

From definition to policy: The ideological struggle of African-American English

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Introduction. A few years ago, I was conducting one of the many dialect workshops for practitioners that I have now done for over three decades. The reactions of the participants—ranging from curious bewilderment to hostile resistance—were little different from those I have routinely entertained from those introduced to sociolinguistic premises for the first time. Having encountered such responses on countless occasions, I fully expected these reactions. What I did not realize, however, was the fact that I had done a similar workshop at the same school a couple of decades earlier, and that, in fact, a few of the participants in attendance that day were present at the earlier workshop. I was concerned about my obvious lapse of memory, but I was much more disturbed by the fact that the reactions from the participants that day seemed no different from those of any other group confronting sociolinguistic premises for the first time.

Most sociolinguists who participated in the original deficit-difference debates of the 1960s or the subsequent periodic public controversies about dialect diversity had a strong sense of *déjà vu* when the so-called Oakland Ebonics controversy erupted in late 1996 and 1997. It seems surprising that so little has changed over several decades with respect to public opinions and attitudes about language differences. We are still arguing about issues that range from the definition of the variety, now named Ebonics or African-American Vernacular English (Mufwene forthcoming), to the significance of linguistic information about this variety for the socio-educational lives of its speakers (Rickford 1997; Wolfram, Adger, and Christian 1999). Furthermore, the institutional and individual effects of linguistic discrimination and subordination are still evident in virtually every social and educational arena. Lippi-Green (1997: 73) observes that discrimination based on accent remains “so commonly accepted, so widely perceived as appropriate, that it must be seen as the last back door to discrimination.”

If nothing else, the controversy and media blitz surrounding the resolution of the Oakland Unified School Board on Ebonics has reinforced several important lessons about the status of dialect differences in American society. It exposed, once again, the intensity of people’s beliefs and opinions about language and lan-

guage diversity. In fact, a *Newsweek* article (Bridgeman 1998: 1) reported that an America Online poll about Ebonics drew more responses than the polls asking the public whether O. J. Simpson was guilty. Beliefs and attitudes about language derive from the same core of beliefs that govern religion, morality, and ethics, thus making them entrenched—and also largely unassailable. Furthermore, beliefs about the sovereignty of Standard English seem to be embedded in what Anderson (1991) labels a “sacred imagined community,” where privileged access to truth and power are rooted in the Standard English script. In challenging the fundamental belief system about the way language is supposed to be, the Oakland Unified School District’s resolution opened, or more accurately, reopened the intensive, heated discussion of language ideology and linguistic subordination.

The controversy further emphasized the persistent and widespread level of public misinformation about language variation in public life and in education. There is an entrenched mythology and “miseducation” about dialects that pervades the understanding of this topic, particularly with respect to the relationship between vernacular and standard varieties (Baugh 1988; Lippi-Green 1997; Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1998; Wolfram, Adger, and Christian 1999). Furthermore, the factual misinformation is not all innocent folklore; it affects how we view people and how they view themselves on both a formal, institutional level and an informal, personal level. Operating on erroneous assumptions about language differences, it is easy for people to perpetuate unjustified stereotypes about language as it relates to class, ethnicity, and region—stereotypes as severe as any other racial and class stereotype.

The Ebonics controversy therefore underscored the need for a strong, proactive strategy to counter the deleterious institutional and personal effects that derive from the popular assumptions and factual misinformation that dominate the public understanding of sociolinguistic diversity. Language diversity is one of the most fundamental dimensions of human behavior still entrenched in such a pervasive mythology, yet there are few systematic and programmatic movements directed toward educating the American public about the “facts of dialect diversity.”

Has such little progress really been made over the past several decades in the sociopolitical and socioeducational struggle against linguistic subordination and language-based discrimination? Can we realistically expect wide-scale change with respect to the consideration of dialect diversity in our social and educational institutions and in the treatment of those who speak vernacular varieties? What can we hope to accomplish and how must we go about it if we seek to effect change? In the following sections, I provide some perspective on the fundamental challenges for socioeducational and sociopolitical change and offer some proposals for change in policy and in practice.

The ideological context. To understand the full significance of the periodic controversies about dialect diversity that erupt in American society, we have to

understand the fundamental ideology that frames such debates. By *language ideology* I mean an underlying, consensual, and unquestioned belief system about the way language is and is supposed to be (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994). In its most pervasive form, language ideology appears to make “common sense” so that no specialized knowledge or expertise is required to understand fundamental “facts” about language and its role in society. The primary socialization processes of an ideology (Eagleton 1991) naturalize and universalize beliefs so that they are self-evident. Furthermore, social reality is obscured in ways convenient to the belief system, so that alternative ways of thinking are excluded and denigrated. In Foucaultian terms (1972) “regimes of truth” legitimize a set of beliefs and practices. In the case of language diversity, a set of perspectives and practices is established that is associated with asymmetric, heterogeneous groups. The beliefs about language need not be made explicit; in fact, as Fairclough (1989: 85) notes, language ideology is most effective when its workings are least visible. At the root of the struggle over the status of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), then, is an entrenched ideology that recognizes the sovereignty of the standard variety and the linguistic subordination of vernaculars, particularly those associated with class and ethnic asymmetries.

