I am trying to copy-edit away my mistakes for a final draft: not just that copy-editing is a bother because it takes so much time and trouble. What strikes me more, now that I’ve come to notice and acknowledge it to myself, is a feeling of resentment against the *actual acquiescence* to correctness. I feel a little sheepish about admitting what seems to be such a childish feeling, but I have a hunch I’m not the only one: “I want you to take me as I *am*.”

There is a crucial larger point here: *Standard Written English is no one’s mother tongue*. People like me have a mother tongue much closer to SWE than many others do, but there is still a distance. The words and constructions that come naturally to my tongue are often inappropriate for writing. Speech and writing are different dialects. For writing, there is still a need to acquiesce--to “give in.”*

*An adult graduate student, teacher of writing, and serious writer (also white and middle class) responded to an earlier draft of this paper with an example that is telling because it is something so trivial that nevertheless still sticks in her craw.

In an essay, I wrote that my parents were going “down to the store.” The teacher lived in our town, our geography, but he corrected the English: “to the store.” I was baffled at the time (I can remember this, even though it was 5th grade) because that is exactly the prepositional phrasing my family used and the phrasing matched our physical reality (the store was down hill). But it was also my mother tongue, in a way. Though only a phrase, I felt a bit taken back. I can’t even begin to fathom what African American students, say, feel in a composition class. (Alex Peary, written response, 12/3/97.)

If I feel I have to give in when I write, then what must many of our students be feeling? When students turn in final drafts full of mistakes, we often say, “How careless!” or “How lazy!” But

now I'm suspecting that plenty of them may be saying--consciously or unconsciously: "If you won't take me the way I am, then screw you."

What if I'd been raised poor or working class and speaking a nonmainstream dialect? Furthermore, what if it weren't just nonmainstream but *bad*? That is, certain dialects are widely seen as inferior, defective, or broken, (e.g., African-American English, Latino or Hispanic English, Puerto Rican English, Mexican-American English, or Hawai'ian Creole English). If I spoke a stigmatized dialect, my speech would be widely experienced as stupid--and I along with it. And I might get this message not only from speakers of mainstream English. Even my mother--whose tongue it is--might call our shared natural speech "bad English" or "trash" talk. Jesse Jackson publicly characterized Ebonics or black English in just such terms. Yes, his response was blurted, and he later qualified it, but his blurt said a lot. ("[S]ome of the most scornful and negative criticism of AAVE [African American Vernacular English] speakers comes from African Americans" [Lippi-Green 200]. Note that my real mother also harbored the hope that I'd abandon her perfectly respectable dialect for a "superior" one.)

Of course middle class white speakers may also be told that their mistakes are "bad English" that imply ignorance. But such mistakes are seldom experienced as implying stupidity. Spanish speakers from Spain who are struggling with English will not feel that their dialect is inherently stupid or trash. The mistakes of ESL speakers from an Asian background are often experienced by teachers as poetic and insightful.

I try to imagine what it would be like if I had grown up with a stigmatized dialect. If I found myself a student in your class and you asked me to write in mainstream English (and I wasn't comfortably bi-dialectal), your request would be problematic. If I went along with you, I would know, consciously or not, that I would have to give in to a culture that thinks my language is defective or bad--or even that a core part of my very self is stupid or bad. Not only that: I would also have to give in to a culture that has been trying to wipe out my culture and what I experience as part of my core self. Besides, some of my best buddies or family members might make fun of me or even disown me if I were to give in and start using your English. ("Over at my school, if they--first time they catch you talkin' white, they'll never let it go. Even if you just quit talking like that, they'll never let it go!" [Lippi-Green 191]. "In the group I most loved, to be fully hip meant to repudiate a school system in which African-American consciousness was undervalued or ignored" [Gilyard 160]. See also Fordham and Ogbu.)

It wouldn't matter how understanding and supportive you were: I'd still be liable *not* to want to give in to mainstream or prestige English--or at least not till I've done some hard chewing and unpleasant swallowing. Yet if you don't find some way around this problem, you will have no success as my writing teacher. For even if you somehow do get me to write correctly--by carrot or stick--I'll be building anger and resentment into the very activity of writing.

If I were a student in that situation, how might you get me to write without resentment--and write more than the minimal required amount? You would have to try to set up the following conditions:

--You would have to show me that you respect my dialect and accept it as a full, complete, sophisticated language--in no way inferior or defective compared to Standard Written English. Fortunately for you, this is something that most linguists agree on.

--You would have to show me that you see me as smart. And not just smart but linguistically sophisticated. Fortunately for you, there is a simple obvious fact here--though I and others in the class will constantly need to be reminded of it: even though I am less skilled in SWE than most speakers of prestige English, I possess a linguistic sophistication that most of them lack. I have had lots of practice in hearing and understanding *multiple* dialects. In fact I have probably learned to switch codes quickly and easily. My mainstream classmate speakers are usually less linguistically sophisticated and more blind to some of the social realities of linguistic variation.

--You would have to make your class a place where I can use my mother tongue as much as I want. Or as little as I want. That is, you have to offer me a real invitation to use my mother dialect, yet you can't come across like bell hooks' teacher and fellow students who told her that her voice was only "true" and "authentic" when she used a Southern black dialect (hooks 11).

--Ideally you would have to set things up so that *other students* see me and my language as fully sophisticated and rich. But let's hope that I would understand that chauvinist, classist, and racist attitudes of some of my fellow students cannot be changed by a teacher in a single course.

I don't mean to imply that all speakers of stigmatized dialects are resistant or angry. Some have internalized the feeling that their mother dialect is indeed inferior or wrong. Such a feeling is understandable for many reasons. Lippi-Green points out that any black student who feels her language to be as good as mainstream English will have to live with "an unresolvable conflict": "*I acknowledge that my home language is viable and adequate' and 'I acknowledge that my home language will never be accepted'" (186, emphasis in the original). Students who have internalized a sense of inferiority about their mother tongue may be compliant and docile, but that very outlook is likely to undermine them as strong users of language.*

Yet how can I reconcile this goal of a completely safe place in our classrooms for the mother tongue and language that people call wrong with my other goal of producing essays that conform to Standard Written English? I'll give my argument in a minute, but first one more delay--one more reason why I want so much for the writing classroom to be a safe haven for the mother tongue.

