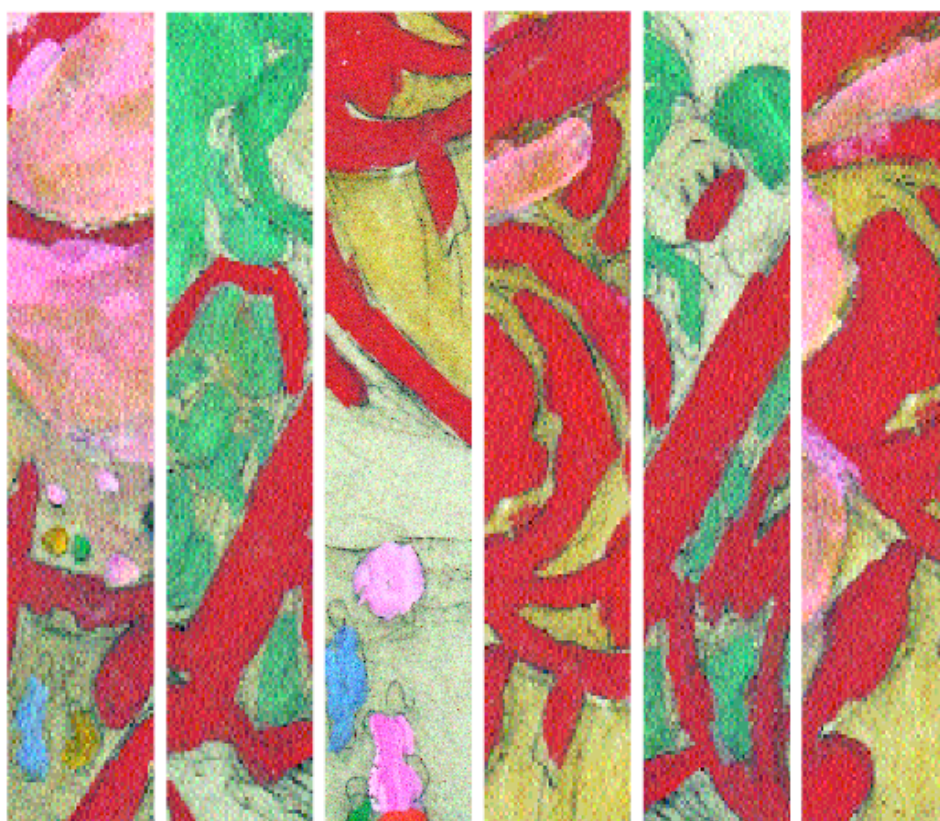


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Introduction

Language performance continually acquires interpretations relating to power and status within a social context. The need to conform to established practices is rarely challenged directly. This paper examines a number of practical instances where aspects of language performance conflict with conventions of established discourse communities. The resulting uncomfortable compromises are analysed in terms of the natural and pragmatic strategies which are likely to operate. A number of processes eventuate in such situations and it is hypothesised that harnessing them may lead to more pedagogically effective practice. However, the development of such practice depends on a firm awareness of the types of linguistic current that run through largely unquestioned established contexts.

This paper will initially examine three vignettes involving language conflict of various types, before proposing a model to try to illustrate the general process that occurs in such situations. The model will then be tested in terms of a fourth scenario to illustrate that contexts that may seemingly be well established may be less powerful than they appear.

Many institutions espouse stylistic tolerance, that is, equity of esteem for language variation (Dawkins 1991). However, the reality of both wider and specialist community expectations remains and there is thus likely to be a divergence between principle and practice.

A first vignette: Vulgarly in Non-Standard Usage

Motivation for this paper came from an incident during 2001 in a country school in the western part of New South Wales, Australia. Over 90% of the pupil population in this part of the state is of Aboriginal Australian heritage. These children retain very little of their heritage language and speak a creolised form ('Aboriginal English') as their mother tongue. Federal legislation in Australia recognises such languages as legitimate means of communication in Australian communities and implements anti-discrimination policies which are designed to prevent people from being disadvantaged due to their language, ethnic background, skin colour or religion.

