

BARBARA QUINT GRAY

DIALECT INTERFERENCE IN WRITING: A TRIPARTITE ANALYSIS

Although neither their teachers nor non-standard dialect speaking students perceive many of their difficulties in writing standard English to be related to dialect interference, there is good evidence to suggest that areas of contrast between standard and non-standard usage contribute significantly to such writers' problems. There appear, in fact, to be three distinct types of dialect interference that occur in written form. Different pedagogical approaches seem appropriate for teaching standard performance in areas affected by each type of interference. And although each kind of interference has a different potential for being totally brought under control, the role that interference plays seems to change as a writer's expository techniques mature.

The development of mature and effective writing abilities is often stunted by a writer's confusion and dismay in trying to use standard grammar. But the role that dialect interference plays in this dilemma is often obscured. Dialect speaking students rarely, if ever, associate their writing difficulties with their knowledge of a variety of English that is significantly different from what they have to produce in writing. On the contrary, because such students know themselves to be fluent speakers of the English language, they assume, with some logic, that a basic cause for the errors teachers continually perceive in their writings stems from an inability to write as well as they speak. In addition, they may attribute their problems to spelling, which, while often an additional facet of the difficulty, is a convenient scapegoat since spelling is strictly a matter of written convention and may bear little relationship to oral language. Finally, they assume that their difficulty stems from their very real lack of an elegant, educated vocabulary. But while nonstandard speakers may be aware of differences among kinds of spoken English, they generally perceive deviations from the standard language largely

Barbara Quint Gray is a Doctoral Candidate in Linguistics and Education at New York University. She has taught English at The City College of New York for five years.

as elements of “slang” vocabulary. They consider what they regard as non-standardisms to have no bearing on writing because they are recognizably inappropriate to school situations.

Student problems may be compounded because their teachers are also unaware of the role of dialect interference in their students’ writing. Certainly, they recognize the copious errors in the written English that their students produce, but their perception of such work as error-ridden often obscures its status as a correct representation of some oral variety of the language. Writing that approximates the spoken form of a non-standard dialect may not be error-filled at all, in the sense that its deviation from standard norms does not result from mistakes but is, instead, quite consciously and intentionally produced. Non-standard writing, while problematic for use where standard written form is required, is nevertheless a problem of a different sort than that characterized by genuine mistakes, things immediately recognizable by their producer as wrong.

Teachers may be misled in their perceptions of non-standard writing by a long series of English courses that typically regard the English language as one sacred, ideal set of forms to be cherished and guarded against corruption. Such a view clearly ignores the variation that has always been inherent in English, as in all other languages.

In addition, grammar texts widely available for classroom use have a limited view of dialect-based problems since they are apparently intended for populations that speak a relatively standard dialect. One representative text, for example, explains subject-verb agreement in the following way:

Make subject and verb agree in number; singular subjects require singular verbs; plural subjects require plural verbs . . . [examples omitted]. Violations of this rule occur when the writer does not know which word is the subject, or when the writer is not sure whether the subject is singular or plural.

This explanation clearly requires that a reader know the standard inflection signalling singularity and plurality of verbs and nouns. It entirely ignores vast numbers of non-standard dialect speakers who would violate the agreement rule, not because they can’t identify the subject or are uncertain of its number, but because their dialect simply does not use the -s inflection uniformly to designate present tense singular verbs or plural nouns.

Thus, students and their teachers are generally unaware of the critical differences between standard written English and some

non-standard dialect forms. This ignorance was illustrated to me when I asked several classes of non-standard dialect users what they thought was meant by the term "standard English." The dominant response was that it referred to common, everyday English," or "the English that most people speak most of the time," definitions apparently derived from the usage of "standard" in such phrases as "standard procedure," in which it does, indeed, mean "usual."

In spite of student and teacher assumptions to the contrary, the writing of non-standard dialect speaking students reveals three categories of their syntactic production that may be directly related to their knowledge of a non-standard grammar and that distinguish them from fluent writers of the standard written dialect. If one defines a grammatical rule as do the transformationalists, as a generalization that summarizes a systematic element of linguistic behavior, one can then consider these categories to be 1) invisibly rule-based, 2) visibly rule-based, and 3) non-rule-based—each a dialect interference with its own pedagogical implications.

"Invisibly rule-based" errors are exhibited through a writer's avoidance of particular grammatical elements. One can often sense that a writer's work is handicapped because he knows language patterns from his native dialect that he understands are not part of the standard language and so cannot be used in educated writing but he does not know the standard equivalents for these forms. Thus his writing may be characterized by an artificial stiltedness or simplicity resulting from the inability to reproduce the complexity of a thought in the standard form.

Features that may be invisible but significant in writing can often be guessed after listening carefully to the writer speak to determine what forms he is likely to use orally but not in his writing. Many black students, for example, use the invariant "be" form and the negative "ain't" in conversation, although they rarely if ever use them in writing. A widely-recognized linguistic pariah, "ain't," also fails to appear in the written work of whites who use it as a spoken form. Similarly, "youse," the second person plural pronoun whose use is widespread among whites in New York, is not found in their writing. With the loss of such forms as these and the nuances of meaning that they carry, dialect speakers working in the standard language may feel themselves bereft of important vehicles of self-expression. Unsure of how to replace them successfully with acceptable forms, they often try to avoid using them at all.

