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BLACK DIALECT AND THE FRESHMAN WRITER

The integration and open admissions policies of the late sixties and early seventies introduced classroom conflicts, as evidenced by the professional literature of that period, that few educators had anticipated and that even fewer were prepared to confront. One problem was, as one college teacher suggested, the Black-English-speaking student's seemingly insurmountable difficulty in reading and writing."[1] In retrospect, however, the literature of that period reveals an additional (and still existent) problem—the freshman English instructor's "seemingly insurmountable difficulty" in discerning the true nature of these students' writing—his or her inability to look objectively at the texts of writers whose oral patterns include syntactical and morphological features that differ radically and systematically from those of the standard written dialect. And this inability to initiate the requisite linguistic analysis, coupled with the failure to acknowledge and eradicate attitudes that circumvent such analysis, led to three misguided approaches to teaching writing to students speaking a nonstandard Black dialect.

The first approach was motivated, apparently, by misunderstanding of the findings of such linguists as William Stewart, William Labov, and others, who undertook the serious study of Black English as a language system. Ironically, considering its origins, it might be called the divergence avoidance approach. It hinges on the belief that Black college students, either in or out of the academic setting, need not—or, in the more extreme view, should not—adhere to the forms and structures of standard American English (i.e., James Sledd's language of "white supremacy"[2]). This approach rests on the belief that the nonstandard code that obviously serves so adequately its oral function will also suffice in situations requiring written discourse.

The apparent logic of such well-intentioned, inherently democratic proposals rarely survives, however, the transition from concept to classroom. Instructors find themselves, curiously enough, both forced to ignore, in

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[1] San-su C. Lin, "A Developmental English Program for the Culturally Disadvantaged," *College Composition and Communication,* 16 (1965), 273.

[2] James Sledd, "Bi-Dialectalism: The Language of White Supremacy," *English Journal,* 58 (1969), 1307-1315.

the traditional way, the grammar of the nonstandard dialect and to avoid, in a nontraditional way, the grammar of standard English (if not, indeed, to deny the existence of both systems altogether). They adopt a theoretical stance that, in its unadulterated form, leads to denying all surface standards (which are, in this view, little more than a sadistic invention of Geneva Smitherman's "prescriptivist middle-class-aspirant-teacher"[3]) and, by analogy, even to rejecting all standard (i.e., white) rhetorical principles *per se*, since, as some scholars were quick to point out, "information-passing among Negroes" involves "subjects and methods of communication of knowledge and feeling...quite different from white middle-class norms."[4] In practice, however, this approach seldom results in an atmosphere of intellectual freedom. Instead the systematic but linguistically unsound instruction of the past is superseded by varying amounts of haphazard--but still linguistically unsound--corrective measures.

The divergence avoidance method is, however, impractical, blithely disregarding the pre- and post-graduation reality of student goals and societal expectations about the command of written language of college graduates. It appears flawed even in theory, since it is based on the assumption, which Smitherman's Black idiom/standard English writings are apparently meant to illustrate, that texts containing nonstandard morphological and syntactical features erect between writer and audience no greater barriers than do texts composed of standard forms and structures. In my experience, however, such minimum terminable units as "Mrs. Costello Mr. Winterbourne aunt" are seriously disorienting to readers whose standard-English linguistic reserves do not include the two nonstandard grammatical principles involved in the actualization of such a construction (indeed, to whom such a construction appears syntactically and therefore semantically incomplete). They have also frequently proven distracting to readers whose reserves *do* include these principles; for familiarity with oral patterns appears not to assure effortless or even accurate decoding of exact but unfamiliar graphic representations. What is more, the ability to decipher intended meaning, whether the reader is competent in Black dialect or not, seems to decrease proportionately as the number of unfamiliar graphic forms increases, apparently because the opportunity for effective use of context clues decreases. Sentences like the one above, when bounded by a sufficient number of conventional sentences (that number varying with audience, purpose, and place) may cause only momentary confusion, thus allowing one to perceive the intended relationships between what appear to be three disconnected nouns. In actuality,

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[3] Geneva Smitherman, "White English in Blackface, Or Who Do I Be?" in *Exploring Language, 3rd ed.*, ed. Gary Goshgarian (Boston: Little, Brown, 1983), p. 331. (Orginally published in *The Black Scholar,* May/June, 1973.)