From time to time, particular events in society may bring to the surface foundational beliefs about language, and language itself may become an object in an ideological struggle. In an important sense, the Oakland Unified School District’s resolution (1996, 1997) was controversial because it challenged primitive beliefs about language and language diversity, offering an alternative, nonmainstream set of beliefs.

The questions and comments about Ebonics thus provided a forum for exposing alternative ways of viewing language and language diversity. The language of everyday conversations readily portrays the ideological struggle over language diversity and the status of AAVE.¹ For example, during the controversy I was routinely asked if I “believed in Ebonics,” as if there were some article of religious belief attendant to the recognition of AAVE. In fact, one host on a radio talk show confronted my stance on the legitimacy of AAVE as a linguistic system with the comment, “You have to understand, professor, that I believe in a right and a wrong, a moral and an immoral, a correct and an incorrect, and Ebonics is simply incorrect English.” Others have had similar experiences. After I gave one lecture on Ebonics at a university, the following day a person in the audience reported that she was greeted that morning by a colleague who observed, “I heard you went to the Ebonics lecture last night; so do you believe in Ebonics now?” Such a response to attendance at a lecture on Ebonics conjures up images of attendance at a religious revival meeting. But this semblance is not far-fetched. I have found that it is as difficult to dispute the linguistic validity of a vernacular variety such as AAVE as it is to dispute religion or politics. Everyone seems to have an opinion about dialect diversity, and these opinions are typically quite

dogmatic. In fact, I found during the height of the Ebonics controversy that the question, “So what do you think of Ebonics?” functioned as an indirect speech act declaring that a person is about to offer you their opinion on this topic rather than a literal question. Furthermore, most people assume that any “reasonable person” would believe the same way as they do about language.² Such is the manifestation of language ideology—at its best or worst.

There is another characteristic of language ideology that may set language apart from some other domains of knowledge. Language is considered to be at once a collective and personal matter, a symbolic token of group identity as well as personal character. In its collective capacity, it is a shared, ordinary commodity, and no specialized knowledge or expertise is required for public commentary. This status means that authoritative critique on the topic is not limited to those with specialized expertise. In fact, the Ebonics controversy has taught us that social and political prominence is considered to be sufficient for the assumption of an authoritative stance on language. Fuel was added to the fire of the Oakland Ebonics controversy when prominent public figures ranging from the president of the United States to educators and leaders in the African-American community offered immediate and pronounced condemnation of the Oakland School Board for its resolution recognizing the linguistic integrity of Ebonics.

It is interesting to note that the Senate subcommittee hearings on Ebonics convened by Senator Arlen Specter included two well-versed, widely recognized sociolinguists, William Labov and Orlando Taylor, who argued in support of the Oakland resolution. Their position was, in turn, opposed by two antagonistic counter-testimonies offered by a columnist and a preacher, neither of whom had any formal training in linguistics or sociolinguistics. This scenario would be akin to two non-experts arguing with two well-credentialed research physicists about the ramifications of a particular law of physics in industrial manufacturing.

Without any safeguards that limit public discussion to those with specialized expertise in language structure, popular beliefs that include common myths about language can run rampant. And that is exactly what took place in the public furor over the Oakland resolution. In this instance, however, the issues involved broad-based societal beliefs about the nature of language and a specific set of misunderstandings about language diversity in Oakland. The controversy even unleashed a whole new public genre of linguistic racism, as documented in the Ronkin and Karn (1999) analysis of Internet parodies of Ebonics. Perhaps most revealing about such parodies was the liberty with which people distributed them on the Internet, apparently unaware of or insensitive to their linguistic racism. I personally was shocked to receive dozens of electronic mail messages containing forwarded linguistic parodies of Ebonics from colleagues and students who would not think of sending me a racist parody on another topic. As Ronkin and Karn (1999: 33, 34) note:

Ebonics parody pages . . . distances producers and consumer from responsibility for language that would be highly offensive in other public venues . . . the Oakland resolution brought language ideology to the foreground in the entire United States in a dramatic way. The resolution, moreover, precipitated a nationwide discourse on language in which attitudes toward Ebonics served as a safe proxy for a discourse on the threats that racialized groups pose to dominant group power in the United States.

One of the ironies of the public commentary on Ebonics was the seemingly paradoxical alliances of public figures who commented on the topic. Public commentary brought together leaders from the African-American community known for their social activism and progressive sociopolitical perspectives and those known for their conservative, reactionary political stances. On what other topic have conservative icons such as the media commentator Rush Limbaugh and the social activist Jessie Jackson agreed upon in their public condemnation? Such alliances are, however, simply a testament to the depth of the entrenched language ideology.

