

Sociolinguistics and mother-tongue education

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1. Introduction

This article deals with the application of work in social dialectology and pidgin and creole studies to some of the problems faced by teachers and pupils in mother-tongue classrooms.

The problems I will consider stem from the coexistence in society of nonstandard varieties, spoken by the majority of the population, and a standardised variety, which is the language of education. Sociolinguists disagree about whether a standard variety is best seen as an idealised set of abstract norms about language (Milroy and Milroy 1985:22-3) or as a dialect with a written form that is also spoken by educated members of society (Trudgill 1984:32). But however it is defined, the fact remains that for some children, albeit a relatively small number, the language of their home is the same as or similar to the standard variety, whereas for the majority of children the home language is a nonstandard variety with a range of grammatical and lexical features that differ from the standard.

Social tensions between standard and nonstandard varieties come to the fore in the school because educational policies endorse the use of the standard. Sometimes they do this implicitly, as in Germany, where the traditional though unspoken aim of the school is apparently for standard German to be substituted for dialect (Rosenberg 1989:79).

Sometimes, on the other hand, there are explicit statements about the use of the standard, as in England and Wales. Here a National Curriculum for English was implemented in 1995 with clear directives concerning the use of standard English in listening, speaking, reading and writing: for example, at Key Stages 3 and 4, which cover the years between 11 and 16, the orders are that 'pupils should be... confident users of standard English in formal and informal situations' (DFE and Welsh Office 1995: 18). Even where language policy is apparently liberal, as in Dutch primary schools where dialect is explicitly allowed as a medium of instruction, the school is usually a straightforward standard

language domain (Hagen 1989:52; see, however, van den Hoogen and Kuijper 1989 for description of an initiative in the Kerkrade area of the Netherlands). In all these varied circumstances, then, children who speak a nonstandard dialect at home are likely to be at some kind of educational disadvantage (Trudgill 2000: 200).

It might be thought that the main issue for the classroom would be how best to teach the standard to speakers of nonstandard varieties, but the situation is complicated by social attitudes towards standard and nonstandard language. Stereotypes about 'incorrect', 'careless' and 'ugly' speech persist, despite 40 years of sociolinguistic work demonstrating that dialects and creoles are well-formed language systems. Ignorance and prejudice still exist amongst teachers - they have been found, for example, in recent studies carried out in Britain, Canada, New York City, the Caribbean and Australia (Siegel 1999). Furthermore, speakers of the nonstandard languages themselves often hold the view that their language is 'broken' or 'poor'; and if they have more positive attitudes towards their home variety they may reject the standard as the language of the elite (again, see Siegel (1999) for discussion). A further problem lies in the fact that learning is known to be better and more efficient when it is done through the medium of the mother tongue (UNESCO 1968), which suggests that dialects and creoles rather than standard varieties should be used in the classroom, at least in the early years of education, and for the initial acquisition of literacy. This issue has been considered for nonstandard varieties that are noticeably very different in their phonology and syntax from the corresponding standards (notably creole varieties), but it has not been taken into account in educational policies directed at speakers of nonstandard dialects.

Sociolinguists have responded to these problems in three main ways, each of which will be briefly reviewed in this chapter. Firstly, they have sought ways to educate both the general public and teachers about sociolinguistic issues, especially the nature of standard and nonstandard language; secondly, they have produced resources and materials that can be used in education, and have been involved in educational programmes that give a place to creoles and dialects; and thirdly they have carried out research in classrooms to determine how children use standard and nonstandard features of language in their speech and writing at school. Because of space limitations I will mainly review work arising from research on English social dialects and English-based creoles; however there has been a great deal of relevant work in many European countries, some of which is summarised in Ammon and Cheshire (1989) and Cheshire, Edwards, Münstermann and Weltens (1989).