[4] Roger D. Abrahams, "Black Views of Language Use: Rules of Decorum, Conflict, and Men-of-Words," in *Current Topics in Language: Introductory Readings,* ed. Nancy Ainsworth Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Winthrop, 1976), p. 187. (Originally published in Roger D. Abrahams, *Positively Black* [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970].)

however, student texts including one such construction usually include numerous others which are grammatical in Black dialect but ungrammatical in standard English. Such writing samples emphasize the fact that the nonstandard/standard contrasts that trouble even academically talented students, though confined to a small number of the thirty-eight Black English grammatical features identified by Fasold and Wolfram,[5] include features encountered frequently in the preparation of academic discourse. Smitherman's articles, on the other hand, reveal only a sprinkling of nonstandard features, many of which, being merely lexical, present few if any problems for readers, since most are mindful of the boundary between formal and informal diction.

A related assumption underlying this approach is that Black-English-speaking freshmen whose written language does not meet traditional standards are merely exercising their option to write as they speak. It deserves scrutiny. For while I have indeed encountered students whose compositions, like the paragraph mentioned above, are flawless representations of oral Black language patterns, I have discovered far more who compose in an "interdialect," a mixture of standard and nonstandard dialect features, and a host of forms that belong to neither. Failure to perceive this mixture has often led to the pedagogically disastrous conclusion, primarily among educators who know Black dialect exists but for whom its actual structure remains amorphous, that any written construction generated by a Black student is, by definition, Black English and therefore valid as a medium of communication. When one puts aside preconceptions and actually analyzes the written language produced by college freshmen, one concludes that the majority of their written language patterns are located well toward the standard end of a postcreole continuum. One recognizes not only points of conflict that reflect the "simple" transference of speech, i.e., nonstandard dialect, to paper but also an amazing range of idiosyncratic forms which create varying amounts of linguistic noise. Many students produce, not obvious spoken patterns, but a Black dialect/standard English/hypercorrect melange (sometimes also including traditional errors), as in the following sentence describing the main characters of *Daisy Miller.*

> Mrs. Costello Mr. Winterbournes'es aunt, and Mrs. Walker were his friend, but they act so much alike they could of been the same peoples.

And such "transitional" prose, with its mix of features, reveals that these students are already struggling toward written standard English. Insufficient guidance at this crucial point could result in the fossilization of confusing approximations to the standard. The fact that close examination of nonstandard written forms reveals so many "traditional" handbook

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[5] Ralph W. Fasold and Walter A. Wolfram, "Some Linguistic Features of Negro Dialect," in *Contemporary English: Change and Variation*, ed. David L. Shores (New York: Lippincott, 1972), pp. 53-85. (Orginally published in *Teaching Standard English in the Inner City*, ed. Ralph W. Fasold and Roger W. Shuy [Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1970].)

errors and so many forms that do not belong in anyone's oral dialect renders the divergence avoidance approach, in my opinion, invalid.

Equally ineffective as a means of teaching writing is what I call the human relations approach. This term acknowledges an obvious kinship to the organizational theory of that name, which, according to Perrow, assumes one of two forms—the "leadership and productivity" model, focusing on the actions of particular leaders, and the "group relations" model, focusing on the alteration of the "organizational climate."[6] It is the latter branch that closely parrallels the administrative philosophy of those who maintain that the traditional college classroom is alien to the Black student and thereby fosters negative attitudes that impede development of standard English proficiency and communicative competence. Conversely, an atmosphere of "relevance" is expected to have the opposite effect: certain alterations— the substitution of Black-oriented stimulus materials for "white" materials, of writing activities that are "egocentered" and "concrete"[7] or that "acquaint...students...with themselves"[8] for impersonal academic topics, of tables for desks, of pens for pencils, of pencils for pens—will enable students to master traditional skills and release natural creative impulses that have been stifled by the hostile (i.e., white) educational environment.

Surely no one will object to some "personal" writing; a collaborative, friendly atmosphere; or to a richer and more diverse mix of ethnic materials for all students, one that reflects our common humanity. It is, however, a disservice to treat *any* group of students as if they exist within an isolated, homogeneous universe, and are too fragile to venture outside it. Moreover, immersion in "relevance" will not, in my experience, effect the promised linguistic and communicative improvements. My own classroom experience suggests that the human relations approach of relevant materials is no more effective—my substitution of *Invisible Man*, *Native Son*, and *Jubilee* for *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, *Daisy Miller*, and *The Great Gatsby* having elicited neither more nor less profound content nor more nor less effective written communication. However, the substitution of more mature subject matter for what I call spontaneous therapeutic topics did result, as I have discussed elsewhere,[9] in increased standard English proficiency.

This is not to suggest however, that using a particular species, caliber, or volume of subject matter will, in and of itself, accomplish the task of altering habitual language patterns. It will not. Such a curriculum merely

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[6] Charles Perrow, *Complex Organizations: A Critical Essay* (Glenview, IL.: Scott, Foresman, 1972), pp. 106-122.