In general, the American public has been socialized into the same language ideology, so that the principle of linguistic subordination cuts across the racial and class distinctions that seem to divide the population on most other issues. In fact, it is one of the few ideologies that seems to transcend race and class in American society. Americans of different classes and races therefore can stand united in totalitarian support of the sovereignty of Standard English—even as they may stridently disagree on other “moral” issues in our society, ranging from the guilt of O. J. Simpson to the sexual behavior of Bill Clinton. With such a consensual base, the small group of academic linguists and “radical” members of the Oakland School Board who seek to legitimize a vernacular dialect can safely be marginalized as a disenfranchised, out-of-touch groups who deserve no public voice in the language policy of the United States. In fact, one of the greatest challenges for linguists speaking out on Ebonics was their credibility as practically minded citizens who genuinely were interested in the academic success of AAVE-speaking students. As one reporter from *USA Today* put it, “People are simply going to say that this is the position of a bunch of radical, ivory-tower academics. What do you say to that?” As we shall see, the threat of marginalization is not an idle challenge, but an important consideration if we hope to translate our sociolinguistic axioms into public policy and practice.

The discussion of language ideology may seem to provide a rather imposing and pessimistic background for discussing change in the practice of linguistic subordination, but it is also the place where we must start. Such a perspective also may help us set realistic expectations in terms of a program of change. Major

changes in belief systems regarding the “facts of life” take generations to be realized, and language ideology should not be expected to be different in this respect. It has taken generations for particular laws of nature to become publicly accepted doctrine; it is therefore not surprising to find that the fundamental premises of sociolinguistics have yet to be embraced by the general public. At this stage, perhaps we should be more concerned about the mobilization of effective strategies and policies for challenging the ideology of linguistic subordination than public opinion polls showing the acceptance of AAVE or other vernacular dialects. I therefore concentrate in the following sections on the examination of strategies and policies for bringing about change.

Language policy and language variation. Language policy typically includes a combination of official decisions and prevailing practices related to language use and education (McGroarty 1997; Cooper 1989). For various historical reasons, approaches to language policy in the United States are quite diffuse and “unofficial.” McGroarty (1997: 68) offers two primary reasons for the diffuse approach: “First are the tensions inherent in the public ideologies related to language, which are strongly individualistic and pragmatic in character, though they include some provisions for protection of minority rights and implicit connections to the notion of pluralism. Second is the effect of the overlapping governance structures that affect all levels of education.”

There is, of course, no official national language policy in the United States despite the well-publicized efforts of the English-only movement to add a constitutional amendment making English the official language of the United States. The Constitution currently has no reference to the language of government, and there is no national language academy to offer prescriptive proclamations about Standard English structures, as is found for European countries such as France and Spain. But the lack of an official policy seems to matter little in the instantiation of language practices. In fact, until recent media coverage and statewide votes regarding the English language amendment, most citizens were quite surprised to find out that English was *not* the official language of the United States, and that there were no authorities who mandated in an official capacity the forms of Standard English.

The relationship between the federal government and education, the primary venue for formal language service, is at once separate and intertwined at different levels of governance. Authority for formal, public education is granted to local school boards and educational agencies so that language-in-education policies in the United States are simply the sum of purely local decisions (McGroarty 1997: 68). This is quite unlike countries such as England, Australia, and New Zealand, which adopt national curricula in a top-down model of education.

At the same time, local school districts may be subjected to federal litigation related to language in the classroom under the authority of federal law. For

example, the guarantee of equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment (Section 1706, Title 20) states the following:

No State shall deny equal educational opportunity to an individual on account of his or her race, color, sex or national origin, by

...

(f) the failure by an educational agency to take appropriate action to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by its students in its instructional programs. 20 U.S.C. 1073f).

On the basis of this statute, a judgment granting language concessions for African-American students was made by the U.S. District Court judge in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in the so-called Ann Arbor Decision. In particular, Judge Joiner (Ann Arbor 1980: 11) ruled that the school board had to “take steps to help teachers to recognize the home language of the students and to use that knowledge in their attempt to teach reading skills in standard English.” Such federal litigation is, however, relatively infrequent.

Although authority for formal education is quite localized in the United States, there is still a widespread, prevalent practice that excludes all varieties other than Standard English. The ideology of linguistic subordination discussed previously is so entrenched in American society that government officials, educators, and citizens see no need to state the obvious—that Standard English is the only acceptable language for handling the affairs of government and education on a national, state, or local level.