2. Educating the public

From the early days of social dialectology researchers recognised the relevance of their work to education, and published books and articles aimed at teachers and educationists (see, for example, Labov 1969; Trudgill 1975). Most continue to acknowledge a social responsibility to disseminate knowledge about language variation and linguistic prejudice to the public, to teachers and, through teachers, to children (Edwards 1989a:321; Labov 1982). This responsibility has been publicly acknowledged by the American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL), which in 1997 issued a position statement regarding the

application of dialect knowledge to education. The Association resolved that members of the association should “seek ways and means to better communicate the theories and principles of the field to the general public on a continuing basis” (AAAL 1997: 7-8). Cheshire (1996) discusses the measures that might need to be taken if other associations of applied linguistics were to adopt a similar objective.

Among recent books aimed at informing teachers and other practitioners about dialects and linguistic variation are those by Milroy and Milroy (1993), Wolfram, Adger and Christian (1999), Baugh (1999), and Wheeler (1999). Books written for the general public include Bauer and Trudgill (1999) and Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1997). In some countries linguists have worked with teachers and teacher trainers to produce books giving information about the linguistic issues that have the most direct relevance to the classroom. These include not only the linguistic differences between standard and nonstandard language, but also the grammars of spoken and written language: see, for teachers of French as a mother tongue, Béguelin (2000), and for teachers of English as a mother tongue in New Zealand, Gordon et al (1996). In Germany teachers are able to consult booklets setting out the main differences, for some areas of the country, between High German and the local dialect (Ammon 1989); in Britain the books by Milroy and Milroy (1993) and Hughes and Trudgill (1987) contain relevant information of this kind.

Social attitudes towards standard and nonstandard varieties, however, make it difficult for linguists to inform the public about the nature of language and language variation. It is relatively straightforward to address teachers and other language practitioners with experience of dealing with standard and nonstandard varieties of language. It is a different matter altogether when linguists attempt to address the general public since, as Graddol and Swann (1988) have shown, professionals cannot control the meanings given to their discourse in the public domain. In the UK, for example, journalists misreported linguists' reactions to John Honey's (false) claims that sociolinguists are attempting to foster nonstandard dialects and deny working class children access to standard English (Graddol and Swann op.cit.). A further example comes from the Ann Arbor case in the USA, when linguists testified against the Ann Arbor Board of Education under the Equal Opportunities Act, for failing to overcome language barriers which obstructed the equal participation of African-American students (Labov, op.cit., Wiley 1996:133-6). The case was frequently misreported by journalists as an attempt by the courts to force the teaching of AAVE upon unwilling and innocent victims who would as a result be confined to an educational, social and linguistic ghetto. Further distortions of linguists' positions made by journalists in Switzerland and the UK are given in Cheshire (1996).

3. Educational resources, materials and programmes

One of the earliest moves by linguists in the USA who were interested in educational issues was the preparation of initial reading materials using the students' own dialect. Reading books might contain multiple negation, for example, or alternative tense forms as in *we went to the fiesta and we have a good time* (Wolfram, Adger and Christian 1999: 154). The idea was that once word-recognition skill had been established, children could begin to read standard English and dialect conversions side by side.

The original intention was to produce dialect readers for all vernacular dialects, but in fact the only materials ever prepared were in AAVE. Reactions to dialect readers from parents and educators were often negative. There was concern, for example, that Black children would be disadvantaged and held back from acquiring proficiency in standard English; and many people resisted the notion that any differences should be made in teaching Black and White children (Wardhaugh 1992: 340). Research on the effectiveness of dialect readers has been limited, though one study reported a gain in reading ability of 6.2 months for a 4 month period versus a 1.2 month gain with regular materials (Wolfram, Adger and Christian 1999: 155). Dialect readers are no longer much used, but Rickford and Rickford (1995) contend that they should not be discarded before proper empirical research on their effectiveness has been carried out. Rickford and Rickford further argue that it is worth experimenting with new ways of presenting dialect readers that might allay people's wariness. Their own preliminary small-scale research in California suggested that vernacular dialect readers did enhance comprehension in one of the two cases in which they were tested; and that they might be most effective with middle school boys.

