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**From the Selected Works of Peter Elbow**

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## Foreword: "When the Margins are at the Center"

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## Foreword: When the Margins are at the Center

Peter Elbow

In *Dialects, Englishes, Creoles, and Education*, ed. Shondel J. Nero. Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006. x-xv.

The authors of this much needed book raise questions more questions than they answer. This is appropriate, given the complex topic. But there's big question they do answer: Should teachers and citizens recognize that the various dialects, Englishes, and creoles we find around us—widely felt as wrong, broken, and bad—are in fact full valid sophisticated languages? The authors agree that the answer is Yes.

We badly need this strong affirmation. Language prejudice runs startlingly deep—in some ways deeper than racial prejudice. When I encounter tolerant people who are remarkable for their openness to dangerous ideas and wrong practices that mainstream society rejects—people who above all sincerely reject racism—I find that a good number of them are deeply intolerant of language they call wrong or bad. They welcome all people and ideas—as long as they are “well spoken.”

Yet when the authors agree on the validity and sophistication of dialects and creoles, they cannot help but raise another question—perhaps larger and more difficult: how can teachers affirm, value, respect, and cherish these dialects and creoles, while nevertheless at the same time helping student speakers gain control of the “standard” or prestige mainstream variety of English that they need for success in school and in most jobs?

This difficult question seems to me the driving force in the book. Virtually all the authors chew on it; they suggest answers of various sorts—sometimes tentatively, sometimes confidently. As a result, the book offers a wide range of thought provoking ideas—and many concrete, practical, classroom-based suggestions—suggestions that teachers all over the country are looking for.

Across the variety of suggestions and approaches, I sense one main theme: *build on strength*. That is, when teachers want to help students get control of the prestige mainstream variety of English, they will do best by building on the sophisticated linguistic command of their home language that all students bring to the classroom. Indeed, most students who speak a non-mainstream variety of English have been negotiating dual languages for much of their lives. For this reason they tend to be more linguistically sophisticated than most mainstream students in their understanding of how language varies and how it is a site of power and influence. It is possible for teachers to build on this rich linguistic strength in order to help them attain command over the standard variety. (This is the theme that has driven the two essays I've written about varieties of English.)

There's another large theme hovering over this book: *what looks marginal can turn out to be central*. What looks normal is really a parochial special case, and what looks special or odd or “other” is actually a fuller and more accurate picture of how things are.

The first time I became aware of this theme—and how it can turn one's head around—was in my reading about the history of science.

- For example, it looks as though we earthlings are at the center and the sun revolves around us from a peripheral position; indeed when Galileo argued against this view—at his peril—most of the empirical evidence was against him. His breakthrough consisted of imaginative model-making that was hard to support empirically. (See Burt's splendid important book on this story.)
- It looks as though every moving object—bicycle or billiard ball—eventually slows down and stops once we stop pushing it (unless it's rolling down hill). But actually, all bodies in motion keep going for ever unless something gets in their way. In order to come up with

this odd but true universal law, Galileo had to start by thinking of the planets as a special case--heavenly bodies moving in a "heavenly space"--completely unlike earthly bodies in our dull heavy "sublunar" realm. By thinking about what seemed marginal beyond the borders of the earth, he and others were able to work out crucial and counter-intuitive insights about everything on earth. (See Burt on this story too.)

- As we fly in fast airplanes, it looks as though our watches work fine and objects stay the same size. But experiments have confirmed the counter-intuitive principles of relativity and demonstrated that objects at high velocities actually get smaller and heavier--and time slows down. Our sense of constancy is misleading: it's a "parochial" special case that applies only to what we see in our small "parish" (the root of the word *parochial*).
- It looks as though we cannot destroy matter even if we burn it: all the bits are still there in the smoke and ashes; all the atoms or molecules are "conserved." But again, relativity shows that matter is *not* conserved and can in fact be transformed into energy. Again, our local parochial view misleads us about the larger real picture.