Walter Ong repeatedly points to the obvious fact that the mother tongue is more deeply connected to the unconscious than any dialect or language we learn later. When language is in touch with the unconscious and draws on it, that language usually has more force and resonance. Writing gains energy, life, and voice when it is fed by the various linguistic elements that permeate the unconscious, but many of these elements are wrong or incorrect in writing: slang, colloquialisms, childishness, idiosyncratic voice, so-called deviant or nonmainstream dialects--and all the kinds of instinctive and bodily-linked utterances and partial utterances that Julia Kristeva calls "semiotic" rather than "symbolic" discourse.

I'm not arguing that the mother tongue and these elements from the unconscious are the only sources of power and vitality in writing. But they are strong sources, and more to the point, *they are the sources most readily accessible to unskilled writers*--especially writers who grew up using nonprestige dialects of English. It is for all these reasons, then, that I take it as my goal to make the first year writing course (indeed every writing course) a place where our students' own comfortable and natural language can flourish--the language that comes instinctively to mind, ear, and tongue. (Unfortunately I cannot take this goal for speakers of languages other than English.)

I've been talking so much about dialects the mainstream culture seems bent on wiping out that perhaps you'll think I have no interest in apple pie mistakes that mainstream speakers produce through carelessness or ignorance of the conventions. Not so. Even if mainstream students don't have the handicap of a nonprestige dialect, they still have a serious disadvantage in writing that needs just as much safety. That is, very few of them have ever had the experience of writing for a teacher while their minds were *focused wholeheartedly on their meaning, topic, or thinking*. Even mainstream English speakers tend to devote a large amount of their attention to questions of correctness in grammar, spelling, and so forth.

How must our writing suffer if some of our attention is always leaking away from our meaning, our reasoning, and our organizing to matters of correct language--wondering what a reader with authority over us will call wrong? Full attention to thinking and rhetoric is not possible unless we can make the classroom a place that is safe for *all* forms of language considered wrong.

How Can I Achieve Both Goals?

So where am I? I'm seeking safety for all language that comes naturally to the tongue, and yet I know that such language *cannot* be safe, and that the mother tongue cannot flourish, unless we also help our students produce final drafts that conform to the conventions of SWE. In the face of this dilemma, I could simply repeat what people might expect from my past writing:

“Just relax about propriety or correctness on early and middle drafts, but then be vigilant about copy-editing at the end. Learn to alternate between opposite mentalities.”

This answer is all very well in general, but it's too general to help us in a one semester writing course that is the only one students are likely to get. Too many students are simply incapable of getting their final drafts to conform to what we call SWE--no matter how vigilantly they copy-edit. We could try to *teach* them everything they need for successful copy-editing, but some students don't need this teaching at all while others need more than we can provide even if we did nothing else. (If I were an English teacher in elementary or high school, I would make the teaching of grammar a substantial part of my curriculum, but I would be with my students more hours per week and more weeks per year than I now get in my college course, and I'd also know that they take English in every grade.)

We could also restrict our *regular* one semester first year writing class to those students who don't need instruction in conventions of usage or copy-editing, and put the others in remedial or basic classes devoted to those matters. But if we take that path, we tend to focus the basic course on “error” and send just the wrong message to students who are least skilled at SWE: “If you want to learn to write, you must first concentrate most of your attention on grammar and correctness. Only after you master surface features do you get to concentrate your attention wholeheartedly on the substance of your thinking.” Also, segregation on the basis of surface features of language can result in segregation on the basis of race and class. I am not arguing against all basic writing courses, but I am troubled by how they often function. (See Royer for a promising approach to placement into basic writing.)

So I'm stuck with the same conflict of goals or obligations I started with, and yet I've dug myself deeper into a hole. By becoming even more committed to safety for the mother tongue, I've made it harder to achieve my goal of giving students power and control over the kind of language that most teachers and most employers will insist on as correct. It seems as though I'll have to give in a bit on correctness. This is, of course, a well trodden path: simply to become a bit more tolerant of final drafts with grammar, syntax, and spelling that deviates from SWE. But Delpit's indictment continues to ring in my ears: that white “liberal, middle class” teachers ensure “that power . . . remains in the hands of those who already have it” (“Silenced Dialogue” 285). I want *all* students to produce the language they need in order to avoid stigmatization by other teachers and readers.

Therefore, in this essay I will suggest another path--one that I have begun to follow in my teaching. Instead of relaxing the “tough” goal of successful copy-editing, I can *reframe* it or rethink it. That is, I can demand and try to teach a slightly different writerly ability--one that is both more important yet in fact more teachable than the ability singlehandedly to get all grammar, syntax, and spelling to conform to SWE. I'm talking about the practical ability to take

whatever steps are necessary to get the desired grammar, syntax, punctuation, and spelling--
even if that means getting help.

“Whatever steps are necessary.” It’s surprising how many students can copy-edit successfully if they just focus their wholehearted attention and commitment to the job. They can access knowledge of conventions that they sometimes trick us into thinking they lack. But of course many students cannot get rid of all deviations from SWE no matter how much they care or how hard they try. They will have to call on help. I urge these students to seek help from various sources: spell checkers, grammar programs (admittedly problematic), writing centers, learning labs, roommates, friends, loved ones, and even paid typists or editors. I offer *help* during my office hours too, though like the writing center, I won’t copy-edit for them. We have no qualms about requiring *typed* papers from students, even if that means some of them pay for the job. We don’t object when professional writers are given free copy-editing by publishers. Why should we object if students also get help? As teachers of writing, we need to recognize that taking whatever steps are needed for successful copy-editing is an important and inherent part of *what it means to be a writer*. (Of course speakers of a nonmainstream dialect may need more than just copy-editing. More about this later.)

The central thing here is a shift in what we require: not the impossible demand that all our students know enough about English grammar and conventions of usage to do it all without help, but rather the pragmatic and feasible demand that they know how to take charge of their writing process and do what is needed. I now simply make this a required part of my course--like attendance--for the four or five most important essays of the semester.

In one sense, this policy is a move toward *softness*--letting students off the hook and condoning “cheating.” But help in copy-editing is not plagiarizing--unless you want to say that all published authors are guilty of plagiarism. It makes me happy when students figure out how to get the help they need. This is feasible knowledge, and it is crucial for success in future courses and jobs. If I say they have to copy-edit successfully without help, I am setting them up for inevitable failure, no matter how hard I try to teach grammar and spelling.