Dialect readers suffer from the same problems as the IPA (Initial Phonetic Alphabet) readers that were used in some British primary schools in the 1970s: children cannot use the writing they encounter in daily life – on cereal packets and billboards, for example – to reinforce the reading they do at school. Goodman (1965) maintains that allowing children to read out materials in their own dialect is preferable to producing dialect materials. In the same vein, Goodman and Goodman (2000) concluded after a longitudinal study of six African American children over seven years in 22 sessions of reading and retellings that the main problem is not dialect differences but rejection of dialect: “given appropriate opportunities and experiences with a range of content and texts, speakers of any dialect of a language are capable of learning to read. All readers are capable of using their language flexibly to become literate members of their communities” (434).

A different kind of involvement by linguists in materials used in the classroom has come from research projects aiming to increase children's language awareness. One such project was the Survey of British Dialect Grammar, which involved a national network of teachers in inner city schools who agreed to take part in collaborative teacher-pupil projects on language use in the local community (see Edwards and Cheshire 1989 for details). The Survey had the dual aim of obtaining information about the regional distribution of morphological and syntactic dialect features, and incorporating sociolinguistics directly into the classroom by inviting pupils to explore their own personal reaction to linguistic diversity and to investigate linguistic variation in their local community. Cheshire and Edwards developed a series of lesson outlines and materials on topics such as multilingual Britain, language variation, language change, standard English, and 'talking proper', tried these out during the pilot stage of the research, and then sent the modified version to the teachers who participated in the survey. A questionnaire on local dialect usage was presented as the end point of the work on language awareness, with the intention of consulting pupils as the experts on their local

variety of English in order to find out whether the forms listed on the questionnaire were used locally.

Cheshire and Edwards (1998) give specific details of ways in which the pupils explored in their lessons their personal reactions to linguistic diversity, and describe how they discovered that their local dialect was part of a wider pattern of linguistic variation. Through their participation in the national Survey the pupils had also learned how research adds to an existing knowledge base, and that their knowledge about their own language was of value to the wider research community. Although there was no direct link to the acquisition of standard English, it could be argued that this kind of exploration of linguistic diversity paves the way for direct teaching of the differences between standard and nonstandard grammar (Cheshire and Edwards 1998:210). It constitutes a valuable educational experience in its own right, empowering children to face the attitudes towards sociolinguistic variation that they will encounter in the adult world (Fairclough 1992).

A further initiative of this kind comes from the work of Wolfram and his colleagues, who designed a series of experimental dialect awareness programs for primary school students in the United States. These, they say, have both humanistic and scientific goals (Wolfram and Friday 1997). The humanistic goals include tackling social myths about language variation and prejudices about socially disfavoured varieties of language. The scientific aim involves students examining carefully described sets of dialect data, forming hypotheses about the language structures and then checking them out against usage patterns. Another aim of the curriculum is 'cultural-historical': students may learn, for example, the historical development of various dialects or they may inductively learn to appreciate the circumstances giving rise to pidginization by making up a skit about how communication could take place between groups with no common language.

One such dialect awareness curriculum, described in Wolfram (1998) was piloted in the Baltimore City Public schools (Wolfram, Adger and Detwyler 1992). The program is not intended to provide the teaching of standard English, nor is it intended as a step that will necessarily lead to the eventual teaching of standard English. Instead, Wolfram and his associates feel that students "deserve the truth about dialect diversity and exposure to the rich dialect heritage of the United States whether or not they ever choose to buy into the mainstream values that lead to the acquisition of a standard variety" (Wolfram 1998: 182). As Wolfram points out, however, such a program may well position students to learn standard English more effectively. In their later work Wolfram and his colleagues have moved beyond in-school programs on dialect awareness to community-based programmes which include television and radio documentaries, museum exhibits and presentations to a wide range of community organisations such as churches, civic groups and preservation societies (Wolfram 1999: 62-4).