If we turn from physics to language we will see that the same principle often applies: What looks odd or marginal or local can give us a better picture of how things really work:

- It looks as though monolingual groups are the norm and multilingual folk who live at the margins of these groups are the exception. Ivan Illich and Mary Louise Pratt both show that this view is parochial and misleading: "Communities in which monolingual people prevail are rare . . . . To take it for granted that most people are monolingual is typical of the members of the middle class" (Illich 46).
- It looks as though each individual's spoken language is a kind of local, imperfect approximation or imitation of the *real* collective language that he or she is using—whether it's English or Chinese. But actually, the truth is the other way around. In *The Linguistic Individual*, Barbara Johnstone points out that languages are treated as if they were superorganic, existing outside the individual and available for logging into, like mainframe linguistic computers. . . . But no two people do in fact have exactly the same history of linguistic experience, so no two grammars can be exactly alike. . . . [E]ach individual's grammar is distinct . . . . [G]rammar and cultures are never completely shared . . . . (173-4)

What we think of as real languages are fictional imitations, convenient abstract constructs. What's most real is what appears peripheral and marginal—the unique and separate languages spoken by different individuals. Our parochial thinking *works* if we are content to look at language through a gross lens--just as the gross lens of Newtonian physics works for most objects we actually have to handle. (Interestingly, our parochial thinking about language is just like Plato's theory that the *Idea* of a bed is real, while individual physical beds are imperfect imitations.)

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It's clear, I trust, how these stories apply to the book you hold in your hand. Dialects and creoles are widely assumed to be marginal—in comparison to "real languages." Schools develop curricula that are "special" and "other" for speakers of dialects and creoles. But if linguistic individualism and uniqueness are the reality, and if multilingualism and contact among languages are the norm—i.e., *mixture and hybridity*—then it turns out that this book is crucial for helping us correct our parochial misunderstandings about how language actually works. We need to have our heads turned around in order to "re-see" or "re-understand" the learning and teaching of language. We need to look at dialects, creoles, and pidgins in order to correct our mistaken assumptions about what is truly normal or truly mainstream in language--and to try to think more carefully about what a normal mainstream classroom might actually need.

Here are four concrete examples of parochial assumptions about “normality” and how they need to be re-interpreted through a process of looking more closely at dialects and creoles:

(1) It looks as though dialects and creoles change while standard languages are stable. The very concept of *standard* means there is a fixed model and individual usage tends toward it. (Consider the history and etymology of the word *standard*. Originally it was the flag held aloft by a soldier at the head of the troops--someone whose job was to keep it aloft even as everyone around him was struck down or starting to retreat.) But we need to turn our heads around on this matter. In fact the “standard” itself is constantly changing. Our teaching and curricular planning would improve if we paid more attention to the fact that change is the norm. For example, both mainstream and dialect-speaking students would find the study of “standard correct grammar” more interesting and memorable if it were presented as drifting--especially when it can be shown how this drift is almost always toward what is considered “wrong”--which is usually towards what’s more common and comfortable for them. (Even linguistic researchers sometimes buttress that the misleading idea of an unchanging standard with their research about how dialects and creoles tend to drift toward the standard or sometimes move away from it.)

(2) It looks to most people as though dialects and creoles are hybrid while “regular” languages are more pure. But we will understand and teach “pure” languages better if we learn from dialects and hybrids about the hybridity in all languages. Renato Rosaldo puts it succinctly. On the one hand, hybridity can imply a space betwixt and between two zones of purity in a manner that follows biological usage that distinguishes two discreet species and the hybrid pseudo species that results from their combination. ... On the other hand, hybridity can be understood as the ongoing condition of all human cultures, which contain no zones of purity because they undergo continuous processes of transculturation (two-way borrowing and lending between cultures). Instead of hybridity versus purity, it is hybridity all the way down" (xv).

(3) It looks as though “regular” “mainstream” students grow up with a language appropriate for writing, whereas dialect and Creole speakers are disadvantaged because their languages are not. Yet of course the constant experience of mainstream students is that even their “standard,” sanctioned version of English is inappropriate for writing. In fact, standard *written* English is *no one’s* mother tongue. Everyone has to learn writing as a new language.