However, within the school context, both State and Federal expectations are geared towards conformity (Dawkins 1991). This tendency is illustrated by processes of Benchmarking (Curriculum Corporation 1999), the use of standardised testing of conventional literacy and apparent belief in the universal applicability of 'standard'

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Australian English. This poses an immediate dilemma. The official context favours the standard or prestige form of the language while tolerating, even encouraging, the use of various vernaculars. Conversely, student users clearly favour their own language while often having very little association with the prestige form. This can be particularly true of the written form of Standard English. Many Aboriginal communities retain their ancestral oral traditions, largely neglecting written language of any type (Blake 1981).

The incident in the country school involved a teacher of English encouraging her students to use their vernacular language form in order to develop their writing skills, in accordance with the syllabus directive that:- “The starting point of a writing program is the students’ existing levels of oral and written language and the students’ experience of real life, gained directly and vicariously” (BofS 1987 p.31) and “Non-standard dialect is not sub-standard language. The concept of language deficit is misleading and negative” (BofS 1987 p.17).

The teacher had successfully encouraged students in this school to use their vernacular to produce poetry and personal writing both inside and outside the classroom. However, features of vernacular usage included many instances of words (such as expletives derived from reproductive metaphors) regarded as being ‘taboo’ in Standard English. These words were once characterised as being illegal “unseemly” words and they remain inappropriate for polite conversation within the prestige form of Australian English.

A relieving teacher examining the children’s books was totally shocked at reading such language and complained vehemently, claiming that the school’s acceptance of such language amounted to tacit approval and thus undermined the broader aim of encouraging children to acquire the standard form of the language. However, attempts to have children become literate in a language that they don’t speak have long been recognised as being futile, so it seems that if these children are to increase their chances of becoming literate, either the ‘offensive language’ principle must be ignored or else anti-discrimination processes must be contravened.

When language performance conflicts with established convention ...

It seems fairly clear that the representatives of the ‘official’ context, that is, the teachers, administrators and policy makers, are often comparatively unaware of the complexities which arise when they attempt to implement a system that tries to ignore social values in pursuit of a higher ‘merit’ such as universal literacy. In many cases, school teachers are not fully conversant either with the nature of the language that children use, or how effectively they can use it.

This can be illustrated by another anecdote from a country New South Wales classroom. A teacher in a country town asked eight-year-old George, an Aboriginal boy, to pick up a spare chair and place it *‘in front of’* the blackboard. George looked around at his friends and giggled but made no move to comply. The teacher repeated the instruction but was met with the same non-response. She became angry and ordered George out of the room, calling him obstinate and saying that he was unable to obey a simple instruction.

One of the authors of the present paper was observing the class and became interested in the incident. On examining the extensive collection of language samples that he had recorded from the Aboriginal children in that class, he could find no instance of the form “in front of”, the closest example being “out the front”. The linguist set up an impromptu test with a toy car and a dolls’ house and asked the Aboriginal children to park the car *‘in front of the house’*. Over 80% of the children picked up the car and parked it in the living room; ‘in front of’ seemed logically opposite to ‘out the front’, and if that’s what the eccentric linguist wanted, the children were willing to comply. However, there was no way that George could make

sense of the ‘simple’ instruction to place the chair “in front of the blackboard” and he was punished for his lack of understanding. Clearly, the teacher was unaware of the differing distribution of prepositional phrases in the dialect of the children that she was teaching.