Siegel (1999) discusses three types of programmes in which creoles and minority dialects are used in education: instrumental, accommodation and awareness programmes. Unlike the dialect awareness programmes mentioned above, in these programmes the goals are explicitly to enable students to acquire the standard language while maintaining their own

way of speaking and thus their linguistic self-respect (op.cit:517). In an instrumental programme the home variety is used as the medium of instruction and for initial literacy, with the standard language introduced at a later stage. Instrumental programmes using a creole exist in approximately a dozen countries (516), and the research that has been done suggests that they are helpful for the subsequent learning of English and other school subjects (op.cit; see also Siegel 1997). Accommodation programmes accept a creole or minority dialect in the classroom, although they are not used as a medium of instruction or subject of study; some basic sociolinguistics is also taught, and students examine linguistic and pragmatic differences between their own dialects and the standard variety. Different types of accommodation programmes have been used in Hawaii (see Boggs 1985), in Australia with speakers of Aboriginal English (Malcolm 1992, 1995) and in the Caribbean (Winer 1990). Awareness programmes of various kinds have been carried out in Britain and the USA, as we saw above: see further Siegel 1999, Thomas and Maybin 1998, Jones 1989. Instrumental and accommodation programmes have been used only with speakers of creoles and other nonstandard varieties that diverge enough from the standard variety to be recognised as a discrete variety. With social dialects that have a smaller number of differences from the standard, elsewhere only awareness programmes have been used. In all three cases, however, the success of the programmes has resulted from linguists and teachers working together.

Other ways in which linguists have been involved in the production of resources for teachers or materials for use in the classroom are discussed in Siegel (1999); see also Edwards (1993).

4. Research on language variation at school.

4.1. Linguistic variation in speech

Standard and nonstandard dialects are sometimes so different from each other that variation in people's speech can be conceptualised as switching between discrete systems. This is the case, for example, for variation between standard English and most English-based creoles, standard (High) German and the Swiss German dialects (Rash 1998: 50), standard English and AAVE (Rickford 1999) and standard English, and the Patois spoken by members of the British Black community and standard English or a local White variety of English (Edwards 1989b; see also below). Elsewhere, however, especially in the major urban areas of the western world, the linguistic variation between dialect and standard is better seen in terms of a continuum along which speakers shift as they adjust their relative proportions of standard and nonstandard forms in response to different aspects of the social situation

Research on both types of situations has shown how pupils adjust their use of standard and nonstandard language at school, probably unconsciously. For example, Cheshire (1982a) presents a quantitative analysis of eleven nonstandard morphosyntactic variables in the speech of eight working class boys aged between 11 and 14. The boys were recorded talking to their friends and the fieldworker in adventure playgrounds in Reading, England, and then when talking to their teacher at school. Some nonstandard

features, such as *ain't* and the past tense verb forms *come* and *done*, were invariant, occurring 100 per cent of the time in the boys' speech in the playground as well as in the classroom. Most nonstandard grammatical features, however, including nonstandard verbal *-s*, nonstandard *was*, negative concord and demonstrative *them*, occurred less frequently in the boys' classroom speech than in their talk at the playground. Two further groups of four boys and four girls also used the nonstandard forms less frequently with their teacher in school than with their friends in the playground, and they used the nonstandard forms still less frequently in their school written work. These pupils had not been explicitly told that they should use standard English at school, nor had they been taught the differences between the grammar of their local dialect and that of standard English; thus their style-shifting was presumably an instinctive response to the norms of the school.

Lucas and Borders (1994) similarly found that the presence of the teacher resulted in African American students using a lower proportion of AAVE features. Lucas and Borders examined language use during both academic and non-academic events within a kindergarten class, a fourth grade class and a sixth grade class. All the children used both AAVE and standard English variants, but the older children (grades four and six) confined their use of vernacular AAVE forms mainly to work done in small groups where the teacher was not present. In teacher-led lessons they consistently used fewer or no AAVE variants. This linguistic behaviour, then, appeared to be a maturational aspect of language use, occurring only with older children, and again apparently directly reflecting their conscious awareness of the role of standard English in the school. When interviewed, in fact, both children and teachers said that in their view AAVE was inappropriate for instructional discourse. (Lucas and Borders op. cit., reported in Adger 1998: 152).