The actual practice, or “unofficial policy,” with respect to Standard English is confirmed by the reaction to any institutional effort to recognize the legitimacy of varieties other than the reified standard. Such formal efforts are met with strong negative reaction and typically lead the way to misinterpretation, as exemplified in the reaction to the resolution of the Oakland Unified School Board. The actual wording of the board’s position on Standard English and African-American language is this:

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Superintendent in conjunction with her staff shall immediately devise and implement the best possible academic program for the combined purposes of facilitating the acquisition of and mastery of English language skills, while respecting and embracing the legitimacy and richness of the language patterns whether they are known as ‘Ebonics,’ ‘African Language Systems,’ ‘Pan African Communication

Behaviors,' or other description (Resolution of the Board of Education, Oakland Unified School District 1997).

Although the resolution simply states that students' community dialects should be respected, affirmed, and used as a bridge to learn Standard English, it was consistently misinterpreted by the media and the public to mean that students and teachers were to use and teach the vernacular variety. Pedagogically, all this statement means is that educators should have specific knowledge about the community language patterns of their students in order to know where they are in the process of moving them towards standard English proficiency. As Orlando Taylor (1997: 2) put it in his testimony to the Senate subcommittee hearing, "taking students where they are to where they need to go is an educational principle that is as American as apple pie." But the ideology of linguistic subordination is so entrenched that such explicit acknowledgment is misinterpreted as a challenge to totalitarian sovereignty of the standard variety.³

My personal experience with proposals for implementing dialect awareness programs suggests that the popular interpretation of the Ebonics resolution with respect to teaching is not unusual. For almost a decade, I proposed to pilot an experimental dialect awareness program for primary and secondary students to school systems around the country. The goal of the program simply was to teach students to understand and appreciate the nature of language differences and the intricate and systematic patterning of all dialects and languages. No aspect of the programs ever endorsed teaching in a vernacular dialect or teaching students to use the vernacular in any productive way. Nonetheless, I was repeatedly denied permission to pilot these programs in the public schools—by principals, teachers, and parents who worried that the programs might teach students to speak "bad language." Once prevailing ideologies are challenged, the security of language quality control evaporates, thus opening the door for worst case scenarios with respect to the demise of Standard English.

Implementing language variation policy. Given the diffuse and unofficial approaches to language policy in the United States, it seems apparent that the implementation of policies with respect to language variation will follow a similar, varied course of action. What exactly can be done to implement practices and policies that ensure the equitable treatment of vernacular dialect speakers in society and in education? Even if it were possible by some national fiat to adopt a national policy on language and dialects, it would require extensive social and educational augmentation given the depth of the entrenched ideology of linguistic subordination in American society.⁴ No single language policy can unilaterally overturn a pervasive, largely covert practice that derives from a foundational ideology of linguistic subordination. At the same time, there are some strategies that can be set in motion to counteract the current practices toward speakers of AAVE

and other vernacular varieties of English. In the following sections, I discuss briefly some of the venues for adopted policies to counter current practices.

Litigation. The United States is a highly litigious society, which offers recourse for those who have been discriminated against through the legal system. Furthermore, there are protections against discrimination offered under the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which mentions explicitly the denial of equal opportunity “because of an individual’s, or his or her ancestor’s place of origin; or because an individual has the physical, cultural, or linguistic characteristics of a national origin group” (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 1988: §1606.1).

Notwithstanding some notable exceptions, there are actually few cases involving dialect rights that end up in litigation.⁵ In part, this is because language is often treated as a right derived from other demographic traits such as race, sex, or national origin, rather than language per se. However, as Matsuda (1991: 1391–1392) notes: “The way we talk, whether it is a life choice or immutable characteristic, is akin to other attributes of the self that the law protects. In privacy law, due process law, protection against cruel and unusual punishment, and freedom from inquisition, we say the state cannot intrude upon the core of you, cannot take away your sacred places of the self. A citizen’s accent, I would argue, resides in one of those places.”

Perhaps a more important explanation for the relative paucity of court cases related to dialect discrimination is found in the tacit accommodation of the linguistic subordination principle in the legal system. Lippi-Green observes (1997: 164) that the courts remain quite receptive to arguments that accents impede communication and therefore the ability to perform jobs, even though every case she examined in detail indicated no effort to make an objective assessment of the communication skills required for the job. This remains the case despite ample documentation of overt and covert discrimination based on language variation (Milroy and Milroy 1985; Lippi-Green 1997). As Milroy and Milroy (1985: 3) note, “[a]lthough public discrimination on the grounds of race, religion and social class is not now publicly acceptable, it appears that discrimination on linguistic grounds is publicly acceptable, even though linguistic differences may themselves be associated with ethnic, religious and class differences.”

Dialect discrimination is ultimately a sociological rather than legal problem, but the United States has a long history of addressing such inequities through the court system, and it often serves as the incentive for implementing social policy. Exclusion on the basis of dialect has not really had its day in court. Or, as Lippi-Green (1997: 170) puts it, “linguistics and language-focused discrimination have yet to meet their Scopes Trial.” It seems that we need to seize the opportunity to have a full hearing on issues of language variation so that legal precedents can be set to guide the society towards sociolinguistic justice. As with other areas of discrimination, such precedents cannot eliminate prejudice, but they can at least

protect the legal rights of those affected by linguistically based discriminatory behavior.