A second vignette: Tertiary Students for whom English is a Second Language

Similar conflicts occur for those teaching students who have English as a Second Language. Again, the official stance is that the students’ interlanguage is “acceptable” but those students are encouraged to acquire skills in the standard form in order to maximise opportunities within the broader community (BofS 2002). Within such institutions as Universities, however, such semi-developments as an interlanguage have suspect validity (Cairney 1995). In exploring language use in university settings, Wilson investigated the stated attitudes of lecturers towards interlanguage forms, and then asked those lecturers to mark pieces of work that had previously been graded on an International Language Testing System (IELTS) scale. “A major finding ... was the fact that, despite their protestations about poor standards of literacy among NESB (Non English Speaking Background) students, lecturers were generally unwilling to fail students because of such shortcomings. Although many of the qualitative comments asserted the essential nature of literacy skills, neither the stated policies ... nor the actual marking performances (of lecturers) showed willingness to fully penalise students for variations in language form, so long as communication was retained” (Wilson 1995 p.103.). Further investigation suggested that this was not so much a case of lecturers failing to practice what they preach, but more one of conscious prioritisation, where literacy conformity was considered to be less ‘essential’ than the need to be able to communicate adequately. This differs from the school responses described earlier, where acceptance of the non-standard features was vehemently opposed. What seems to be occurring in both the Aboriginal English and the ESL context is that there is a clash between the actual expectations of the established context (regardless of what the stated principles say) and the productions of those with variant language forms. In the former case, the language productions are dismissed as being of no value, while in the latter, they are tolerated, though still being subjected to severe criticism.

Such interaction between style and substance has also characterised discussion of the language of science.

A third vignette: Scientific English

Adept users of prestige dialects are able to recognise, and respond appropriately to, shifts in language style. We shift into, and out of, the styles appropriate to paddock, shopping centre, stables, workplace, beach, office, sports field and bar. However, we do so unconsciously and our non-linguist friends would often be hard put to explain the differences between the language we use in those various situations. People who are trying to learn a new language find this particularly difficult and so much of the useful material for thinking about these issues has come from people who are trying to teach English as a foreign language or, more particularly English for Specific Purposes (eg., Holme 1996, Swales 1985, 1990).

Student difficulties with science language fall into a number of areas (Cantor 2001). There are problems with talk (Dagher & Crossman 1992, Lemke 1982, 1990, 1998; Ogborn et al 1996, Roth et al 2001), reading (Koch & Eckstein 1995, Wellington 2001), writing (Prain & Hand 1999, Unsworth 1997) and assessment (Lawrence & Pallrand 2000). If style shift does not occur then neither does student access to science. Thus, scientific English forms a *stylistic*

barrier which is best dealt with directly by making its features explicit and helping students over the barrier by helping them to decode the style.

Language, style and science

An earlier investigation used 12 language tests based on an enhanced version of cloze technique to identify the features of the language of science which were causing difficulty for 2606 secondary science students from 57 different linguo-cultural backgrounds (O'Toole 1998). The data coming from the use of **one** of the cloze tests from that wider study have been re-analysed to form the basis of the following discussion.

The data gathered in this investigation allow fairly precise linguo-cultural contrasts to be drawn. Table 1 shows the comparison between the difficulties with the scientific style of English being experienced by students from nine specific linguo-cultural backgrounds, as shown by their results on one of the cloze tests which was the basis of the wider investigation. The passage on which this cloze test was based was drawn from a widely used secondary science text and dealt with the human body's defenses against infection.

Table 1: Who is having trouble with what?