Adger and Wolfram's research in five elementary schools in Baltimore City adds an additional dimension to our understanding of the use of standard and nonstandard forms at school. Unlike Lucas and Borders, they found that AAVE did occur in the classroom, in the speech of teachers and students alike, but standard English was associated with literacy and with speaking with an authoritative footing. The teachers mainly used standard English, but they occasionally shifted to vernacular forms to achieve a specific interactional effect (Adger and Wolfram 2000: 397). The students generally used AAVE forms in class, without sanction from the teacher; they did so during both whole-class and small-group work, and when addressing teachers as well as other students. However when classroom tasks were related to literacy the teacher insisted on the students using standard English variants, and the students were careful to do so: this occurred, for example, when they dictated a written sentence for the teacher to write on the board, based on a story they had just heard. The students also used standard English forms when they were speaking with authority. Examples include a situation when a student was called on to explain a diorama to his class, role plays of radio advertisements, and an occasion when a student took the teacher's place at the blackboard to demonstrate how to complete an order form advertisements. Scripted discourse at school assemblies or multi-class presentations also called for the use of standard English, whether the discourse was memorized or read (Adger 1998: 164, Adger and Wolfram 2000: 400-01).

Thus both the AAVE speaking children in these studies and the dialect speaking children in Reading, England shifted towards a higher use of standard English forms in situations where they appeared to consider it appropriate to do so. Adger (1998: 167) suggests that in the case of the AAVE speaking children their shared ethnicity with an African American teacher contributed to their maintaining the norms of their speech communities, where standard English is the language of literacy events and of authority. It is important, she argues, to give children opportunities to adopt an authoritative footing in the tasks they are required to perform at school, since this is where community expectations call for standard English; by increasing the discourse tasks and activities in which students are offered authoritative footing their experience with using the standard will become more extensive (see also Adger and Wolfram 2000: 405).

The association between standard English and speaking with authority demonstrates how speakers manipulate linguistic variation in the projection of different identities. Sometimes, however, the results are less harmonious. The study in Reading found that those boys who liked their teacher and had established a good relationship with him accommodated to his speech by increasing the proportion of standard forms in their speech, whereas those boys who disliked both their teacher and the school increased the proportion of nonstandard forms in their speech when they were talking to him. One boy even used a higher proportion of dialect features to a teacher that he despised than he did with his friends in the playground (see Cheshire 1982b for details).

Edwards (1989b) discusses a similar phenomenon in the classroom behaviour of some British-born Black adolescents. The first generation of immigrants from the Caribbean, who arrived Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, spoke a variety of English that was very different from the local varieties, but British-born Black children now tend to adhere very closely to local White speech norms, at least until adolescence. However they can usually understand the variety that they refer to as Patois; they use it in at least some settings and they understand its social meaning as a marker of group membership and a positive assertion of Black identity (op.cit:371). Only a small number of speakers use Patois in the classroom, and they do so in only a small number of exchanges; but the social meaning of Patois in the school context means that these exchanges can demonstrate hostility towards the school or the teacher. Edwards gives examples of interactions where Black pupils wish to exclude their White, non-Patois speaking teacher, both in asides to other pupils and in more confrontational comments addressed explicitly to the teacher.

The research indicates, then, that educational programmes that recognise the associations that standard and nonstandard English have for speakers, and that build on these, are more likely to result in children becoming proficient in using standard English than are policies which assume that acquiring the standard language is simply a matter of substituting one variant for another. Programmes of this type were discussed above. Policies that insist on a blanket use of the standard variety at school risk alienating pupils who are perfectly able to adjust their use of standard and nonstandard features at school if they wish to do so.