And as for real or substantive plagiarism, this approach is actually a big help. It is much easier to know if students are really writing their own papers when I see early and middle and even late drafts that are very much in their own tongue--for it is inherent in this approach to use at least three drafts on major essays as we move towards an additional copy-edited, “publication draft.” I also have them do plenty of informal writing in class and I see a certain amount of that.

But in another sense, this policy is a move toward *toughness*: students who need the most help will often have the fewest friends and loved ones who can copy-edit well--and the least money to buy help. This could be called unfair, but I’ve reconciled myself to it because I find the alternatives unacceptable: making the class *less safe* for the mother tongue or letting these

students turn in final drafts that will undermine their chances of success with other teachers and employers. And as I've begun to use this policy, I've discovered that students who speak a nonmainstream dialect (and also second-language students) are usually more understanding of the need for these copy-editing steps. They can usually manage my requirement with the help of writing centers and friends; a few pay. It's the complacent mainstream speakers who resent the requirement or can't comprehend that they need help. Mainstream speakers also need to know the pragmatic truth about the power and politics of language. You have to turn in correct final drafts if you want to avoid stigma; but you don't have to do all the correcting yourself.

Admittedly, a few stickler teachers mark down students on matters of surface mechanics on in-class essay exams where there is no chance for help in copy-editing. But my nonmainstream dialect students will be worse off in such situations if they can't even put their best thinking into comfortable and clear language. There are also a few jobs that demand the ability to copy-edit memos on the spot with no chance for help. But these jobs are pretty rare, and I don't think it makes sense to design a first year, one-semester writing course as preparation for them.

Putting This Policy into Practice

This policy can seem contradictory and confusing to students. Some of them think I don't really care about good copy-editing since I invite the mother tongue and carelessness about surface language on early and midprocess drafts. Others think I am "hung up about correctness" with my blanket demand for conformity to SWE on final drafts. And some students are confused when I push them for good thinking, organization, and clarity on *midprocess* drafts while nevertheless not pushing them on correctness. (If a student really wants feedback on surface features on early drafts, I'll give it, but only if this doesn't deflect attention from thinking, organization, and clarity of meaning.) But few students have trouble understanding the policy when I relate it to the political realities of language use. I make it clear that I'm not calling SWE inherently better than other dialects. I'm emphasizing that they can't have success in most college courses and most job situations without writing that conforms to the conventions of SWE.

More to the point, I engage in some concrete practices that I think are worth spelling out briefly:

--I make this copy-editing demand on only four or five major essays. I assign lots of quickwrites, exercises, and informal assignments that needn't be well copy-edited.

--On major essays, I find it crucial to specify copy-editing as a separate assignment with a separate due-date. On my course calendar I have one due date for the "third and almost final draft" (which does not have to be well copy-edited), and then a due date one or two classes

later for the fourth or “publication draft,” and this must be successfully copy-edited. When I used to stop with a third draft I finally realized that I was asking students to do two conflicting cognitive tasks at once: revise for content, organization, and style, *and* copy-edit for surface features. It doesn’t bother me that some students will find the copy-editing assignment quite easy. In the second half of the semester, I sometimes ask for a bit of other homework for the same class.

--I find it helpful to define copy-editing as a blunt yes/no requirement rather than something I grade along a continuum. I compare it to the requirement that they come to class, or that they turn in all previous drafts with later drafts, or do process writing. If I “grade” copy-editing, I am treating it as a matter of talent. Yes, good copy-editing *is* a talent, but I’m purposely taking it out of that realm and putting it into the realm of responsibility, diligence, and self-management--something done or not done. That’s the message I’m trying to send: “If you want to pass this course you simply have to manage yourself and do the things that writers do--one way or another.”

--I try to exploit what seems to me the biggest help in copy-editing: the human voice. Many students have never *heard* what they have written. When they read out loud with any degree of presence and they actually *hear* their words, they make many improvements in the surface features of their words. No, the ear won’t help with spelling mistakes or even usually with forms like “would of,” but the improvements from reading out loud are extensive--*as long as* I train students to be braver and speak with full intonation and to listen with care (see Chafe). Therefore I get students to do lots of reading outloud: in pairs, in small groups, sometimes to the whole class--and often to me in frequent conferences. I use many short conferences for hearing them read their papers outloud and then responding on the spot--instead of taking the papers home to respond in writing. Of course speakers of nonmainstream dialects don’t by any means notice all deviations from SWE by ear, but they do in fact notice and correct a remarkably large number of them, especially problems in punctuation. Much of their knowledge of the mainstream dialect is in their ears.

--In our program we have always used lots of publication. Four or five times a semester every teacher publishes every student’s essay in a class magazine. Students have an easier time taking copy-editing seriously when they see their “publication drafts” in a magazine in their classmates’ hands. We use a lab fee to pay for photocopying class magazines.

--And of course I try to soften my “hard” requirement with concrete help:

--I teach some mini-lessons in usage, grammar, punctuation, occasionally a point of spelling, and we do a few exercises in copy-editing a sample paper.

--I take some class time for discussing ways to get help in copy-editing--just like getting help having papers typed. I talk about what the Writing Center can and cannot do. I try to help them make better use of spell checkers. (I want to learn how to help them

make better use of grammar/style checkers.) We talk about trying to find friends or loved ones who can do a good job, and ways of bartering for help.

--On their first major essay, when I get their third drafts, I write in copy-editing suggestions for the first page or two, and suggest copy-editing strategies they might need to use for the rest of the paper. I may call in a few students who face a big copy-editing job and give them some help in conference--but I concentrate on getting them to talk about the steps *they* need to take to get more help.

--On the days when I return third drafts, I often set up peer copy-editing teams in class. I wander around a bit and try to have some whole-class discussion of specific questions that come up.*

*Long ago in the Bard Writing and Thinking Program I experimented timidly with shared responsibility for copy-editing. Small groups were officially responsible, as groups, for the copy-editing of all their members. If any single member's paper was not well copy-edited, none of their papers were acceptable. See Johnson and Johnson, Sharan, and Slavin for more about this dimension of cooperative learning in various school subjects and levels. I would like to explore this kind of thing again (and would love to hear about successful uses of it for copy-editing).

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An Objection to this Approach for Speakers of Nonmainstream Dialects

“Your approach may be fine for mainstream students, but you can’t invite speakers of other dialects of English to do most of their writing in the mother tongue and then at the end say, “Now just copy-edit out the surface features of the dialect.” Dialects consist of more than just different third-person verb endings. A dialect carries deeper habits of rhetoric and organization. Speakers of nonmainstream dialects who write early drafts in their mother tongue will have to rewrite much of the substance and even thinking of their essays at the end in order to have a college essay in Standard Written English. Where does one find a partner or hire an editor for that job? Thought and language are deeply linked, but your proposal implies that they can be handily separated.”