	Student Specified Heritage Language ¹	No. % of sample	Noun % wrong Comp. Sample D'fclty	At'cle % wrong Comp. Sample D'fclty	Verb % wrong Comp. Sample D'fclty	Prp'n % wrong Comp. Sample D'fclty	Tchlty % wrong Comp. Sample D'fclty	Word Stacks % wrong Comp. Sample D'fclty	Pas've Voice % wrong Comp. Sample D'fclty	Cohsv Device % wrong Comp. Sample D'fclty	Avg. D'fclty % wrong Comp. Sample D'fclty
A	English	167 (19.2%)	44 +1	28 0	38 -1	40 -6	36 +4	24 +5	35 -1	40 -5	36 0
B	Patwa ²	12 (1.4%)	56 +13	43 +15	48 +9	57 +11	49 +17	43 +24	44 +8	54 +9	49 +13
C	Greek	9 (1%)	50 +7	38 +10	57 +18	47 +1	46 +14	33 +14	70 +34	48 +3	50 +14
D	Mandarin	166 (19.1%)	33 -10	18 -10	26 -13	37 -9	22 -10	13 -6	18 -18	35 -10	25 -11
E	Cantonese	19 (2.2%)	41 -2	21 -7	28 -11	37 -9	29 -3	19 0	28 -8	40 -5	30 -6
F	Hokkien	32 (3.7%)	32 -9	21 -7	29 -10	41 -5	21 -11	13 -6	26 -10	38 -7	28 -8
G	Other Chinese	48 (5.5%)	34 -11	18 -10	24 -15	35 -11	24 -8	15 -4	24 -12	36 -9	26 -10
H	Pilipino	369 (42.4%)	48 +5	33 +5	48 +9	55 +9	36 +4	19 0	45 +9	52 +7	42 +6
I	Other Philipino	12 (1.4%)	43 0	43 +15	54 +15	63 +17	30 -2	19 0	53 +17	54 +9	45 +9
J	Reduced Sample	834	43	28	39	46	32	19	36	45	36

NOTES:

¹ The authors would like to thank Prof. Ma. Christina Padolina, Dr Goh Ngoh Khang and Mr. Seamus O'Mahoney for their invaluable assistance in co-ordinating data collection in the Philippines, Singapore and Britain, respectively.

² this is the label for their home language provided by children from London families of West Indian ethnicity

Table 1 is based on analysis of student responses on a single cloze test. Student data was recoded so that a **clear error** = 1 and acceptable replacement or defeat was = 0.

Cloze test deletions were classified by language category.

Two SPSS routines were written ("dictionary categories" + "modern grammar categories").

These did the following:

- 1) count number of items representing a particular language category (eg., nouns) a student got wrong
- 2) divide that number by the number of items representing that category (eg., nouns) deleted (in
- 3) this case, 18) to give the mean category (in this case, noun) difficulty
- 4) multiply that mean by 100 to yield a percentage.

MANOVA techniques (taking language categories as the dependent variables and heritage language as the independent variable) indicate that there is a less than 5 in 1,000 probability of the differences between the means shown on Table 1 being due to chance. The results are robust enough to allow meaningful discussion.

The result cells on Table 1 represent the percentage of category deletions which students who claimed the particular heritage language could *not* process correctly. For example, comparison of rows A and J indicates that the 167 English language background students in this sample got 44% of the noun-deletions clearly wrong on the particular cloze test, compared to a reduced sample (834 students) mean difficulty level of 43%, yielding a comparison score of +1 for noun difficulty. Students who identified English as the only language spoken in their homes were unable to conceptually correctly replace an average of 36% of the deletions making up this cloze test and that percentage also indicated the reduced sample level of difficulty (the error total) for this cloze test.

The table illuminates a number of frequently unrecognised facts of life in secondary science classrooms. The 'Reduced Sample' row indicates that the language of the text which formed the basis for the particular cloze test caused significant levels of difficulty for these 834 students. On average, they were unable to conceptually correctly replace 43% of the deleted nouns, 46% of the deleted prepositions (an echo of the problems George had in the second of the anecdotes which began this paper) and 45% of the cohesive devices. This indicates that many of these students would be unable to draw much meaning from text such as that on which the cloze test was based.

Student difficulties with nouns and technicality are predictable but difficulties with verbs, prepositions and cohesive devices may come as more of a surprise to mainstream science teachers. The relatively high degree of difficulty experienced by students who indicated they came from monolingual English-speaking homes is particularly notable (comparatively: nouns +1, technicality +4, word stacks +5). Much of the Western resistance to direct treatment of language issues in mainstream classrooms rests on arguments of 'majority equity': "*Most of my students are ordinary <insert nationality> children (meaning monolingual speakers of the local prestige dialect of English), why should I slow them down for the sake of the few who are having trouble with the language I use?*" These data demonstrate that even the supposedly linguistically adept are having trouble with the

language of science and suggest that action designed to help those students who are experiencing greater difficulty will be of assistance to those of their classmates who might be expected to experience less.

