

# The role of dialect differences in cross-cultural communication : proactive dialect awarness

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## The Role of Dialect Differences in Cross-cultural Communication: Proactive Dialect Awareness

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### Abstract

L'importance des dialectes est souvent négligée dans les études sur la communication inter-culturelle. De nombreuses raisons humaines, scientifiques et socioculturelles militent en faveur d'une intégration de l'étude des dialectes dans les programmes scolaires en langue maternelle ainsi qu'en langue étrangère. La présente contribution présente des éléments puisés dans des études expérimentales réalisées aux États Unis pour illustrer la réalisation de programmes d'enseignement pour l'étude de la diversité des dialectes. Parmi les effets positifs de l'utilisation de ces programmes, il convient de relever la sensibilisation aux stéréotypes culturels et la participation active des étudiants à une étude inductive de leurs dialectes locaux.

### Introduction

Although current cross-cultural communication studies now consider a full range of structural and functional issues, there is surprisingly little attention paid to issues of dialect diversity within the examination of cross-cultural communication. As perplexing as dialect diversity sometimes is for native speakers of a language, it is even more mystifying for speakers attempting to communicate in a second language. Unfortunately, in second language instruction there is often an implicit assumption that a common core of a language exists which unites all varieties of a source and target language and overrides issues of diversity, *the commonality myth*. Most language teaching thus aims at an ideal but unrealistic dialect-neutral variety of the second language. But second language learners, who speak some regional and social dialect of their first language to begin with, are typically surrounded by an array of dialects in the natural context of their second-language contact situation.

The natural context of second language acquisition will typically not be restricted to standard varieties of the language; in fact, there is a high likelihood that this context will include some well-established, socially disfavored varieties of the language. In the process of language learning, the sociolinguistic socialization of many foreign language learners may lead them to adopt the same uncharitable, biased opinion of vernacular dialects that is often found among native speakers of languages. For example, language learners may think of these socially disfavored varieties as nothing more than unworthy, unpatterned approximations of a more perfectly patterned standard, thus falling

in line with the *deficit myth* which so often typifies perceptions of nonstandard dialects.

Given the inevitable role of dialect diversity in learning a first or second language, it seems appropriate to incorporate aspects of language variation into the examination of cross-cultural communication. Theoretically, the failure to consider dialect diversity deprives students of an honest understanding of the nature of language variation--a perspective that can lead to an authentic appreciation for the natural basis of variation in their native and their second language. Practically, it deprives students of the benefits of learning about everyday language--the applied knowledge base that should guide them as they encounter the varieties of language that they face in their regular and essential sociolinguistic interaction. Language instruction programs thus have much to gain from incorporating dialect diversity into their curricula.

Despite the theoretical and practical rationale for instruction in dialect diversity, there is very little positive instruction about language diversity in language classrooms, whether these classrooms focus on native or second language instruction. As a result, dialect intolerance remains a deep-seated, primitive prejudice that can be quite resilient. Along with such intolerance is the perpetuation of the socio-education and socio-political inequities that derive from dialect prejudice.

Some educational practitioners have become aware of sociolinguistic issues related to dialect diversity through university studies, in-service workshops, and conference presentations, but there is still an epidemic of misinformation about the nature and significance of dialect diversity in the classroom. Unfortunately, most students around the world are rarely exposed to truthful information about language variation. Few primary and secondary level programs include information about dialect diversity as a regular part of their curriculum, unless the curriculum focuses on teaching the standard variety of the language from a prescriptivist perspective. For this reason, my personal commitment to applied linguistics in recent years has focussed on introducing proactive *dialect awareness programs*, which are geared toward raising the students' conscious awareness of the nature of dialects and their role in human life (WOLFRAM 1993, forthcoming). The scope of these dialect awareness programs includes cognitive (the patterns of dialects), affective (attitudes about dialects), and social (the role of dialects in effective communication) parameters (HAWKINS 1984). Experimental curricula have now been inaugurated in educational systems in the United States that range from large, predominantly black Northern inner-city metropolitan schools (e.g. WOLFRAM, ADGER, & DETWYLER 1991) to small,

Southern, rural schools with little ethnic diversity (e.g. WOLFRAM, SCHILLING-ESTES, & HAZEN 1995; WOLFRAM, DANNENBERG, & ANDERSON 1996). In some ways, these are not unlike the materials that have been produced for England (e.g. DONMALL 1985; EDWARDS 1990), but in other ways they are different in their focus and rationale. In the following sections, I provide a rationale for these programs, with illustrative examples demonstrating the some essential components of the curricula.