This objection connects with the scholarship in contrastive rhetoric that shows how culture is linked with language, rhetoric, thinking, and even modes of identity. There is extensive research about how people in different cultures argue and persuade and present ideas differently. For one example, Arnetha Ball, one of the prime researchers of African American English (AAE), researched the modes of organizing and presenting ideas that were used and preferred by a group of African American students and compared them to results for a group of mainstream students. She found that AAE students had a greater tendency to use and to prefer narrative and circumlocutionary modes for presenting their thinking or experience. (For interesting contributions to contrastive rhetoric, see Coleman, De and Gregory, Fox, and Shen. For an ambitious overview of studies in contrastive rhetoric, see Connor.)

This objection also connects with the almost universally accepted advice about learning a new language: “don’t *formulate* your thoughts in your home language and then *translate* them into the new language; it’s far better to operate *in* the new language so you can learn to get comfortable in it.” In short, if culture, language, thinking, and perhaps even identity are deeply linked, it would seem to follow that we shouldn’t ask students to write in their home dialect when it carries a different culture of thinking and rhetoric from what they are supposed to end up with.

In response to this strong objection, I want to propose three arguments.

(1) **I am not writing about ESL.** Most of the research in contrastive rhetoric about the links between culture and rhetoric, and about the difficulties of students who were raised in one culture trying to write in a new one, involves *different languages*. (Arnetha Ball’s research on dialects, just mentioned, is an exception; I’ll take up her findings below. Helen Fox emphasizes the difficulty and anxiety for students moving across entire languages.) In this essay I am not suggesting that students move from one language to an entirely different one, but rather that they move a much shorter distance from one dialect of English to another.

Yet even “translating” may not be so bad. For even though I’m not suggesting that we should invite speakers of Japanese or Turkish to write early drafts in their home language, perhaps it’s not such a wild idea. Some startling research on total translation from one language to another provides interesting support for my suggestion that students engage in a much milder form of “translation” between dialects of the same language. In an careful research study of forty-eight Japanese university students writing in English, Kobayashi and Rinnert compared the quality of their compositions using two composing processes: writing directly in English, and writing in Japanese and then translating into English. They found that all students produced higher quality compositions through translation--though high English-proficiency students benefited much less:

In the translation versions, these students developed more ideas with explanations and specifics, which captured the readers’ attention, and they also used more sophisticated vocabulary and a greater variety of form. These results suggest that composing initially in the first language allows students, especially those of lower language proficiency, easier and freer discovery of meaning (e.g., as discussed by Zamel, 1982 and Spack, 1984) and support Lay’s (1982) and Cumming’s (1989) observations about the benefits of first-language use in second-language writing (201).

(2) **The hardest journey may be from oral literate.** Most nonmainstream or stigmatized dialects of English are oral and not written. Therefore, the journey for speakers of these dialects in writing college essays may not be so much a journey from one language to another, *per se*, nor from one ethnic culture to another, *per se*, as it is a journey from oral modes of

thinking and rhetoric to written modes of thinking and rhetoric. Ball writes: “[S]peakers of AAE . . . because of their cultural and linguistic experiences, rely on oral discourse features” and have “vernacular-based preferences in expository patterns” (“Cultural Preference” 520). That is, the changes in rhetoric and thinking needed for writing college essays are difficult not because the home dialect is a *different dialect* but rather because the home dialect is an *oral dialect*.

Therefore the strategy of asking these students to write out their oral thinking and rhetoric as it comes to the tongue will serve as a helpful midway stage in their journey from oral to written modes of thinking and rhetoric. If we want our students to take on the power of full mainstream literacy, we can never remove the difficulty or even identity anxiety that some of them may experience in having to move past an oral culture (not necessarily to leave it) and take on a culture of literacy. But we can substantially mitigate their anxiety by inviting them to take on *full literacy* in their oral dialect. And let’s not forget that *lots* of mainstream students in our first year writing classes have not read or written very much; therefore they too cannot really be considered to have entered the culture of literacy. Many of them also show the same tendencies toward an oral-based rhetoric of narrative, circumlocution, and indirectness.

(3) Links are not chains. There may indeed be deep links between language, thinking, culture, and identity, but links are not chains. Even a knowledgeable authority about contrastive rhetoric like Ilona Leki insists that a culture does not consist of just one way of thinking:

Despite a possible resurrection of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (see Connor’s essay in this volume), contrastive rhetoric cannot show us the thought patterns of another culture. Rhetorical choices are not directly linked to thought patterns; they are made in response to social, political, and rhetoric contexts and histories. . . . [And] Yet the findings of contrastive-rhetoric research on a single text type (or a small number of text types) have sometimes been promulgated as discoveries about an entire cultural group’s general rhetorical preferences. . . . How many writing teachers of native English-speaking (NES) students would be willing to accept descriptions of English rhetorical patterns based on essays by a randomly selected group of NES freshmen writing in a language other than English, even one as close to English as French, let alone Chinese? (236. Leki is writing in a rich and impressive collection of essays that will probably interest readers of this essay: *Writing in Multicultural Settings*. Severino, Guerra, and Butler, editors.)

The mere use of a dialect or language does not lock someone into one way of thinking or prevent other ways of thinking. Shall we say, for example, that people cannot analyze or think abstractly if they are using AAE? Smitherman is at pains to show otherwise in her *Talkin and Testifyin* and in some remarkable research findings noted below. (See Thomas Farrell for a

striking contrary assertion that such links are indeed chains. He argues that Black children get lower IQ scores because their dialect is oral and lacks “the full standard deployment of the verb ‘to be’ and depends too much on additive and appositional constructions rather than embedded modification and subordination” [481].)

Does mainstream English or SWE “own” certain discourses? Do people have to give up their cultural identity to take on certain rhetorical or intellectual or cognitive tasks? Surely not. I believe we can validly invite speakers of AAE or other dialects and cultures to take on academic tasks and write an academic essay *in* their home dialects--as Latinos, African Americans, or Caribbeans. (Note a related case. The discourses of abstraction, analysis, and logic are genuinely and deeply *linked* with white, male, Western culture, yet plenty of women have insisted that they don’t have to give up their identity as women to use these discourses. See Nussbaum for a vigorous statement of this position.)