Table 1 also poses some interesting questions for further research. For example, the relatively high performance of students from homes where Chinese languages are spoken is noteworthy, if not entirely unexpected. Children from such families have been performing very well on international tests of science for a long time. In 1993 McPhan commented that such features of Asian culture as effort, diligence and a de-emphasis of individual differences might well translate into increased motivation and consequent high rates of academic success. These same features may be influencing the specialist language performance of children from homes where Chinese is spoken. It follows that the relatively low performance of children where Philipino languages are spoken is also of interest. It may possibly be that cultures which assert an on-going distinctiveness provide a basis from which children may engage with specialist language use in another language as a puzzle to be solved while those which are more easily seen as peripheral, temporary or devalued provide a less sure footing for children encountering language variation.

In the present context, it is the results for students from homes where non-standard dialects are spoken which are of most interest (Table 1, Rows B, E, F, G, I). ‘*Patwa*’ is the dialect label used by children from London homes where the West Indian dialect of English was spoken. Although Patwa and Aboriginal English are widely separated in both history and location, they are both technically ‘creoles’. Children from Patwa-speaking homes had consistently greater degrees of difficulty with all of the features of scientific English involved in this investigation (see Table 1, row B: 49% average difficulty). Children from homes where Chinese languages were spoken generally exhibited fewer language difficulties than those from other language backgrounds (27% average difficulty). Those from Mandarin-speaking homes (row D: 25% difficulty) had fewer difficulties than those from homes where non-standard Chinese languages (Cantonese, Hokkien and Other) were spoken (rows E: 30%, F: 28% & G: 26%). Pilipino (row H) is the standard language of the Philippines and students who came from homes where non-standard forms of the language (row I) were spoken had more difficulty (45%) with the language of science than their standard-speaking classmates (42%).

It appears that children who come from homes where non-standard dialects are spoken experience a greater degree of difficulty with the scientific style of English than their classmates whose families use any prestige language form. Everybody is having too much trouble for comfort, but some students are having more trouble than others. This may matter when students’ knowledge is assessed.

Student assessment in language-rich contexts

Science examinations in New South Wales have traditionally relied on multiple choice items supported by questions requiring students to write answers of no more than eight to ten lines, scaffolded through explicit segmentation of the question. The norm-referenced approach adopted in the past has recently been replaced by a standards-based one. The format of the Higher School Certificate examinations has also changed somewhat. One of the changes included in the ‘new HSC’ involves the use of unscaffolded essay questions in science papers. The most able science students are identified on the basis of their ability to write 10-15 line answers to essay-style questions which lack explicit segmentation.

This change foregrounds student control of focussed language use in an established context.

The impact of the removal of scaffolding from examination questions was explored by O'Toole, Irwin and Jolliffe (2001) with a scientifically able group of 16 year old monolingual speakers of the local prestige dialect of English. Students did better on scaffolded questions than they did on matching unscaffolded ones. The results of this later investigation suggest that the removal of scaffolding will produce lower student scores because of the change in format rather than any difference in student understanding of the science content. It is likely that the removal of scaffolding may have an even greater impact on the apparent science performance of students from more linguistically diverse backgrounds. Interpretation of unscaffolded essay questions and the production of appropriate answers within tight stylistic parameters are clearly language skills.

Student access to relatively scarce educational resources

A recent Australian report documents the tertiary entrance performance of a group of over 13,000 secondary school students who were the subject of a longitudinal study from 1995 to 1999 (Marks, McMillan & Hillman 2001). The report shows that the average student from an Asian background easily outperformed students from the Anglo-Celtic background which forms the Australian 'mainstream'. However, children from Southern European, Pacific Island and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds performed less well in terms of university entrance. This linguo-cultural complexity emerging from a much larger and more comprehensive study echoes the situation exposed by Table 1.