### **A Rationale for Dialect Awareness Programs**

There are several reasons for incorporating the study of dialect diversity into language instruction, which include both philosophical and practical aspects of education. It seems only reasonable that education about language, whether it be first or second language, should be committed to a search for fundamental truth—the truth about laws of nature and matter. When it comes to language differences, however, there is an educational tolerance of misinformation and folklore that is matched in few subject areas. Myths about the basis of language variation, the linguistic status of dialect structures, and the socio-educational implications of dialect divergence are deeply rooted in language education (LABOV, 1972; WOLFRAM 1991). They need to be confronted as honestly as any other unjustified set of beliefs in the social and physical sciences. At the very least, then, a language educational program should assume responsibility for replacing the entrenched mythology about language differences with factual information.

Misinformation about dialects is not simply innocent folklore. Substantive socio-educational inequities continue to be perpetuated on the basis of language differences. In fact, it is safe to conclude that public discrimination on the basis of language variation is currently tolerated to a much greater degree than virtually any other type of social-class discrimination (MILROY & MILROY 1985). For example, in the United States, there is still a grossly disproportionate number of vernacular dialect speakers who end up in special education programs on the basis of language assessment instruments that do not adequately distinguish difference from disorder (ADGER, WOLFRAM, & DETWYLER 1992). Many language tests still equate language competency exclusively with proficiency in the standard variety.

Issues of equity in education are hardly limited to how educators and professional specialists categorize students based on language differences. Also at issue is how students feel about other students and themselves. Students who

speak socially favored varieties may view their dialectally different peers as linguistically deficient. Worse yet, speakers of socially disfavored varieties may come to accept this viewpoint about their own variety of language. Students need to understand the natural sociolinguistic principles that lead to the development and maintenance of language varieties apart from their relative social status. Furthermore, students need to understand that a dialect difference is not an inherent linguistic or cognitive deficit. Only when this kind of information is pervasive, however, will we start seeing some change in the current practice of discrimination on the basis of dialect.

The equity issue also extends to the impartial representation of sociolinguistic history. As history and social studies programs strive to represent more fairly the contributions of various socio-cultural and ethnic groups to the development of a nation, it seems only reasonable to extend this focus on diversity to language representation as well. For example, in the United States various vernacular dialects have had an important influence on the development of American English, but there is little or no acknowledgement of this role in the study of North American history. Thus, it is a curious but significant omission that the celebration of Black History month in most school districts in the United States rarely if ever includes any discussion of the historical development of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), yet this is one of the most significant of all dialects of American English historically and presently.

In the preceding discussion, we have set forth a reasonable humanistic, socio-educational, and socio-historical basis for sharing information about dialect diversity with primary-level students. In the following section, we shall also argue that there is strong scientific rationale that complements these rationale and further supports the study of dialect diversity. We also will provide some illustrative cases of curricula designed to realize these goals in a practical way.

### **Components of Dialect Awareness Programs**

Given the above rationale, the experimental dialect awareness programs we have designed for primary school students in the United States include humanistic, scientific, and sociohistorical goals. The humanistic rationale with respect to multicultural education should be obvious from the preceding discussion. In an initial unit, students need to confront stereotypes and misconceptions about dialects. This is probably best done inductively. An easy method of doing this involves having students listen to representative speech

samples of regional, class, and ethnic varieties. In the United States, students need to hear how native speakers, both standard and vernacular, in New England, the rural South, and urban North compare to appreciate the reality of diverse regional and social varieties. Although most tape-recorded collections of dialect samples are personal ones that are not commercially available, the video production *American Tongues* (ALVAREZ & KOLKER 1987) can be used to provide an entertaining introduction to dialects while, at the same time, exposing basic prejudices and myths about language differences. The video portrays both the diversity of English and the ethnocentrism that sometimes exists about American English dialects.