[7] James A. Banks, "A Profile of the Black American," *College Composition and Communication*, 19 (1968), 296.

[8] Dorothy Wells, "Using the Journal to Build Competence in Standard English," in *Non-Native and Nonstandard Dialect Students* (Urbana, IL.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1982), p. 93.

[9] Allison Wilson, "The Study of Literature and the Development of Standard English Proficiency: An Approach to the Teaching of Writing to Speakers of Black Dialect," *The Writing Instructor*, 2 (1983), 115-121.

constitutes inverted recapitulation of the theoretically flawed human relations approach. Even casual observation of actual written language reveals that certain Black dialect forms are particularly resistant to change even when students are constantly immersed in enormous amounts of written standard English.

It is the frequency and persistence of some errors, that apparently causes many college teachers who come into contact with Black-English-speakers, like those who encountered "the remedial student" of the past, to adopt what I must label the regressive approach to writing instruction. This pedagogy seems to presuppose that students who produce dialectal or interdialectal forms are students who hear no standard grammar, see no standard grammar, speak no standard grammar, and must therfore begin at the beginning—must concentrate on words before sentences, sentences before paragraphs, paragraphs before essays, must, in short, master the standard language in isolation before they are equipped to compose in that register. This is a method that was discredited, in general, several decades ago and that, when applied to Black nonstandard speakers in particular, has proven especially debilitating. Moreover, as with the idea of divergence avoidance, the "logic" of the regressive approach cannot withstand the test of reality. The major problem is that the postulatory intention of this preliminary grammar drill—to enable students to prepare final drafts that are free of confusing nonstandard forms and/or idiosyncratic standard approximations—gradually dissipates as instructors devote more and more instructional time to the study of minute facets of language. The disappearance of actual writing is the logical extension of the assumption that one must control morphology and syntax before one can use these forms and structures to create utterances. For proponents of this approach, therefore, there is no recourse but, in the interest of time, to slight college-level reading and writing assignments in favor of large, frequent doses of grammar exercises or of detailed contrastive analysis of the standard-nonstandard systems.

In actuality, examination of student writing indicates that most activities of both types are either superfluous or irrelevant. A student's habitual use of a certain few nonstandard features need not independently and automatically condemn him or her to endlessly labeling parts of speech, subjects and verbs, simple, compound, and complex sentences, and (most astounding) gerunds, participles, and infinitives or to an exhaustive study of language contrasts. In the examples given below (which were taken from first day essay pretests), the actual points of standard/nonstandard conflict in the academic writing of college students are very few indeed:

> Whenever I ride a bus, stranger looks at me from head to toe without saying a word.

> They moves from one town to the next without tie, without regrets, without saying goodbye to the many friend they have made.

There several factor which determine the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of a teacher.

To avoid colliding with Grandfather vehicle, the young man drive into the river.

There shadow of people inside, talking, laughing, and eating with chopstick.

Cover with crystal clear ice, the vine look like giant chandeliers.

Black dialect interference, then, in and of itself, appears, on close examination, not to cause the major syntactic "derailments" peculiar to basic writers. Instead, (to continue Shaughnessy's metaphor[10]) it allows both scheduled and unscheduled detours on alternate grammatical tracks, these either the solid, time-worn sidetracks open to speakers of nonstandard English or the makeshift, hastily constructed sidetracks of interdialects. In view of this, a detailed prewriting study of the entire corpus of standard English seems hardly tenable.

Even were one able to provide convincing empirical evidence that quasi-foreign language teaching methods improve the nonstandard speaker's ability to prepare future essays that are relatively free of Black English forms, the approach would be regressive. For it encourages instructors to ignore, for varying periods of time, all but the most superficial aspects of written discourse and to treat identically all students whose written language shows some degree of dialect interference. The failure to discriminate between inappropriate register and inadequate development (i.e., between typical freshman prose that contains dialect interference and basic writing that may or maynot contain dialect interference) can easily lead to classifying all Black-English-speaking freshmen as remedial writers—solely on the basis of isolated constructions like the above, regardless of the rhetorical strength of the compositions in which the nonstandard forms appeared. The following essay, for example, which was the first for a first-semester freshman and which was compiled in response to a poem provided in McCrimmon's critical essay chapter,[11] has strengths that can easily be overlooked by an evaluator who is concentrating solely on surface forms:

"An Endless Cycle of Departures"

The title of Eleanor Ross Taylor "The Going Away of Young People" refer to an endless cycle of departures. Taylor use four departure situation to relay her message about the cycle because she assume that the reader can discover the meaning of her poem by analyzing those examples. She use a different stanza to tell about

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[10] Mina P. Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 10.