A Possible Model for Accomodation

These three different scenarios suggest that there is considerable exercise of political power operating, but in strongly variant ways. The most obvious pressure comes from the power of **Conformity**, wherein the established contexts tend to claim superiority over variant forms to the point where users of such forms are criticised, patronised or excluded from membership of that establishment (Giles & Copeland 1991). One would imagine that a remedy would be simple; users of variant language forms could simply conform or the establishment could (as their stated principles suggest) become more tolerant and flexible. However, conformity operates in a number of directions and users of variant forms may have strong bonds of conformity to their own variant forms, possibly to the denigration and even exclusion of the established ones. Members of relatively large, and/or cohesive, communities may actively oppose supposed 'prestige forms', ridiculing their conventions and denigrating their users. Establishments, on the other hand, have a range of 'principles' which they may regard as inflexible to a greater or lesser degree. The clash between the statement of a legal position and the establishment of an equity policy, as seen in the initial scenario, will be reflected in terms of appeals to Standards and Benchmarks in the second and third instances.

It is at this stage that a second 'pressure' manifests itself; namely the need for **Prioritization** (Giles & Copeland 1991). While, in the first vignette, the process of language habit was almost immediately outmatched by the pseudo-legal approach, with its support principles of decency, community standards and "reasonable thinking", the other examples required decisions to be made. In the ESL case, content was considered to be of greater merit than language form, though the establishment reserved its right to criticise the latter and demand the best of both worlds. In the Science instance, the establishment reserved its right to exclude linguistic non-conformers on historical grounds, as well as those relating to accuracy of expression. However, each of these cases involved, almost by definition, a process of discrimination.

Despite our national equity policies, this type of discrimination is part of our society's everyday practice, and leads directly to the type of **Judgment** results that are often looked upon as bringing about reprehensible social features (Giles & Copeland 1991). These include social rejection, limited access to opportunity and exploitation by establishments of variance and non-conformity. Such social shibboleths are costly in both human and economic terms and our policies and principles continually direct us to redress such wrongs (BofS 1987). Let's now turn our attention to a fourth scenario wherein such a restructuring has been (more or less successfully) attempted.

An illuminative fourth vignette: Tertiary Literacy Investigation,

An ongoing monitoring of a course in Literacy for Trainee Teachers has revealed a number of trends over the past four years. One of the major revelations has been the power of changing contexts. In 1998, these final year teacher trainees displayed a profile whereby a surprising 25% of the 20-30 year age group expressed severe concerns about their own computer literacy. This group claimed to have little access to and almost no background experience of computers and their operation. This trend was seen to be of major concern since the major employing body, the NSW Department of Education and Training, was demanding that all graduating students entering the teaching profession from the year 2000 onwards would need computer competency. Exercising *judgement*, our training institution took a number of steps towards conformity with this requirement. Recognising the *priority* of employer demands we required that all assignments submitted in the Faculty be computer generated. Some subjects also became computer-distributed, with students being required to acquire information from the internet and participate in on-line discussions. Within three years, this pressure to *conform* had reduced the proportion of students expressing lack of confidence in their computer skills to 4%.

A corollary to this change, however, has been the corresponding rise in the level of dissatisfaction with traditional methods of delivery of information. While the 1998 group had expressed high satisfaction with lectures and tutorials, there has been a progressive lowering of this figure in the three groups since then. Some students have suggested that the whole course should be delivered by computer, and that lectures would thus be unnecessary. Thus, the student profile has changed from an almost phobic one to one of unquestioning enthusiasm. Some worrying features of this trend, however, have included the unwillingness of the students in later years to participate in one-on-one, face-to-face help for school pupils facing literacy difficulties. An exercise involving this type of strategy was included in the 1998 assessment battery and proved to be extremely popular. A similar exercise in 2001 was seen as being an invasion of pupil privacy and an exacerbation of student difficulties through a highlighting of their inadequacies. Our actions seem to have had some unintended consequences.