Two Strategies for Changing Thinking

So where are we? I’ve been trying to address this objection: “*We shouldn’t ask speakers of nonmainstream dialects to compose in their mother tongue and copy-edit later, because they will have to make substantive changes in their rhetoric and thinking at the end--instead of just copy-editing.*” I hope I’ve given convincing answers to the first part of the objection. That is, I’ve given reasons why it *is* valid to invite these students to compose in their mother tongue (though not to force them to do so). But I have *not* answered the second part of the objection. That is, I fully agree that many of these students will indeed have to make substantive changes in their rhetoric and thinking if they want to end up with strong college essays that conform to the conventions of SWE. Language and thinking *are* deeply linked or intertwined, and therefore my teaching approach makes special difficulties for students who have strong roots in a nonmainstream culture. Let me describe two teaching strategies that I use to deal with these difficulties. I choose one or the other, depending on the assignment, the student, or the point in the semester.

First strategy. I use this strategy when I am pushing for an essay of fairly standard or orthodox structure--that is, an essay that makes a single main point that is well supported with reasons and evidence. I start by inviting students to write about something they care about and to produce exploratory writing or a draft that follows whatever path comes most naturally or comfortably. From a male African American student I get an initial piece of writing that shows various features, some of which are the ones that Ball talks about: it is short; it is narrative based; it treats a personal situation in a personal, conversational way with lots of first person; it has an angry tone and sometimes drifts into hostile second-person address; and it is indirect in that it implies or suggests an overall point but doesn’t really make it. In addition, it uses many surface dialect features of AAE.

As a first step, I get the writer to make it longer by explaining more and by giving more details and examples. But I don't ask for any changes in the surface dialect. Next, on the basis of feedback from me and/or classmates, I ask the student to settle on a main point and give more reasons and argument for it. In addition I get him to think more about purpose and audience and lead him not to direct his anger *at his reader*, but rather to explain in a less angry fashion to *other* readers why his anger at certain people makes sense. (In doing this I am also teaching him about the genre of academic discourse--where you are supposed to speak in the third person to a group of "general readers" rather than speaking directly in the second person to the people you are actually annoyed at.) Only at the end do I get him to make the changes in surface dialect that are needed to get his final draft to conform to the conventions of correct SWE--giving him *some* help but still leaving a lot of responsibility on his shoulders.

This process raises an intriguing question as to the nature of dialect: as he gradually transforms his essay--first in thinking, rhetoric, and organization and finally in grammar, syntax, and spelling--at what point has he abandoned AAE? I think the answer will be a matter of fruitful debate, but however it is settled, it is clear that I am asking him to make substantive changes in his thinking as he moves his drafts to mainstream or academic or "white" modes of thinking and presentation. And thus I have to acknowledge to him that he might experience some of the difficulty or even anxiety that students sometimes experience as they try to adopt rhetorical modes of a different culture from the one they grew up in.

Nevertheless, I would still be able to emphasize to him that he need not, throughout this difficult work, worry at all about his surface language. As he struggles to change his pattern of thinking and organizing, he is still free simply to put down whatever words, syntax, grammar, and spellings that come to mouth and hand, without having to notice, question, or doubt them. So even though I don't want to *minimize* the task this student faces as he tries to change his larger rhetoric, I would argue that this approach considerably reduces the size of his struggle by postponing one very large battle. For the allegedly "minor" or surface features of our dialect are often the peskiest or even the most disturbing elements to try to change.

Of course some students will not *want* to start off writing in their home dialect. They've always tried to write in mainstream English and it feels too odd to do otherwise. Some even feel it would "pollute" their home dialect: "If I have to end up with a white essay, I want to start off writing white." Fair enough; I make it clear that this is fine with me. This is the bi-dialectal path that most speakers of nonmainstream dialects have traditionally chosen: one dialect for speech, another for writing. But I want show such students that they have a *choice*: they don't *have* to start out with mainstream English if they want to end up with mainstream English. And I suggest to these students that they *try* drafting in AAE on some other occasions--perhaps in low-stakes freewrites or quickwrites. The whole point here is to give students more choice about language and dialect. Till now, most students were obliged always to try to write in the

mainstream dialect of English--and made to feel that they had a big problem if they had trouble doing so.

Second strategy. I use this strategy when the final essay doesn't have to follow a strictly conventional academic organization. And this time let me picture a female student, since some argue (Fox in particular) that women in some nonmainstream cultures have special difficulty moving from a rhetoric of indirectness to the full, blunt, hierarchical explicitness that most teachers want in school essays. This could be someone of Latino or Hawai'ian background (or in fact many seemingly mainstream U.S. backgrounds, as De and Gregory point out [122]). In this strategy I encourage her and help her along in writing it "her way"--perhaps beginning with a story or digression, and only gradually circling around to her main point--a point that she finally makes somewhat indirectly and without any oppositional confrontation with contrary views. I try to help her make her essay as good as she can in "her rhetoric." I give her feedback on early drafts to help her make it better, but without trying to get her to change her rhetorical approach.

But then for her final stages of revision, I suggest a way she can try to *fit* this draft to mainstream readers--even academic readers. I show her how she can add a tiny introductory section to this effect:

In my essay I am making the following point: [and here she needs to state her point directly and briefly]. But I think I can develop and transmit my point most effectively if I work up to it slowly and state it subtly, weaving it together with various suggestive narratives and scenes.

And if the ending seems abrupt or inconclusive to me--that is, if it doesn't do what we think of as "concluding" in an academic culture--I might suggest adding a comparable blunt note at the end. Of course she might find these opening or closing sentences offensive, clunky, rude, or even difficult to write. But I would suggest to her that this approach is easier than trying to transform the rhetoric of her whole essay. Thus, where the first strategy involves moving step by step away from one's home rhetoric and dialect--first in matters of rhetoric and organization and finally in surface details--the second strategy invites the student to hang on to home thinking and rhetoric till the end.

This second strategy calls attention to a powerful rhetorical principle: the opening of any discourse has a disproportionate effect on responses by the audience. The opening usually determines whether readers are cooperative or resistant as they read the rest of the text. Cooperative readers often appreciate and even praise the very things they would criticize if they were reading in a resistant frame of mind. An explanatory opening like the one I've just described tends to give readers that crucial feeling: "Yes, I'm in safe hands. This writer seems to know what she is doing." When readers have a sense of where the essay is trying to end up,

they are less likely to feel lost if the path wanders. (This holds even for surface features: readers are usually much less upset over spelling and grammar problems if they don't see any in the first page or two.) Similarly, the closing of a text often determines how a reader decides on a final evaluation of a text.