Resolutions and position statements. In the wake of the Oakland United School Board Resolution on Ebonics, a number of major professional language organizations formulated supportive resolutions and position statements. For example, the Linguistic Society of America, the American Association of Applied Linguistics, and Teachers of English as a Second and Other Language were among the associations offering resolutions in support of the efforts of the Oakland Unified School Board to recognize the linguistic integrity of AAVE. As the event played out in the media, some of these resolutions became an essential part of the story. The resolutions, along with media interviews with linguists, were often used to present the other side of the public condemnation of the Oakland School Board's resolution. Linguists all over the United States were called upon to offer expert professional opinion on the controversy for local and national news stories, and the resolutions of these various professional organizations helped ground their expert opinion; they could point to the adoption of supportive resolutions by prestigious professional language organizations. Such resolutions also added professional credibility to the numerous web sites that were rapidly created in response to the controversy. Thus, the various resolutions and position statements by professional organizations certainly seemed to provide support for linguists throughout the country trying to take advantage of their fifteen minutes of media fame related to language variation.

The long-term effects derived from these resolutions and position statements are, of course, another matter. Position statements on language variation are hardly a new strategy for supporting changes in language policy and practice. For example, a subdivision of the nation's largest and most influential organization of English teachers, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), adopted a strong position affirming students' dialect rights in 1974. The statement asserted that "teachers must have the experience and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language" (Committee on CCC Language Statement 1974: 3). The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), the exclusive authoritative professional organization for speech and language pathology, also offered a strong position statement on social dialects, in which they insisted that dialects be considered differences rather than disorders. Thus, it was noted (ASHA 1983: 23) that "no dialectal variety of English is a disorder or pathological form of speech or language" and that "each social dialect is adequate as a functional and effective variety of English."

To what extent have such resolutions and position statements had any effect on the professional membership? Do they inspire change? Do they really make a difference in terms of language practice? Although it is difficult to answer these

questions in a comprehensive way, it appears that such position statements are effective to the extent that they can be subjected to concrete appropriation. For example, the ASHA position statement on social dialects served as an important professional guideline for our implementation of an extensive training program for speech and language pathologists in the Baltimore City Public Schools (Wolfram, Adger, and Detwyler 1993: 1), as indicated in the following statement in the introduction of the handbook.

The approach to language differences adopted by BCPS [i.e. Baltimore City Public Schools] is consonant with the position statement on social dialects formulated by ASHA.

It is the position of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) that no dialectal variety of English is a disorder or pathological form of speech or language. Each social dialect is adequate as a functional and effective variety of English. Each serves a communication function as well as a social solidarity function. It maintains the communication network and the social construct of the community of speakers who use it. Furthermore, each is a symbolic representation of the historical, social, and cultural background of the speakers. (ASHA 1983: 25(9), 22–23)

The ASHA position on dialect differences adopted by BCPS has important implications for service delivery to a linguistically and culturally diverse student population. In particular, there are essential implications for the competencies of SLPs [i.e., speech and language pathologists] with respect to language differences. These are set forth by Cole (1983: 25) as follows:

1. knowledge of the particular dialect as a rule-governed linguistic system
2. knowledge of nondiscriminatory testing procedures
3. knowledge of the phonological and grammatical features of the dialect
4. knowledge of contrastive analysis procedures
5. knowledge of the effects of attitudes toward dialects
6. thorough understanding and appreciation for the community and culture of the nonstandard speaker.

The particular details of descriptive and applied sociolinguistic knowledge required to serve students equitably and effectively in BCPS cannot necessarily be assured on the basis of the SLP's previous academic training and background; hence it is usually necessary to augment their previous training with additional knowledge about linguistic-cultural differences. It is also necessary to adopt appropriate procedures for considering the dynamic nature of language variation in the Baltimore language community. In the following sections, we attempt to provide clinicians with relevant sociolinguistic descriptive information and procedural models for applying and integrating this information regarding linguistic-cultural differences into the service delivery model.

We appropriated the ASHA position statement primarily as a rationale for our training program. It provided a justification of the training for both the practicing speech and language pathologists who participated in the program and for the higher administrative offices within the BCPS system who might have questioned the training plan. We tried to ward off resistance by showing that our efforts were directed towards bringing local speech and language pathologists into compliance with the position statement adopted by the major professional organization responsible for certification and accreditation.

Another way in which the position statement on social dialects has been appropriated relates to the preparation of students. ASHA does not dictate specific, required courses for professional certification, but it does designate topical areas for coursework that now includes a core area related to language structure and language differences.