Contextual features, such as workplace requirements and political correctness, seem to have a very substantial influence on the nature of literacy in practice. Only four years ago, a cohort of students saw the ability to inter-relate with and show understanding to students with problems as a major basic requirement for teachers of literacy. There has now been an apparent complete pendulum swing whereby computer proficiency and preservation of privacy are paramount.

It seems that this may well be a case of Techno-promoter dreams being realised (Zhang & Nunamaker 2003), with the old 'established context' being very quickly replaced by the new. However, Peck and his co-workers (2002) indicate that this acceptance of things technical may be little more than an initial enthusiasm for "low-end instructional devices" which may

be merely a temporary social craze, comparable with the advent of educational television. Their research, conducted on two schools in the Silicone Valley area near San Francisco, where one would expect high commitment to technology, showed that “increasingly high access to technology in schools had ... little effect on the classroom and instructional experience” (Peck et al, 2002 p.478.) They identified a number of aspects of the already established context as preventing the new one from becoming established; these included the traditional school structures, time constraints, defects in the technologies and competing educational priorities such as exam results. Since these factors also exist in our own situation, we may well find that our tertiary students’ new found ‘establishment’ may yet be overshadowed, or at least severely compromised, by the values of the old.

It’s perhaps true to say that similar types of compromise may also occur in the other scenarios examined earlier. We do, after all, tend to accept the use of that four letter taboo word in such award winning movies as ‘Erin Brockovitch’, ‘Traffic’ and ‘Four Weddings and a Funeral’ yet it is still seen as being shocking in Aboriginal English.

Conclusions

This paper was motivated by a number of individual classroom events involving children who spoke a non-standard dialect of English. These events juxtaposed effective features of the children’s vernacular with contrasting conventions of the prestige language form. This juxtaposition prompted the oft-posed question “How should teachers respond to language variation in their classrooms?” (James & Garrett 1992).

An extended discussion of the difficulties which features of specialist language styles (specifically the language of science) can cause for secondary school students from a variety of linguo-cultural backgrounds moved the enquiry beyond anecdote into grounded research. It appears that speakers of non-standard dialects may experience relatively greater difficulty with specialist styles.

Comparison with recent reports of a major longitudinal study of Australian secondary school student performance (Marks et al 2001) and a smaller investigation of the impact of changes in the linguistic demand of particular external examinations (O’Toole et al 2001) suggest that students’ linguo-cultural background may have a complex impact on their school performance. Speakers of non-standard dialects may have greater difficulty accessing educational resources but the effect is not uniform across all linguo-cultural backgrounds. Issues of individual motivation and familial attitudes to learning may counterbalance linguistic diversity.

Speakers of non-standard dialects may have more difficulty accessing classroom resources (both print and personal) because the differences between their vernaculars and the language of the school appear to be differences in ‘quality’. **Conformity** may be personally more threatening for children from such backgrounds. The official assertion that ‘non-standard’ does not mean ‘sub-standard’ is denied in many contemporary classrooms. The quite reasonable retreat into defense of the family vernacular, and the consequent drop in **priority** for educational styles, can compound children’s already restricted access to such pathways to power as the school can provide. The same phenomenon impacts speakers of completely different languages but it is easier for these children (and their families) to **judge** the problem as arising from inadequate control of a distinct communication system. Children from such backgrounds are more able to see their difficulties as challenges to be overcome rather than confirmation of either their own inadequacies or the essential injustice of the situation in which they find themselves. This may partly explain the relative success of students from homes where Chinese languages were spoken.

Those of us who are responsible for the education of more marginalised students might do well to try to emulate those families who successfully challenge the linguistic stereotypes and succeed where schools and teachers might expect them to fail. We cannot reverse the social inequities which marginalise the families we serve but we can affirm the value of the vernaculars which our children bring to class, stress the situational nature of communicative competence and help them to develop the specific language skills which will provide them with greater access to power over their own lives.

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