A good example of this kind of dilemma can be seen in the work

of writers who indicate verb tense through non-standard devices. For instance, linguists report the use by black dialect speakers of "been" and "done" to form perfect tenses. While these forms rarely appear in written work, they may underlie the writing of a black dialect speaker who consistently uses the simple past tense, not showing gradations in past time that may be implicit in his message. For instance, a student writes:

On saturday I *woke up* about two in the afternoon, only to find that I was a lone. Everybody else *went* shopping.¹

It seems clear here that "went" is meant as the equivalent of the standard "had gone."

Features in this category may not always stand out as errors, as does the example above. Such features may, however, be the underlying force that pushes a student into an unproductive corner. The student knows he can't write the form that he wants but doesn't know what else to use and so he must work to circumvent a structure altogether.

That invisible rules may underlie some writing problems suggests an informative pedagogical approach rather than a corrective one. This is an area in which the standard dialect may legitimately be dealt with as a foreign language, comprised of unknown forms. Even without knowing each student's non-standard rules, if a teacher knows, for example, that standard English tenses comprise one widespread contrast with non-standard dialect forms, she can present standard tense formation paradigms as new material, making sure to do so with the completeness that a presentation of any foreign language system requires if a learner is to be able to use it productively. Such a representation leaves behind any implication that failure to use standard forms has been due to carelessness or sloppiness. English teachers have too long applied such humiliating and inaccurate explanations to non-standard interferences in their students' writing, resulting in confusion and distress for the writers, who may, in fact, have been quite careful and neat.

Exposition of standard grammatical forms often results in astonishment from students who had no idea that such forms existed. For instance, such students distinguish the times designated by the perfect tenses, but they "never knew you could say that" in the standard

¹ All quotations from students' writing used herein are reproduced exactly as originally written with italics added for emphasis.

format. Such open interest in finding new forms to replace recognized non-standard ones makes this category of interference easier for students to eliminate than is the second category, “visibly rule based” interference.

In contrast to the influence of “invisibly rule-based” features in writing, “visibly rule-based” performance produces a variety of identifiably dialect-based features that are highly visible to readers due to their conspicuous, often systematically recurring, departure from standard written form. These features are correct by some dialect rules but not by the standard ones. While some of them, appearing together in the work of a single writer, can lead a reader to guess at the racial or ethnic identity of that writer, as individual items they all cross racial and ethnic lines. Such items include non-standard 1) use of relativizers:

I answered to find that it was a friend of mine *in which* I hadn't heard from in years.

He is supposed to be much more mature polished, responsible *than that of* a high school teacher.

My coach has a round face and a bright red curly afro *which upon it* sits a black derby.

2) use or non-use of final -s to indicate possession, plural nouns, or third person singular verbs:

Being a college graduate one can get the job *he want*.

The skilled *potter* wrinkled *brow show* concentration.

3) verb forms:

I'm *send* an application.

They live in the South someway because they don't talk about snow falling and they *flown* kites around Christmas time.

As I *walk* outside my building in the afternoon I *would see* children playing games on the sidewalk.

What is critical about this category of dialect interference is that it consists of features that users do not recognize as inappropriate to contexts requiring standard performance. The features in this category are not elements that speakers typically identify when they consider what they may call their “bad” or “broken” English. They are not recognized as taboo forms. These features do, in addition, operate according to systematic rules. Thus, they are correct according to the linguistic intuition of their users.

This category of visible dialect interference is the most difficult for students to eliminate because they do not have a mental uncertainty about the features of it that would signal a place for insertion of a standard form. Instead, they are faced with the need to deliberately produce forms that are absolutely wrong according to their native grammars in order to be right in the standard.

Discussion of such areas of grammar with students reveals the dilemma that this category of interference can create for them. In considering the standard English subject-verb agreement rule, for instance, students are often bewildered to discover that -s can signal singular (on verbs) as well as plural (on nouns.) Once having grasped the idea that -s on the subject generally precludes it from appearing on the verb, students often explain this phenomenon by asserting that "a plural subject requires a singular verb," a statement that reveals the illogic that they find in the system they are confronting.

This category of interference is amenable to comparative techniques. The growing body of research into non-standard grammars is a useful source of the information to facilitate comparison of non-standard and standard equivalents. One can, however, often elicit from their users dialect rules that are not formally phrased as rules but that are remarkably correct representations of the logic according to which a feature is produced, simply by asking in a noncritical way why a feature is present, or why missing. So, one can come to know the system which he must help his students contrast as "spoken English" with the standard written requirements either through research or through inquiry. Or perhaps best, one can learn through a combination of both that will allow modification of researchers' generalizations to fit the usage of a given individual or group as well as recognition of a particular person's report about his grammar as fitting into a recognized pattern.

A pedagogy that compares two grammatical systems is often welcomed by students who are in the throes of a conflict between their own sense of the English language and the demands that academic English is placing on them. Such an approach can allow them to understand the systematic integrity of their usage as well as that of the standard formula, whereas a spotty identification of some forms as "right" and others as "wrong" can leave them with a queasy sense of hopeless chaos in both grammars.