Perhaps an even more effective strategy for learning such information is the inclusion of examination questions about language differences on national certification exams. I admit, for example, that I have written questions in this area for the pool of questions to be selected for the certification exam and taught a section on social dialects as part of examination preparation courses. In American society, there is, unfortunately, no greater motivation for learning a topic than the threat of an examination. While I realize that there is an apparent inconsistency in my cooperation with the testing establishment while railing against the sociolinguistic biases of standardized testing (Wolfram 1976), I am willing to live with such personal paradoxes to promote change in the institutional treatment of vernacular dialect speakers.

In my opinion, ASHA's position statement on social dialects has made a difference in professional practice within the profession, though the change may not be as encompassing in terms of local practices as we would like to see. In fact, I personally think that ASHA as a professional organization has made more institutional progress over the last three decades with respect to their consideration of language differences than any other professional language service organization with which I am familiar.

In contrast, the NCTE statement on dialect rights has not had the same kind of professional and practical impact that the ASHA statement seems to have had. Surely, it has generated heated debate among some professionals, which in itself indicates some progress. But my personal experience working with language arts teachers in local school systems indicates that the policy has had little effect on how they conduct their business with respect to their students who speak vernacular dialects. There are probably a number of reasons for this, ranging from the loose relationship between local school systems and national professional organizations to the composition of the statement itself, but the bottom line seems to be the same. To my knowledge, the NCTE professional position statement has not been appropriated to a significant degree in the training of professionals nor in the local places of practice. It seems that position statements by professional agencies can have an effect in changing practice, but only to the extent that there is some institutional control exerted over appropriation—in the preparation of professionals and in the establishment and maintenance of professional standards of practice.

Establishing standards. One of the ways in which policy change is effected in American society is through the establishment of “standards” or objectives of behavior. These standards, which are often related to resolutions and position statements, may be applied to a wide range of behaviors in diverse settings, from broad-based socioeconomic standards for living (e.g., the establishment of a “poverty level”) to objectives for specific competencies (e.g., literacy). Furthermore, the establishment of standards may involve varied levels of bureaucratic responsibility and authority, ranging from the highest levels of federal government to local education systems. The federal government may, for example, set a standard for raising the literacy level for the nation as a whole, whereas a local school board may establish a quite specific standard for reading competency for third graders. Given the system of governance within the United States, the federal government often has no say in state and local affairs, including education, but the allocation of money and other resources certainly affects state and local government systems. The federal government has little to say directly about state and local affairs related to language, but it certainly wields significant influence. For example, a Senate subcommittee hearing was held to consider the Oakland resolution, with possible implications for funding allocations. One of the primary reasons for the inquiry by the subcommittee of the Senate Committee on Appropriations: Subcommittee on Labor Health and Human Services of Education, in fact, was related to the issue of budgetary allocation, thus showing how the federal government may exert pressure over the educational practices of local school systems.

The establishment of standards for behavior on a national, state, or local level seems to be an effective venue for policy change, particularly with respect to language. National agencies, like the government and vested professional agencies, may provide overarching mandates for change, whereas state and local agencies pos-

sess the authority and responsibility to implement concrete change. Standard-setting may also be relegated to professional agencies responsible for language practice. For example, we saw in the previous section that ASHA, which holds exclusive authority for certifying speech and language pathologists and accrediting training institutions, holds the vested authority to ensure the local implementation of its social policy on dialects. Agencies that do not hold such regulatory power over training and practice naturally would have less authority in implementing change of various types.

In the best case scenario of a top-down model, a national agency adopts a set of standards with respect to language, a state, through its appropriate agencies, adopts a similar standard, and a local governing board follows this up by instantiating change on a local level. Adger (1999) exemplifies this hierarchy by documenting a national standard on language variation set forth by the National Council of Teachers of English and International Reading Association, a state-adopted standard related to language diversity for the state of Massachusetts, and a curriculum standard for fifth- through eighth-grade students adopted for a local school district, Lowell, within the state. This case even includes specific teaching examples that can be used to carry out the objective. Adger (1999) quotes the standards on these respective levels as follows:

National Council of Teachers of English and International Reading Association, Standards for the English Language Arts.

“Standard 9: Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.”

Massachusetts English/Language Arts Curriculum Framework.

“Students will demonstrate an understanding of how oral dialects differ from each other in English, how they differ from written standard English, and what role standard American English plays in informal and formal communication.”

Lowell, MA, English/Language Arts Curriculum Framework, grades 5–8.

“Students will analyze how dialects associated with informal and formal speaking contexts are reflected in slang, jargon, and language styles of different groups and individuals.”

Core knowledge/skills, grade 8.

“Students will carefully examine and explore the many ways in which variations and oral language impact on communication

and determine the ways we understand the meanings derived from that communication.”

Teaching Examples, grade 8.

“The teacher could ask students to choose a favorite sport or activity/hobby, generate a list of jargon specific to that field and share results with the class.”