4.2. Linguistic variation in writing

Where a local spoken variety is very different from written standard English, learning to write may be like acquiring a second language. Tyndall (2000) argues that this is the situation for students from rural areas in Guyana and Barbados, where neither teachers nor students are under any pressure to speak standard English in oral communication. Students from urban areas, on the other hand, are likely to be from a language environment that is close to the acrolectal end of the Creole continuum; their spoken language, therefore, will be closer to the written standard and the problems that they may encounter in school writing will be different in nature. Research on other Creole varieties, however, has tended to downplay the effect of the spoken Creole on students' written performance. Winch and Gingell (1994), for example, argue against the almost unanimous assumption of educationists and sociolinguists in St. Lucia that poor standards of written competence in St. Lucian standard English are due to interference from St. Lucian Creole English or Creole French (op. cit. 158). They analysed 309 examination scripts consisting of narratives and letters, from 9 to 11 year old children in low-achieving schools. The most common errors that could be attributed to creole interference also occurred in a comparative sample of writing from a British school, casting doubt on the role of interference from the creole varieties (177). Some categories of error that might be assumed to relate to the creoles could more plausibly be attributed to a misunderstanding of the relationship between speech and writing. Furthermore, many mistakes seemed to relate to the increasing risks with sentence construction that children took as they became more ambitious in their writing. Winch and Gingell conclude that studies of children's writing carried out in other Creole-speaking areas and in Creole-speaking communities in Britain should consider whether they might be confounding developmental factors with the factor of dialect interference.

Williams' quantitative analysis (1989) of the written personal and narrative accounts of 9 to 10 year olds also stresses the role that developmental factors play in the process of learning to write. Williams analysed all the extended pieces of writing in the exercise books and creative writing books of 40 children over a six month period. Twenty children were from a school in a working class area of Reading and twenty were from a school in a middle class area. All the dialect speaking children used some nonstandard forms in their school writing, though the specific forms that individual children used varied, reflecting, Williams points out, the many different factors that come into play when a child is learning to write. Interestingly, the standard English-speaking children also used features that appeared to be dialect forms, though the number of forms was smaller, and they occurred less frequently; furthermore, these forms coincided, in most cases, with developmental features of children's English (such as the overgeneralisation of the *-ed* suffix to the past tense forms of 'irregular' strong verbs). The working class children used fewer of the generalised *-ed* forms than the middle-class children, and more of the forms that could only be attributed to the influence of dialect. It could be argued, therefore, on the basis of their written work, that the working class children were more advanced in their language development since the past tense forms they used in writing more closely resembled the forms used by the adult members of the local community (op.cit.: 190).

Williams' study also showed that dialect speakers and standard English speakers alike used features associated with informal colloquial spoken English in their writing. The use of dialect in writing, then, can be seen as just one aspect of the close relationship that exists in children's early writing between spoken and written language (see also Perera 1984). Children who wrote less fluently or who had difficulty with the mechanics of writing included fewer features of speech in their writing.

Williamson (1990, 1995) argues, in fact, that very few of the problems that children encounter in writing are due to dialect. His 1990 study involved the analysis of two pieces of written work, one report and one letter, from 28 pupils aged 11 in an inner-city school in Newcastle upon Tyne. Their errors fell into six categories: punctuation, spelling, other orthographic features (such as misuse of apostrophes, incorrect segmentation into words, incorrect use of capitals), grammar, lexis and omissions. There were frequent errors in the individual pieces of work, ranging from one error every 2.7 words to one in every 26.9 words, but 80 per cent of the errors were covered by the categories of spelling, punctuation and 'other' orthographic errors. Only about 10 per cent of the errors were of a grammatical nature and only about 1 per cent involved lexis. By no means all of the grammatical errors could be attributed to the influence of nonstandard dialect: with verb forms, for example, the majority of errors came from using stem forms where a past tense or past participle was called for. The remaining grammatical errors seemed to arise from problems in handling the complexities of written structures: for example, *it* and *them* occurred with no antecedent, or with the wrong antecedent.