In describing this second strategy I also need to insist on an important cultural observation. Not all successful academic or published writing uses the slam bam thank you ma'am style: first tell 'em what you're going to say, then tell 'em what you are saying, and finally tell 'em what you told 'em. (The five paragraph essay is the paradigm of slam bam.) Many teachers are grateful for subtlety, finesse, movement, and even indirection, *as long as* they can see the writer's skill and control, and as long as they get the help necessary for not feeling lost or bewildered. In the last few decades, academic readers have become accustomed to an astounding range of rhetorical strategies that are anything but four-square. And our journals are rife with first year writing faculty and writing-across-the-curriculum faculty describing adventuresome forms for academic writing (see Bridwell-Bowles for a classic statement).

In fact I look forward to pushing the second strategy even further. That is, I could invite this student to forget about providing any introductory or concluding assistance to mainstream readers and instead go straight to the final copy-editing. Consider the result. She might well end up with an essay that starts with an anecdote or story and circles around digressively to a main point that is only brushed in. This could be viewed as a very nonmainstream or even "non Western" essay, but in fact it wouldn't be very different from much writing published in any number of magazines and literary journals. Remember, this essay will not be "carelessly" nonacademic and nonmainstream. The writer will have worked hard--with the teacher's help--to make it as good as it can be in "her rhetoric." And it will be in impeccably correct SWE. Indirection and subtlety are much valued and published--as long as they are handled well. Students from stigmatized dialects need to know this. We need to ponder the point that Victor Villanueva makes in looking back at his writing as an undergraduate college student. He points out that his essays were grounded in what he calls a "Sophist" rhetoric--a "Latino sophistic" that neglected logic--yet these essays were highly successful with his teachers because he made his grammar and spelling flawless (87). Citing and analyzing Villanueva, Pat Bizzell argues for opening the door in our college writing classes to "Rhetorics of Color" (her title).

Maybe Speakers of Stigmatized Dialects Don't Have to Change Their Rhetoric

I've been at pains to acknowledge that speakers of nonmainstream dialects will have to change their rhetoric and thinking, not just tweak their grammar and syntax. I like to acknowledge this because it suggests a larger truth about our job as teachers of writing: whether our students

are from the mainstream or not, we usually spend most of our energy trying to affect students' thinking and rhetoric--not just their grammar and syntax. But the example of Villanueva, Bizzell, and Bridwell-Bowles suggest that perhaps there is a bit more room for variation than is sometimes assumed.

For further and more substantive evidence, we can look at research conducted by Geneva Smitherman and a team of readers who analyzed student exams written for the National Assessment of English Proficiency (NAEP). Their main finding was this:

For 1984 imaginative and 1984 and 1988 persuasive NAEP essays, a team of experienced writing instructors was able to identify a discernible black discourse style [involving rhetorical and structural features--which they distinguished from black grammar and syntax] and establish criteria for rating the "blackness" of student essays. The team achieved a 90 percent agreement for 867 essays. Results indicated that students who employed a black expressive discourse style received higher NAEP scores than those who did not. In the case of primary trait scores, this finding held regardless of the frequency of BEV [Black English Vernacular] syntax ("The Blacker the Berry" 94)

Smitherman argues that language and rhetorical norms have changed over time. Her team looked at essays from two earlier tests (1969 and 1979), and found that black discourse style did *not* correlate with higher scores then. She concludes:

" As cultural norms shift focus from "book" English to "human" English, the narrativizing, dynamic quality of the African American Verbal Tradition will help students produce lively, image-filled, concrete, readable essays, regardless of rhetorical modality--persuasive, informative, comparison-contrast, and so forth (95).

One of the important correlative findings by the Smitherman team was that black language and black discourse were *not* necessarily linked. "No correlation was found between a discernibly African American discourse style and the production of BEV syntax" (94).

Of course Smitherman's is only one study (actually she calls on another one too), and her team did not look at college level writing. Still her results suggest that we shouldn't be too quick to assume speakers of stigmatized dialects must abandon *all* the rhetorical and linguistic habits of their culture. When people like De and Gregory point to rhetorical losses for students from other cultures writing for mainstream teachers, they usually base their findings on texts produced when students were trying to start off writing in "proper English." Indeed, many of their examples are taken from timed exams--surely a poor window into students' language and thinking. Students may well pay a smaller rhetorical price when they actually get a chance to compose in their home dialect.

There is another price that students pay when they start off trying to write in “proper English”: what ESL teachers have called “production errors.” That is, students create *additional* deviations from SWE because they are stretching for correctness in an unfamiliar dialect--errors that wouldn’t show up if they wrote in their home dialect. Of course the home dialect produces its own deviations from SWE, but the important point here is this: the grammar and syntax of a nonmainstream dialect of English in the U.S. is usually *less* alien from SWE than many students think. Every teacher is familiar with the destructive effects of students stretching for an unnecessary “propriety” in writing.

A Long Term Goal

My short term goal is crudely pragmatic: to help speakers of nonmainstream dialects come up with good essays in *correct* SWE as quickly and easily as possible. But my long term goal is probably no secret: to honor and help preserve multiple dialects of English and to legitimize their use *in writing*. Do we really want a world with fewer and fewer dialects? Listen to Toni Morrison:

The worst of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language. There are certain things I cannot say without recourse to my language. It’s terrible to think that a child with five different present tenses comes to school to be faced with those books that are less than his own language. And then to be told things about his language, which is him, that are sometimes permanently damaging. . . . This is a really cruel fallout of racism. I know the Standard English. I want to use it to help restore the other language, the lingua franca (quoted in Lippi-Green 185-86).

Linguists tell us that dialects tend to drift toward the dominant language and to die out. I don’t think minority dialects can survive and flourish unless they come to be legitimate for writing. Given the growing recognition of English as a *world* language rather than merely the language of the UK and US, however, it’s not unrealistic to imagine a future where multiple and very distinct dialects of English *are* legitimate and widely used for writing.