Following the presentation, students in small groups discuss the significance of language diversity and issues of dialect prejudice. Questions to guide the discussion include: *What is a dialect; What do people think about dialects; Are people's feeling about dialects fair; Compare the dialects from the video with your own and point out some similarities.* Students also "free write" about their experiences with dialects in a dialogue journal. Typical responses in journals include comments such "it is not fair how people think about dialects" and "I would like to see people change their attitudes about dialects." In fact, in one class where the curriculum was piloted, over 80 percent of the students mentioned in their written, unsolicited responses the unfairness of people's attitudes about dialects after viewing the video.

Another goal of the program is scientific. Language, including dialects, involves a unique form of knowledge in that speakers know a language simply by virtue of the fact that they speak it. Much of this knowledge is not on a conscious level, but it is still open to systematic investigation. Looking at dialect differences provides a natural laboratory for making generalizations drawn from carefully described sets of data. We can hypothesize about certain forms of language and then check them out on the basis of actual usage patterns. This, of course, is a type scientific inquiry.

In its present form, the study of language in the schools often has been reduced to laborious, taxonomic exercises such as "parts of speech" identification, sentence parsing, and other comparable metalinguistic exercises of questionable value. Few students understand this type of inquiry as scientific in the sense that hypotheses are formed based on a particular type of language data and then confirmed or rejected using a specialized argumentation structure. The study of language differences, as any other study of language data, offers a fascinating window through which the dynamic nature of language patterning can be viewed. In hypothesizing about certain forms of language and then

confirming or rejecting these hypotheses on the basis of actual usage patterns, students engage in a kind of principled inquiry that is generally untapped in students' present instruction about language. It also happens to be a "higher order thinking skill" that is becoming such a central goal in contemporary education that extends beyond the mere accumulation of facts.

Such a rationale for studying dialects may seem a bit esoteric at first glance, but it really is quite within the grasp of a well-conceived study of language. In fact, our curricula use dialect examples to take students through the steps of hypothesis formation and testing in very practical exercises using dialect forms as examples. The following exercise, taken from our materials developed for 12-13 year old (8th level) students, illustrates the process (WOLFRAM, SCHILLING-ESTES & Hazen 1995). The exercise is based on the analysis of *a-* prefixing provided in WOLFRAM (1980).

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### The Pattering of A- Prefix

In some rural dialects of English, some words that end in *-ing*, pronounced as *in'*, can take an *a-*, pronounced as *uh*, in front of the word. We call this *a-* prefix because it attaches to the front of the *ing* word. The language pattern or rule for this form allows the *a-* to attach to some words but not to others. We will try to figure out this fairly complicated rule by looking at the kinds of *-ing* words *a-* can and cannot attach to. We will do this using our inner feelings about language. These inner feelings tell us where we CAN and CANNOT use certain forms. Our job as linguists trying to describe this dialect is to figure out the reason for these inner feelings and to state the exact pattern.

Look at the sentence pairs in LIST A and decide which sentence in each pair sounds better for attaching the *a-*. For example, in the first sentence pair, does it sound better to say, *A-building is hard work* or *He was a-building a house*? For each sentence pair, just choose one sentence that sounds better with the *a-* by placing A in the appropriate blank.

#### LIST A: Sentence Pairs for A- Prefixing

1. a. \_\_\_ Building is hard work.  
b. \_\_\_ She was building a house.
2. a. \_\_\_ He likes hunting.  
b. \_\_\_ He went hunting.
3. a. \_\_\_ The child was charming the adults.  
b. \_\_\_ The child was very charming.
4. a. \_\_\_ He kept shocking the people at the store.  
b. \_\_\_ The way the store looked was shocking.

5. a. \_\_\_ They thought fishing was easy.  
 b. \_\_\_ They were fishing this morning.
6. a. \_\_\_ The fishing is still good here.  
 b. \_\_\_ They go fishing less now.

[Answers are: 1b, 2b, 3a, 4a, 5b, 6b]

Examine each of the sentence pairs in terms of the choices for the *a-* prefix and answer the following questions.

- Do you think there is some pattern that guided your choice of an answer? You can tell if there is a definite pattern by checking with other people who did the same exercise on their own.
- Do you think that the pattern might be related to parts of speech? To answer this, see if there are any parts of speech where you CANNOT use the *a-* prefix. Look at *ing* forms that function as verbs and compare those with *ing* forms that operate as nouns or adjectives. For example, look at the use of *charming* as a verb and adjective in sentence 3.
- Write a rule for *a-*prefixing which explains the pattern found in List A.