In his later study Williamson (1995) analysed two essays from 23 students aged 16, again from an inner city school on Tyneside. The written pieces were longer than those of the 11 year olds and, encouragingly, there was a much lower incidence of errors. Again, the majority of the errors were in spelling, punctuation and other features of the orthography, with the commonest form of grammatical error arising this time from difficulties in handling subordination – a feature, Williamson points out, that is both more sophisticated and more prevalent in writing than in speech (op.cit.:9). Even at this age, then, pupils seem still to have difficulty in handling the written form as an alternative means of expression to speech. Tyneside dialect features again accounted for only a small proportion of the errors and, interestingly, their frequency remained the same in the work of the 16 year olds as in that of the 11 year olds. Williamson's explanation for this is that although nonstandard dialect forms appear to be a relatively minor problem in writing, a core of dialect forms may persist that are very difficult to eradicate entirely, perhaps because it is impossible for a teacher to draw attention to the entire range of 'inappropriate' usage, or because the core forms are such an ingrained part of children's speech patterns that they will tend to recur in their writing (op.cit.:11).

Williamson and Hardman (1997a, 1997b) examined school writing in three further areas of England, analysing between 38 and 50 examination scripts, involving a wide range of writing tasks, from 11 and 15 year olds from Merseyside, the Southwest and London, as well as Tyneside. These areas were those for which Hudson and Holmes (1995) had previously analysed the incidence of nonstandard forms in the formal spoken English of 11 and 15 year olds. As expected, the frequency of nonstandard dialect forms was lower

in the written sample than in Hudson and Holmes' spoken sample, with just one occurrence every 381 words for the 11 year olds and one occurrence every 569 words for the 15 year olds. Again, then, the occurrence of dialect forms in school writing is found to be a relatively rare phenomenon, and one which shrinks into insignificance when compared, for example, with errors in spelling and punctuation (op. cit.: 298).

Williamson concludes that if we look at the issue of writing from the standpoint of the teacher rather than from that of the dialectologist we see that the problem for the children, and their teachers, lies in mastering the writing system, not in dialect variation (1990: 260; see also Williams 1989: 189-90). Williamson and Hardman (1997b) also found that the nature of the writing task affected the incidence of nonstandard forms, with the highest number occurring in personal anecdotes. Thus it is possible that those children who use nonstandard features in writing may, given a different task, be capable of writing exclusively in standard English.

Research into nonstandard language and writing, then, has indicated what teachers could usefully focus on in their teaching. Rather than worrying about the influence of nonstandard features of grammar and lexis, for example, they would do better to emphasise punctuation and orthography in their teaching (Williamson and Hardman 1997b: 255). If teachers do decide to focus on nonstandard grammar, the research suggests that the most profitable area to focus on could be the verb phrase: nonstandard verb forms accounted for more than half the total number of instances of nonstandard writing in the scripts analysed by Williamson and Hardman (1997a:168). Verb forms are also singled out as problematic for Creole speakers in the Caribbean (Tyndall 2000, Winch and Gingell 1994).

5. Conclusion

Much of the research described in this chapter concludes that speaking a nonstandard variety is not as detrimental to educational success as might be thought. In speaking, writing and reading children can often adjust their use of language to accommodate the standard variety if they wish to do so. The situation for English seems to resemble the situation in the Netherlands: Hagen says with reference to this that although "dialect can be a problem, it is not a drama" (Hagen 1989: 72). Nevertheless public attitudes towards nonstandard language continue to be ill-informed and prejudiced in most countries (Norway, Switzerland and Luxembourg are notable exceptions, as Trudgill (2000) points out), despite the work of linguists who have done their best to inform teachers and the general public about the nature of sociolinguistic variation. Edwards (1989a:320) reminds us of the difficulty of the task ahead: although there is much to criticise in the earlier work of Bernstein, she says, it is hard to argue with his observation that education cannot compensate for society.

6. Literature

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