[11] James M. McCrimmon, *Writing with a Purpose,* 7th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), p. 303.

each of the departure situation and a fifth stanza to conclude her work and make the message clearer.

In stanza one, the first of the four departure situations is describe by the narrator, who merely tell of the departure of her child because she do not yet realize that her child's leaving home is part of a continuous cycle. The author uses this departure to let the reader know that the narrator have a problem and needs to adjust to it and except it as fact. The problem is that the narrator do not want to accept the fact that a love one has left and keeping the truth buried deep in her mind. The author try to let the reader see this through the use of various detail, such as:

> Anyway it's stuff I'm used
> To stumbling over in various
> Recesses of my house
> Wondering why I haven't
> Given it away, put it
> To some use
> But keep on hoarding it, ashamed.

In the second stanza we see that the narrator neighbor children gone also and that the leaving of these children totally in keeping with the continuous cycle because it just another step in that cycle. The author use the leaving of those children to show that the poem was not focusing on just one departure. Here the author lets the narrator discover that not only has her child left, but some one else child or childrens also. This makes the narrator think and she begin to realize that her home is "Becalmed of young people" and subsequently all homes that have children in them will be "Becalmed of young people."

In stanza three, the narrator remember her own departure from home and try to imagine how her mother felt in a similar situation. Here, the narrator remember her "mother's face at the window/Like a postage stamp" watching her departure. The narrator had left home and her mother had felt sad. Now the narrator child have also left home. She realize that that part of a cycle and that in time, sooner or later a loved one will leave home. The irrevelance of time seems to be the major point she make here about departures.

Stanza four shows how someone else besides the narrator feels about a young love one leaving home. The narrator watch an "old friend fight tears" and offer her sympathy. She able to offer her sympathy because it something she could relate to because her situation similar. And again this departure from the narrator friend home in keeping with the endless cycle of departures from home by young people.

The fifth and final stanza brings us to the conclusion and the most interesting part of the poem. The four proceding stanza gave a general idea about a cycle that will sooner or later, effect everyone. This stanza enlarge on the idea that were laid down in the previous stanzas. The mother have realize that her child leaving is a part of a cycle and that in time she like other will come to except that. This reveal through the use of window:

> Windows between Septembers
> More and more windows
> Muffling, fogging over,
> At last reflect only me
> In car window, kitchen window,
> Across-the-street windows....

Therefore, the author let the reader know that there is a cycle of young people leaving home, and yet she make another point in the final stanza. She let the reader know that even though a young person have left, he always welcome to return to the place he left. "This window I open over your bed/In case you should come back/For what you forgot."

From the traditional viewpoint, this essay is, admittedly, saturated with surface error. It is obviously composed in a written register that would be unacceptable under most circumstances. But, again, obviously, most of the surface errors occur at points of standard/nonstandard conflict and are clearly confined to a few basic contrasts—plural nouns, possessive nouns, and verbs. Furthermore, when analyzed in terms of content and organization, this essay compares favorably with the standard English model provided by McCrimmon[12]—each having (1) an opening paragraph that explains what the poet is trying to say as well as how she says it, (2) four paragraphs that detail several related scenes and explain their relationship to the poem's message, and (3) a final paragraph that concludes rather than merely summarizes. Thus, it appears that degree of dialect interference is not necessarily indicative of degree of rhetorical competence nor is dialect interference *per se* indicative of the need for intensive drilling or grammar-study techniques. In the case of the above student, in fact, to delay further composing in favor of tedious, irrelevant (or even relevant) drill would be absurd.

The division between ineffective writing strategies (the "paratactic, disjunct progressions; ...overgeneralized and overpersonalized declarations; ...roughly hinged, isolated declamations, and...nonconciliatory, absolute moral announcements" delineated by Hoddeson[13]) and dialect interference becomes even more clear when one examines the essay of a classmate,

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[12] McCrimmon, pp. 294-295.

[13] David Hoddeson, "The Reviser's Voices," *Journal of Basic Writing*, 3:3 (Fall/Winter 1981), 92.

who was apparently attempting to make a similar point but whose unfamiliarity with written conventions far outweighs the intrusion of native speech patterns:

"Going Way of Young People"

Going way of young peoples mean everyone departure. Eleano describe the narrator very unhappy, her child have left home. It was going to be so quiet in her house. Her friend child had left also. So the narrator give her friend something to drink. So the narrator gave her friend sympathy. The narrator herself left home, she could remember how her mother face look in the window and how it look like a postage stamp hinges a faded septemer. In today modern world it can be very hard and disturbing on parent because they doesnt't won't their child to leave home. But most parent would tell his/her child to keep that key they welcome anytime and they would like that child to keep that key. But always remeber this, never let your parent think they have fail you.