The first step in figuring out the pattern for *a-* prefix is related to the part of speech of the *-ing* word. Now let's look at another difference related to prepositions such as *from* and *by*. Based on the sentence pairs in LIST B, say whether or not the *a-* form can be used after a preposition. Use the same technique you used for LIST A. Select the sentence that sounds better for each sentence pair and say whether it is the sentence with or without the preposition by placing A in the appropriate blank.

### LIST B: A Further Detail for A- Patterning

1. a. \_\_\_ They make money by building houses.  
 b. \_\_\_ They make money building houses
2. a. \_\_\_ People can't make enough hunting ginseng.  
 b. \_\_\_ People can't make enough money from hunting ginseng.
3. a. \_\_\_ People destroy the beauty of the mountain through littering.  
 b. \_\_\_ People destroy the beauty of the mountain littering.

[Answers are: 1b, 2a, 3b]

- State the pattern for *a-*prefixing which explains why its relation to prepositions such as *from*, *by*, and *through*.

We now have another detail for figuring the pattern for the *a-* prefix related to prepositions. But there is still another part to the pattern for *a-* prefix use. This time, however, it is related to pronunciation. For the following *-ing* words, try to figure out what it is about the pronunciation that makes one sentence sound better than the other. To help you figure out the pronunciation trait that is critical for this pattern, the stressed or accented syllable of each word is marked with the symbol ´. Follow the same procedure that you did in choosing the sentence in each sentence pair that sounds better.



### LIST C: Figuring out a Pronunciation Pattern for A- Prefix

1. a.  She was discóvering a trail.  
b.  She was fóllowing a trail.
2. a.  She was repéating the chant.  
b.  She was hóllering the chant.
3. a.  They were fíguring the change.  
b.  They were forgétting the change.
4. a.  The baby was recognízing the mother.  
b.  The baby was wrécking everything.
5. a.  The were décorating the room.  
b.  They were demánding more time off.

[Answers are: 1b, 2b, 3a, 4b, 5a]

Can the *a-* prefix be used when the following syllable is accented? Can it be used when it is not accented? State this pattern.

Now, say exactly how the pattern for attaching the *a-* prefix works, including the three different details from your examination of the examples in LISTS A, B, and C, in the space below.

In LIST D, say which of the sentences may attach an *a-* prefix. Use your understanding of the rule to explain why the *ing* form may or may not take the *a-* prefix. Write A if the *a-* prefix CAN attach to the sentence and N if it CANNOT in the space provided. Below the sentence, give the reason why the *a-* can or cannot attach to the sentence.

### LIST D: Applying the A- Prefix Rule

1.  She kept handing me more work.
2.  The team was remémbering the game.
3.  The team won by playing great defense.
4.  The team was playing real hard.
5.  The coach was charming.

[Answers are: 1=yes; 2=no; 3=no; 4=yes; 5=no]

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Exercises of this type require students to examine data depicting regional and ethnic language variation, to formulate hypotheses about systematic language patterning, and then to confirm or reject hypotheses about language structure as they understand the regular, predictable nature of language variation--an application of the scientific method.

The advantage of these types of exercises should be obvious, as students learn how linguists collect and organize data to formulate rules. It also provides a protocol for students to apply to data that they might collect from their own community. For example, one of the exercises used to understand the systematic basis of grammatical rules in an African American Vernacular English-speaking community focusses on the so-called 'habitual *be*' in sentences such as *She usually be going to the store*. Students use their native speaker intuitions about the use of *be* to mark systematically an 'intermittent activity over time or space' in the following exercise on the grammatical patterning of this form. In Table 1, student responses (N = 35) from a forced-choice task for the patterned use of *be* are given for a classroom of 9-11 year old African American students. These students live in a community where AAVE is the predominant community dialect. The percentage of correct responses is given for each of the sentence pairs in the exercise. In each case, the response pattern significantly favors the habitual use of *be* (that is,  $p < .01$  in the application of a Chi squared test of significance for each sentence pair).

**Table 1. Responses of African American Vernacular English Speakers to**

% Correct

(N =35) 'Habitual '*be*' Sentence Pairs.