This fact is important because in schools, writing trumps speaking. “Competence in English” in a school context tends to mean command over syntax and writing. A student who has problems there will be called “deficient in English” even if he or she has good competence in speaking and wields a large vocabulary. Stephen Krashen points out an odd asymmetry that makes matters worse: our culture seems to insist on virtually 100% accuracy in writing, but nothing like this high standard for speaking, reading, or listening. In short, our parochial assumptions lead people to focus on a “dialect problem for marginal students when they write,” whereas in fact *all* students face a speech/writing problem they must learn to overcome.

(4) It looks to many in the general public as though mainstream speakers have a language whereas others have a dialect. Of course lots of others *are* aware of a central insight from linguistics, namely that every language is a dialect and every dialect a language. But there’s another parochial misunderstanding that is widespread even among scholars, policy makers, and teachers. That is, it looks as though mainstream speakers operate safely from within the “standard” language while speakers of dialects and creoles feel a pressure that comes from operating outside it—the pressure that comes from the difference between how they actually speak and how they “ought to speak.” But in fact, mainstream speakers too (especially in

school) characteristically have the same experience of finding that the language that comes most naturally to their mouths and minds is considered wrong and in need of correction. Virtually all students in a culture like ours—where the culture of schooling and the culture of literacy are strong—are constantly experiencing a pressure from “the standard.” Ivan Illich recounts for us the remarkable history of how this situation came about.

It turns out that what we take for granted as normal—classrooms that teach “proper English” to everyone—is in fact exceptional and stems from an amazing historical event. In the same year that Columbus persuaded Queen Isabella of not-yet-Spain to fund his adventure, a grammarian persuaded her to fund an equally pregnant adventure. Nebrija was the first man to write the grammar of a the European national language--and probably the first ever to write a grammar of any current vernacular spoken language. He persuaded Isabella that her reputation would soon wither unless the current Castillian dialect were regularized and preserved (to become what we call Spanish). In addition, Spain was in the process of expelling all Moors and Jews and enlarging its territory, and Nebrija also argued that “language has always been the consort of empire, and forever shall remain its mate” (from his *Gramatica Castellana*, quoted on Illich 33).

But Nebrija didn’t write a grammar of Castillian as it was spoken; he “fixed” it—in both senses of the word. “[T]his our language has been left loose and unruly . . . . By means of my grammar, [the people] shall learn artificial Castilian, not difficult to do, since it is built up on the base of a language they know; and, then, Latin will come easily . . . .” (43 & 37) Illich comments:

Outside of those societies that we now call Modern European, no attempt was [ever] made to impose on entire populations an everyday language that would be subject to the control of paid teachers or announcers. Everyday language, until recently [the Renaissance], was nowhere the product of design; it was nowhere paid for and delivered like a commodity. (47)

Illich argues that throughout most of human history and throughout most of the world, people have not been considered needful of *instruction in their mother tongue*. Only in our parochial culture are we somehow tricked into thinking that people cannot possess their mother tongue without being taught in school.

Formerly there had been no salvation outside the Church; now, there would be no reading, no writing--if possible, no speaking--outside the educational sphere. . . . (37)

Thanks to the exceptional events Nabrija set in motion, no one in our culture operates safely from within the “standard” language, and the experience of “dialect” speakers highlights what we need to understand as the experience of mainstream speakers.

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In short, this helpful book about what the culture defines as “other”—dialects and creoles and alternative versions of English—serves in fact to give us a better window on the subtle realities of all human language. These realities that are ignored by most teachers and most curriculum planners because they concentrate parochially on mainstream classrooms and mainstream languages. In planning mainstream classrooms, they think they are “leaving out the exceptions,” when in fact they are leaving out what’s central but hidden from them. We are accustomed to thinking of science as the realm of subtle realities that are hidden but powerful, but a book like this one helps us see subtle hidden but powerful realities of language that we need to understand for *all* good language teaching and language policy.

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