Adger’s example underscores the significance of hierarchical support in setting and implementing a language policy. At the same time, she demonstrates that effective policy must be translated into concrete, localized practice. In effect, she demonstrates the adage of “thinking globally but acting locally” as popularized in other movements involving policy change.

Public Education. If nothing else, the Ebonics controversy has once again illustrated the dire need for general education about language issues. In other articles (Wolfram, Adger, and Christian 1999; Wolfram 1999a, 1999b), my colleagues and I have outlined the rationale for dialect awareness programs and provided numerous examples of curricular activities and products that might be used in implementing school-based and community-based dialect awareness programs. At the heart of public education should lie two concerns: truth and fairness. As noted earlier, there is an entrenched mythology and miseducation about dialects that distorts the understanding of this topic in American society, particularly with respect to the relationship between vernacular and standard varieties (McWorter 1998; Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1998; Wolfram, Adger, and Christian 1999). Furthermore, the factual misinformation is not all innocent folklore; it affects how we view people and how they view themselves on both a formal, institutional level and an informal, personal level. As noted previously, it is easy for people to perpetuate unjustified stereotypes about language as it relates to class, ethnicity, and region. And this is where issues of fairness come to the fore.

I am constantly reminded that many people have never even considered alternative interpretations of vernacular dialects apart from the popular myth that speakers are simply too ignorant or lazy to speak better. As one host of a radio talk show commented surprisingly in our discussion of the nature of vernacular dialects, “So you mean to say that dialects have rules? I never knew that!” Certainly, it starts with the presentation of accurate information about the structural integrity of dialects, moving from there to a sense of fairness in terms of the speakers of such varieties. Many people, particularly children, have a strong sense of fairness in the treatment of others. One of the most common responses we get from elementary and middle school children in discussions of dialect attitudes is the observation that “it’s not fair” to treat people badly because of their dialect. As

one fifth-grade student in Baltimore wrote after viewing some vignettes illustrating dialect prejudice from the video *American Tongues*: “Today I learned that not all people speak the same. I like the way some people talk differently. I did not like the way some people teased others because of their language. I would like to see Dr. Wolfram improve the attitudes of the people in the video.” In an evaluative summary of one of our dialect-awareness curricula, the learning experience most noted by the students concerned dialect prejudice and human relations related to dialect differences (Messner 1997).

As mentioned in the resolution passed by the American Association for Applied Linguistics (1997), “all students and teachers should learn scientifically-based information about linguistic diversity, . . . education should systematically incorporate information about language variation,” and linguists and other language professionals “should seek ways and means to better communicate the theories and principles of the field to the general public on a continuing basis.”

Implementing such programs is, of course, easier said than done; to my knowledge there presently are no large-scale dialect awareness programs in the United States. As we are discovering in our effort to implement such a program in the state of North Carolina, it takes great marketing skills, bureaucratic finesse, and a good sense of timing, to say nothing of sociolinguistic expertise and translation skills. First, we have to sell the notion that dialect awareness programs are essential and that they align with the extant educational objectives on a statewide and local level. We have, for example, aligned specific lessons and activities in our dialect awareness program with specific competencies in social studies and communication skills as set forth by the State Board of Education (Simmons et al. 1998). Some of the units meet the following competencies of North Carolina Standard Course of Study (NCSCS) Social Studies Goals:

- The learner will access the influence of geography on the economic, social, and political development of North Carolina.
- The learner will evaluate the effects of earlier contacts between various European nations and Native Americans.
- The learner will judge the continuing significance of social, economic, and political changes since 1945 and draw conclusions about their effect on contemporary life.

Some of the units that examine the history of dialects in North Carolina and the current changes taking place in post-insular dialect areas clearly fall within the goals for social studies. For example, geography is an important dimension of dialect diversity, and changing conditions within the state have clearly affected the dialect landscape of the state since 1945. At the same time, there are also a number of aspects of the curriculum that align with the NCSCS Communication Competencies Goals, including the following:

- The learner will use strategies and processes that enhance control of communication skills development.
- The learner will use language for the acquisition, interpretation, and application of information.
- The learner will use language for critical analysis and evaluation.
- The learner will use language for aesthetic and personal response.

It is not difficult to demonstrate how dialect awareness programs are consonant with the current state-mandated competency goals, such as critical analysis and use of language in responding to new information about language variation. This demonstration is a necessary step in the process of marketing the materials to teachers, curriculum designers, and state education administrators. Schools and teachers are highly aware of and responsible for attaining these mandated competencies, and this step cannot be ignored or bypassed.

It is also essential to package the text appropriately for students and teachers. At this point, cooperation with curriculum writers and publishers who might incorporate the materials into textbooks becomes critical for the implementation process. Over the past several years, I have maintained regular contact with the publishers of social studies texts for North Carolina in order to ensure that units on dialect diversity will, in fact, be incorporated into the next edition of a middle school text and/or the supplement to the current fourth- to sixth-grade text. I have also co-authored illustrative text with a curriculum writer.