- |    |             |   |
|----|-------------|---|
| 1. | <u>91.4</u> | a. <i>They usually be tired when they come home.</i><br>b. They be tired right now.               |
| 2. | <u>88.6</u> | a. <i>When we play basketball, she be on my team.</i><br>b. The girl in the picture be my sister. |
| 3. | <u>88.6</u> | a. James be coming to school right now.<br>b. <i>James always be coming to school.</i>            |
| 4. | <u>68.6</u> | a. <i>Wanda be going to school every day.</i><br>b. Wanda be in school today.                     |
| 5. | <u>91.4</u> | a. My ankle be broken from the fall.<br>b. <i>Sometimes my ears be itching.</i>                   |

In such an exercise, students learn firsthand about the systematic nature of all dialects regardless of their social acceptability. In some cases, this includes their own dialect, as in the case of the exercise reported in Table 1, while in other cases, it is applied to dialects other than their own. The intention in this distribution is for students to acquire inductively an appreciation for the

linguistic patterning and complexity of both their own and other dialects--apart from their social status in society.

Exercises targeting phonological, morphological, and syntactic dialect patterns also introduce students to the modular nature of language patterning and organization. As one 8th grade level student who spoke an isolated island dialect on the Southeastern coast of the United States noted in her journal, "Well, studying dialect is alot [sic] involved that what I realized. It has a lot of grammar rules in it. I do think dialect is important, especially here."

Another major goal of the curriculum is cultural-historical. Students are exposed to the historical development of representative dialects, including those commonly used by students, so that they can develop a sense of appreciation for the ancestral cultures and circumstances that have brought about the formation of these varieties. Students are introduced to the sociohistorical contribution of various language varieties through concrete, participatory activities as well as historical exposition. For example, students learning about the pidgin and creole roots of some varieties of English make up a skit simulating how language contact might proceed between groups that use unintelligible languages. In this way, they inductively learn to appreciate the circumstances that give rise to language pidginization. Following the skit, they view a video segment profiling the development, distribution, and migration of pidgins and creoles in the African diaspora to see the historical continuity of West African, Caribbean, and North American creoles (for example, Gullah, spoken in coastal South Carolina). Through this process students gain an appreciation for the roots of different sociolinguistic groups and confront myths about language change and development with authentic sociocultural and historical information.

Students also become dialect ethnographers, as they interview parents and grandparents about the uses of particular dialect items, for example, the changing status of dialect lexicon. They make observations about language change and retention on this basis as they participate actively in the construction of dialect dictionaries for their community.

It should be noted that the goals of this program do not explicitly include instruction in the standard variety. However, this may be a practical by-product of dialect awareness programs. As students learn in a non-threatening context to pay attention to the details of language variation and even to manipulate selected dialect patterns in learning about the systematic nature of language differences, they should become more equipped to transfer these skills to other language-related tasks, including the acquisition of a standard variety. Studying about

various dialects from a sociolinguistic vantage point hardly endangers the mainstream sovereignty of the standard variety. Instead, it simply provides an informed sociolinguistic background and a heightened sensitivity to language variation which can be applied appropriately by students and educators to their regional, social, and educational context.

## **Conclusion**

There are a number of positive results that derive from a unit of study on dialects. If students simply replace the current stereotyped mythology about dialects with informed knowledge, the curriculum is probably justified in light of the far-reaching effects of dialect prejudice in society. Along with this perspective, students should develop a positive understanding of the complexity and naturalness of language variation.

One of the greatest attributes of a curriculum on dialects is its potential for tapping the language resources of students' indigenous communities. In addition to classroom lessons, students can learn by going into the community to collect live dialect data. In most cases, the language characteristics of a local language community should make dialects come alive in a way that is unmatched by textbook knowledge. Educational models that treat the local community as a resource to be valued rather than a liability to be overcome have been shown to be quite effective in other areas of language arts education, as demonstrated by the success of WIGGINTON's Foxfire experiment in Rabun Gap, Georgia, (WIGGINTON 1986). There is no reason why this model cannot be applied in an analogous fashion to the study of community dialects. A model that builds upon community strengths in language, even when different from the norms of the mainstream educational system, seems to hold much greater potential for success than one that focusses exclusively upon language conflicts between the community and school. In fact, the community dialect may just turn out to contain an educational lodestone for the study of language arts. Our experimental curricula indicate that the study of dialects can, indeed, become a vibrant, relevant topic of study for all students, not just for those who choose to take an optional course on this topic at the university level of education.

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