Even basic writers like this one (and I am speaking again from experience) rarely benefit from a course consisting of grammar drill, since, obviously, the ability to generate content and to perceive the organizing principles inherent in that content must of necessity precede any attempt to manipulate surface. I cannot discern, in short, how the substitution of standard for nonstandard forms will improve written discourse that is almost contentless in any register.

For quite some time it seemed to me that my freshmen and I would be forever hindered by the paradoxical nature of the situation. Concentration on the expurgation of dialect-based forms appeared, on the one hand, ludicrous in contrast to the profound tasks underlying the construction of effective written discourse but, on the other hand, essential in relation to societal expectations and needed competencies. The solution to this dilemma lay, however, in this dual nature itself, in the proper timing of selected aspects of the avoidance and regressive approaches.

The principles behind my discourse-based approach are these: I attempt to teach the student all the skills he will need in the complete composing process. The structure of Black dialect, as far as I can determine (the Whorfian hypothesis notwithstanding), is irrelevant to the acts of inventing and composing. Thus, my students and I have learned to ignore the presence of dialectal and interdialectal forms not only during the gathering of ideas (what we call "the prewriting stage") but also during the shaping of the first draft ("the writing stage"). Direct and (due to the vast range of interdialects encountered within a single classroom) personalized emphasis upon nonstandard written forms is reserved for a multistepped "revision stage," a term that refers not to a discrete hypothetical segment of an individual student's private writing processes but to the instructional time set aside for the manipulation of completed drafts.

In revising, students first reexamine the content and organization of their essays and attempt what might be called conceptual revision. They are encouraged, for instance, to verify generalizations by providing appropriate details, to consolidate isolated details by supplying appropriate generalizations, to clarify logical assertions by revealing intermediary conclusions, and to determine appropriate strategies either for inserting such material into existing essay structure or for modifying that structure to accommodate revised content. They are, in short, encouraged to discover and appropriately articulate, for the reader's benefit, the mental connections underlying the original body of generalizations, details, and assertions.

Then and only then do I introduce revision activities designed to emphasize surface features. We begin with those Black-dialect-based forms that actually appear in a particular set of essays. Students may be asked, for example, to extract from their compositions several sentences containing nouns and to explain to me, to the class, or to a group of students who are having particular difficulty with standard English plural inflections the difference between the standard singular and plural forms and the corresponding nonstandard forms. In the case of extreme confusion resulting from Black dialect/standard English contrasts, such as often occurs with past tense inflections, I may ask a student or even a whole class to underline all past tense verbs in their essays, to use their handbooks or dictionaries to determine whether each verb is considered to be regular or irregular in standard English, and to center attention on the elimination of first null, then hypercorrect forms. Such single-minded concentration on one troublesome feature at a time seems not only to clarify long-standing confusion but to increase sensitivity to individual weaknesses as well. Also, since students are aware that activities of this kind improve the possibility of effectively communicating their own knowledge and discoveries, the stifling atmosphere created by the use of similar grammar book exercises seems to be avoided. This step of "contrastive revision" cannot legitimately be described as mere "copyediting," primarily because these procedures necessitate the analysis and subsequent elimination of habitual and deep-seated language habits, both oral and written. In fact, instructors considering a discourse-based approach should be aware that most students must repeat this part of the revision process several times for each essay, not only to locate inappropriate forms but also to discern acceptable standard English equivalents; the average student, however, requires less and less time for such revision with each new writing assignment, both because freshman writers become gradually more adept at locating and altering dialect-based forms and because the number of inappropriate forms appearing in first drafts gradually lessens.

The final group of revision activities are true "copyediting" activities, for these center on the so-called "common errors" (vague pronoun references, awkward constructions, misspelled or missing words, etc.) that occur in the first drafts of many writers on all levels and that are easily corrected once brought to the author's attention.

Though some instructors may object to the concept of a three-stage writing process that culminates in a revision stage or to the use of any single model of the writing process at all, such a concept has proven invaluable to me in separating, analyzing, and confronting the disparate layers of written language difficulties that hinder Black-English-speaking freshmen. In contrast, the absence of such a perspective often leads, I believe, to either a counterproductive denial of these difficulties or to the time-consuming and baseless construction of "remedial" and/or "relevant" methods and materials which merely confound an educational issue that is already quite complex, even when based upon careful observation of actual written language behavior.