So even in a one semester writing course, while we try to make sure that all students get the final drafts of their major essays to conform to the conventions of SWE, I think we can also honor writing in nonmainstream dialects. We can invite students to leave their exercises and low stakes writing in the home dialect--helping send the message that nonmainstream dialects don’t need to be “corrected” into SWE to be legitimate. And even on major essays, we can invite copy-editing into *two* final drafts: one into correct SWE and one into the best form of the student’s home dialect.

Speakers of stigmatized dialects need to know how much good writing is currently being published in these dialects. They need to know about the works of writers like Gloria Anzaldua, Zora Neal Hurston, Darrell Lum, Sapphire, “Sistren”, Alice Walker, and Lois-Ann Yamanaka. As Gates and others have noted, nonprestige dialect tends to appear first as reported speech in poetry and fiction. Gradually it spreads to narrators and to nonfiction. Geneva Smitherman uses African American English even for scholarly and academic writing.

Knowing this, students will be more adventuresome in finding audiences for their writing in nonprestige dialects--audiences that do exist. They will have friends and peers who will appreciate such pieces, and this kind of work is already starting to be published in some campus literary magazines and even at times in the student newspaper. As teachers we may find, as I have, that we enjoy it--particularly because writing in nonmainstream dialects tends to have a stronger and livelier voice. Given how much is now being published in nonprestige dialects, I see a day when many more mainstream readers will also appreciate it.

Some people say nonmainstream dialects are not meant to be written; orality is their essence. I have heard this even from native speakers of these dialects. But Middle English literature and a good deal of Renaissance literature in English is nothing *but* writing in local, oral dialects that varied widely according to region. And much of this literature was widely published--some of it by means of copying and circulating, some of it actually printed. Only later did *one* of these dialects become “standard” because it happened to be the dialect of the region that became economically and politically dominant. This tradition of publication in the vernacular continued past the Renaissance with writers like Robert Burns and, more recently, James Kelman. I suspect that the same thing happened in other countries. Dante wrote in a vernacular of the people that was looked down on by many academics for that reason. All our modern European languages started out as nonmainstream oral vernaculars.

So the truth about writing in oral dialects is more curved and interesting than we might have thought: it *used* to be common and it is getting common again; but we have been living through a long period--in England and the U.S. anyway--when writing in nonprestige oral dialects seems to have been relatively rare. Our present situation highlights a question that is coming more and more to the fore--a dominant question that was the focus of the Spring 1995 special issue of *TESOL Quarterly*: “Who owns English?” In the introductory essay, Bonny Norton asks, “whether English belongs to native speakers of English, to speakers of mainstream English, to White people, or to all of those who speak it, irrespective of their linguistic and sociocultural histories” (422).

Brief Responses to Two Other Objections

(1) I imagine an objection from even a *champion* of nonprestige dialects. I’m thinking of people like De and Butler who worry about minority dialects being “colonized,” engulfed, or tamed

when they interact with English and “Western epistemic practices” (120) and with the “rigors of academic thinking and writing” (123). I can imagine them saying that this colonization process will accelerate if we invite students to compose in their home dialect and then revise into SWE. Perhaps nonmainstream dialects can only be preserved intact by *heightening* their separation--and keeping them oral.

I suspect that the strategy I am describing might lead to more mixing and hybridity; and I admire the pedagogical suggestions De and Gregory offer in their efforts to help students keep the logics of two cultures distinct (they focus more on logic than rhetoric). Still, I suspect that dialects can only survive and prosper if they are widely used--in writing and for various purposes. This will probably result in some change, but I’m worried about the survival of dialects if people try too hard to preserve them in their “pure” or unmixed form. Change is the rule when it comes to language and especially dialect. Standard English itself has changed substantially because of contact with nonmainstream dialects. English, perhaps more than most languages, is itself a hybrid. Pratt argues as a linguist that interaction among languages and dialects is the norm and that linguistic homogeneity is the exception, the “utopia.” William Labov (see Fasold, Stevens), studying Black English, and Charlene Sato, studying Hawai’ian Creole English, both observe an interesting phenomenon: even though creoles *tend* to drift toward the dominant language (in this case mainstream English), Black English and Hawai’ian Creole English are halting in this drift and resisting being swallowed by the mainstream dialect. When students can write early drafts in home dialect and home rhetoric, I think that both their language and their thinking will be stronger and be more their own--even if not remaining pure.

(2) Am I just a “well intentioned white liberal” with a sentimental attachment to other dialects because I already have access to the dialect of power? A friend has called my proposal “lily white.” Lisa Delpit criticizes teachers who introduce “dialect readers” into the early grades and who also, in their liberal looseness, veil their authority and offer students too much choice and therefore too little access to the language of power. Such teachers may be well intentioned, she says, but their behavior serves “to prevent the schools from teaching the linguistic aspects of the culture of power, thus dooming Black children to a permanent outsider caste” (“Silenced Dialogue” 285).

The substantive question is not about my color, I hope, but about whether my proposal sufficiently achieves Delpit’s goal of offering access to the language of power for students of stigmatized dialects. This is probably the most important question raised by this essay, and I acknowledge that the answer is debatable. For my approach here might seem to involve mixed messages about teacher authority, student choice, and the demand for competence in the language of power. On the one hand, I am offering students a new choice of writing early drafts in their home dialect. And I am also inviting them to get help in copy-editing into SWE rather than trying to insist that they be able to do it on their own. Yet on the other hand, I’m insisting that students learn to turn in final drafts in the language of power. In doing so I’m not

using what Delpit calls “veiled commands” (289); I make it a blunt requirement. I’m not sure what Delpit would say about this mixed approach, especially since her criticisms seem to be addressed more to teachers in the schools than to teachers in colleges. (It’s important to remember that I’m talking about a one-semester first year college course; not English courses in the schools.) But she recently made a suggestion about the teaching of writing that is not so different from what I am suggesting here:

Unlike unplanned oral language or public reading, writing lends itself to editing. While conversational talk is spontaneous and must be responsive to an immediate context, writing is a mediated process which may be written and rewritten any number of times before being introduced to public scrutiny. Consequently, writing is more amenable to rule application--one may first write freely to get one’s thoughts down, and then edit to hone the message and apply specific spelling, syntactical, or punctuation rules (“Ebonics and Culturally Responsive Instruction” 7).

Geneva Smitherman makes a similar recommendation:

I am often asked “how far” does the teacher go with this kind of writing pedagogy. My answer: as far as you can. Once you have pushed your students to rewrite, revise; rewrite, revise; rewrite, revise; and once they have produced the most powerful essay possible, then and only then should you have them turn their attention to BEV grammar and matters of punctuation, spelling, and mechanics” (95).