While the first two categories of written dialect interference are directly related, either visibly or invisibly, to functioning non-standard rules, the third category, that which I call "non-rule based" interfer-

ence, appears as written forms that are not discernible in the spoken language of the writers who produce them. They seem, therefore, to be forms that are recognizably incorrect in the dialect of the writer himself. At the same time, they are identified by standard-English-using readers as incorrect. Such features include 1) attachment of -ed onto words where it doesn't belong:

There is a great need for someone *to related* to the people of our *problemed*-communities.

and 2) omission of negative markers in situations whose meaning is clearly negative:

All those years in college would have been wasted because you didn't get any further than a person who *did go* to college.

The first of these errors characterizes the writing of students who often do not pronounce -ed inflections. They know that they must insert -ed in some places where they don't say it but are not entirely in command of the complex processes for determining exactly what those places are. The second appears in the writing of students whose dialect has retained a multiple negation rule that has dropped out of standard usage. The conventional explanation of the standard negation rule is that only one negative is permissible—"two negatives make a positive"; such explanation does not include the corollary that allows more than one negative if there is more than one clause. Hence, the author of the second example seems to be following what he has been given as the standard rule and so omitting the negative from his final clause.

Interference of this sort does not suggest a contrastive teaching technique, since it does not contain a form that the writer feels is legitimate or functioning within a comprehensible system. The fastest and fullest strides toward standard performance can be made in this category of interference because it is here that the writer knows himself to be floundering. Explanation and exercise in the use of the standard negation rule and of standard infinitive and tense formation, for example, can provide students with the information and understanding that they need to produce the standard forms. But, as in dealing with invisibly rule-based problems, care must be taken to explain the standard rules in all their complexity, so that a student is not left trying to function with only partial knowledge of the new system.

One implication of this breakdown of dialect interference in writing

into three categories with differing presumed causes is that the kinds of interference have very different potentials for being eliminated from a writer's formal written production. It does seem, however, that while all dialect forms may not necessarily disappear from student writing, they take on a vastly diminished significance as the student becomes a more fluent, self-confident writer, learns the standard forms for those areas in which he was adrift at first, and develops a command of expository prose techniques that increases his ability to make the structure and content of his writing match the sophistication of his thought.

If, as William Labov suggests,² one forms negative social judgments about another person's speech on the basis of the relative frequency or infrequency of stigmatized features rather than on the mere fact of their presence or absence, then only at a certain level of frequency do non-standardisms obtrude themselves as such on the hearer's consciousness.

¹ This phenomenon, which Labov observed in spoken language, appears to operate in writing in which one finds a variety of forms that arise from non-standard pronunciations as well as non-standard grammars. In a well-developed, coherent, thought-provoking essay, three or four non-standard forms which persist will not more than momentarily distract the reader, whose attention remains focused on the content. Only when the deviations from the standard become so frequent that they interfere with the reader's ability to concentrate on the message do they cause irritation and become the probable source of negative judgments about the writer's social and intellectual status.

This theory is supported by what appears to happen to my own students who, as entering freshmen, were placed in the lowest level Basic Writing course. Such placement means that English department faculty reading these students' placement essays have found that they show substantial departure from the standard grammar and lack clear, formal development of content. Papers eliciting such judgment tend to be very brief—having fewer than 400 words to show for an hour's writing—and to have errors that exceed 5 per cent of the total word output. Such writers' first few class-assigned essays, not produced under the pressure of an examination situation,

²William Labov *Social Stratification of English in New York City*, the Center for Applied Linguistics, 1966.

tend to have the same characteristics. By contrast, successful papers—those earning an A or B—produced by ex-Basic Writing students after having completed the three semester writing sequence, are not characterized by total freedom from the types of grammatical non-standardisms that appeared in their initial writing. But the number of errors in total word production is 2 per cent or below, and the word production is greatly increased as the writer has gained command of effective techniques for recording his thought development on paper. It is perhaps not accidental that this 2 per cent figure is identical to the 2 per cent that Labov feels is the degree of ungrammaticality in the average person's spoken output.³ The implication is that hearers and readers are used to filtering out a small percentage of error in language production. As long as dialect interference in writing does not exceed that percentage, it can easily be ignored. When interference rises above that level it overtaxes a reader's filtering processes.

In light of the suggestion that writing need not be entirely error-free to be successful, teachers should not concentrate on absolute control of non-standardisms to the exclusion of necessary work on expository prose techniques. It is equally true, however, that teachers cannot assume that if non-standard writers learn to express their ideas fully and clearly their grammatical difficulties will evaporate. The numerous writing problems that stem, at least in part, not from careless mistakes but from the three kinds of dialect interference outlined above cannot be controlled unless they are recognized for what they are and treated accordingly. Only then are students likely to reduce the level of nonstandard dialect interference, if not down to zero, at least down to a point where it no longer detracts from a reader's ability to keep his attention focused on content.

³ William Labov, "The Study of Language in its Social Context," *Studium Generale*, 23, No. 1 (1970), p. 42.