Arnetha Ball writes that

Students can continue to use their informal language patterns while acquiring competence in new academic registers. These kinds of curricula mandate further research on creating bridges between patterns used in students’ home discourse communities and those required for school success (“Cultural Preferences” 525).

Patricia Bizzell has well earned her stripes as not-a-white-liberal, and so it is interesting to hear her thinking in this area. In a short paper for a recent conference, she wrote, “It may no longer be necessary, or even accurate, to say that all students must write only in traditional academic discourse and Standard English to satisfy academic expectations” (“The Need for a Common Language: A Constraint on Civic Literacy?”). In a recent full essay she seems to restrict her focus to “Rhetorics of Color” rather than grammar and syntax of color. In her first paragraph, she acknowledges that “we have a responsibility to teach the standard forms” (1), but in the second paragraph, she turns and devotes the rest of the essay to arguing that nevertheless,

the academy should allow culturally diverse students to retain their home habits of language use and adapt these to academic writing. This means that the academy would

have to accept alternative forms of academic discourse, forms that reflect the students' own cultural diversity (2).

I look forward to more research and conversation as to whether the approach I suggest in this essay provides students of stigmatized dialects enough access to the language of power.

To Conclude

After these excursions into complex and often theoretical matters of dialect and culture, I want to move back to the concrete realm of the classroom. Consider the criteria that most teachers use in judging most essays: sticking to the topic or question or assignment; getting the information or concepts right; having good ideas of one's own; reasoning carefully; giving enough arguments, evidence, and examples; organizing effectively; and making meaning clear at the sentence level. *It is possible to meet every one of those criteria and still use lots of language people call wrong.* Thus it is possible to meet all those criteria before worrying about grammar, syntax, and spelling. (A few matters of punctuation will come up in trying to achieve clear meaning at the sentence level.) And thus it is possible to give students feedback on *all* these criteria and help them satisfy every one--and never once talk about surface features of language.

Once a draft has become strong and clear on *all* these substantive criteria, it's usually not so hard to make the changes needed in grammar, syntax, and spelling for conformity to SWE. Students can get better at this job relatively quickly, and get help with it--*after* they've worked on all the other criteria without worrying about surface features (as Smitherman emphasizes). It may be difficult for speakers of nonmainstream dialects to copy-edit final drafts, but not as difficult as trying to write *all* their drafts in SWE. The same goes for "giving in": it may be galling to give in on final drafts to a culture that seems bent on destroying your culture--but not as galling as giving in on all drafts, all writing.

But this approach can put a strain on teachers. It's not uncommon to hear teachers say they can't pay attention to substance if there are too many mistakes; they need to "clean up the language" enough to see the thinking and structure. Here's a comment I recently overheard on a list serve discussion among writing teachers: "Only now can I really address the underlying thinking and understanding problems because previously the writing was so atrocious that I couldn't see them." This is a common reaction--I occasionally feel it myself. But it's a reaction we need to get over. Premature attention to surface correction has created a serious handicap for many students--plenty of them speakers of the mainstream dialect. Over the years, the writing of these students has not improved enough because they have not been pushed hard enough or held accountable enough on the *substance* of their thinking. Their thinking and rhetoric have been too much ignored because their teachers have too often experienced only problems in grammar, syntax, and spelling. Think about the effects of never being pushed about

weakness in thinking, organization, or even clarity of explanation and only being pushed about your language.

In short, providing safety about language does not mean discarding standards and evaluation. Carelessness about surface language is not the same as carelessness about meaning, thinking, organization, and clarity. We can make it clear to students that our invitation not to worry about grammar, syntax, and spelling on early drafts is our method of asking them to give *more* attention to meaning, thinking, organization, and clarity. We can give them more feedback and hold them more responsible on these matters of substance if we are not trying to correct grammar and syntax on early and mid drafts.

Since I've been trying to cover such a lot of territory in this essay, let me conclude by summarizing my main hypotheses and suggestions:

- It is possible and often beneficial to do most of our writing using all sorts of language that people call wrong and only at the end make changes to get the text to conform to the conventions of Standard Written English.
- Plenty of students will need help in making those final changes, but it is reasonable to invite them to get that help if we are teaching the only writing course they have in college or in their first two years. In teaching such a course, we do not need to take it as our goal that all students know how to make their final drafts conform to correct SWE without help. But we can and should insist that they know how to manage themselves as writers so as to do what is necessary to get their final drafts into SWE--the language of prestige and power.
- Students *can* use nonprestige dialects for whatever cognitive and rhetorical tasks face them. In doing so, they will usually find writing more comfortable and inviting and will usually be able to find more words and ideas and get more force, power, energy, and voice into their writing. This approach might help stigmatized dialects and their cultures to persist and flourish.
- We can make the writing classroom one of the most *hopeful of all sites of language use*: a place where students can learn to put their entire attention on their meaning and not on surface propriety--and where students can use their mother tongue as much as they want (or as little as they want). We can communicate respect for all dialects and help all students realize that speakers of nonmainstream dialects are usually more linguistically sophisticated than speakers of mainstream English.

Perhaps this is the most important benefit for speakers of stigmatized dialects. We can show them that *writing* provides a safer site for language use than speaking--easier access to linguistic

power. That is, when they *speak* to mainstream listeners they must use correct mainstream English--even down to intonation--or risk stigmatization; but when they write to mainstream readers, they can do most of their work in their mother tongue and still end up with a text in SWE.

Finally, I want to call attention to an underlying principle of great generality. Everything in this essay reflects a recent discovery that will stand as one of the most important and enduring principles of literacy: *Anyone at any time can write anything he or she can say; writing is easier than reading and hence serves as a much more empowering doorway to literacy.* It was only a few years ago that Donald Graves (with the powerful help of people like Nancie Atwell) learned that tiny children could be taught how to write before they could read--if only they were shown how to make use of squiggles and invented spelling. Now, kindergarteners and first graders all over the country are learning that they can put their words on paper as naturally and easily as they speak. Children in these elementary classrooms become literate much more quickly and comfortably when they start by writing in their idiosyncratic dialect. Even their relationship to reading improves. Since virtually everyone is far more linguistically sophisticated in speaking than in writing, we do well to call on speech in order to import that sophistication into writing. Putting it another way, more and more teachers are learning to build more bridges to literacy by blurring the boundaries between speech and writing.*

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