The teachers must also be prepared for the challenge of teaching about language variation. I have attempted to orient teachers to the curriculum by presenting workshops on the dialect awareness materials at state and local conventions for teachers. We have even provided incentives, such as free maps of the dialect areas of North Carolina, for teachers to exhibit in their classrooms. The maps include sample text for the proposed curriculum for classroom teachers to become familiar with a sample of the content and presentation mode. And the staff of the North Carolina Language and Life Project have now taught a localized pilot curriculum on dialects in select classrooms in North Carolina for the past six years, including a week-long showcase unit in the Ocracoke School that I have personally taught every year since 1994. The preparatory stage requires marketing, networking, coordination, and perhaps most of all, patience. Such changes are not taken lightly, nor do they come quickly if they are to become a permanent part of public school education.

The implementation of dialect awareness programs in education cannot, however, take place exclusively through the education sector. As Kaplan (1997: xiii–xiv) notes, “language-in-education policy is subsidiary to national language policy, that national language policy is rooted in the highest levels of government, and that the education sector follows the lead of more powerful sectors.” There is obviously a critical need to engage in broad-based informal education venues as well as school-based public education.

Our own efforts to promote dialect awareness in recent years have included community-based programs such as television and video documentaries (e.g., Alvarez and Kolker 1986; Blanton and Waters 1995), trade books on dialects for general audiences (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1998), museum exhibits (Grundler et al. 1997), and presentations to a wide range of community organizations such as civic groups, churches, preservation societies, and other local institutions and agencies.

The Oakland controversy has clearly indicated the inherent interest and underlying concern that most people have about language issues as well as the need for public education on these issues. As the superintendent of the Oakland Schools, Carolyn Getridge (1997: 2) noted, this situation created “a teachable moment of national proportion”—an occasion to provide accurate information about dialect diversity to counter some of the misguided, popular interpretations. We now need to move beyond that moment to provide long-term, informal sociolinguistic education for the American public. There is simply no other insurance against the reincarnation of the kinds of controversies and misunderstandings that continue to arise. More importantly, there is probably no other road that will lead to an authentic understanding of the role of dialect diversity in American society. Such variation affects us all, regardless of the dialect involved. Dialect awareness programs should therefore be inclusive of the wide range of dialects that represent a full array of language diversity in American society, not just AAVE. In fact, our experience with programs in schools and in communities indicates that they are most effective and less threatening when they do not isolate a single language variety in the discussion of language variation. There are few “facts of life” more misrepresented in the public sector than those involving language variation; it seems only appropriate that a wide-scale, dedicated effort be made to counter this miseducation through using the full range of formal and informal public education venues.

Conclusion. Given the entrenched ideology that governs matters of language diversity, it is hardly surprising that the implementation of concrete, equitable sociopolitical and socioeducational language policies should take place so slowly. But we must keep things in perspective. Changes in primitive belief systems, such as those governing language, do not take place rapidly; major changes take generations to be effected, and even then there is continued, residual resistance. Thus, it has taken generations for the teaching of scientific theories of human development to be implemented in our schools, and there are still pockets of opposition. The fallout of the Scopes trial is still felt after well over a half century. We should not realistically expect a different timeline for the scientific understanding of sociolinguistic diversity to replace the entrenched mythology. Perhaps the most we can expect is incremental progress as more people gain an understanding and more institutions become cognizant of the

orderly naturalness of language diversity independent of its association with particular regional, social, and ethnic groups.

It should also be clear from this discussion that change will not simply take place without intervention. There is a need for proactive involvement on many levels, ranging from broad-based government policy to individual practice. In this regard, Wren's (1997: 3) advice for the involvement of TESOL teachers in language policy seems to be quite generally applicable to those involved in issues pertaining to language variation:

- Convince them [i.e., practitioners] of the need to be interested in language policy issues.
- Make them feel they can make a difference in their own workplace.
- Develop their own skills in order to influence institutional colleagues.
- Provide them with knowledge, skills, and understandings to "act locally."

National language disputes such as the Oakland resolution, the English-only movement, and other national and local language controversies provide a measure of the current state of national language ideology, and a reminder of what still needs to be accomplished with respect to public knowledge, policy, and practice. While it might be easy to get discouraged about what has not yet changed with respect to the national consciousness about language variation, there are at least significant tasks for everyone to do in the effort to mold a more linguistically informed and equitable society with respect to language differences. I personally am thankful simply that I have had an opportunity to be present at the initial stages of a movement towards equitable sociolinguistic policies that might be realized sometime in the next millennium. The dawning of the new millennium at least gives a reasonable time frame for accomplishing the desired changes in policy and practice.

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NOTES

1. Bridgeman (1998) notes that the prevalence of two metaphors dominated the media coverage used to describe Ebonics, namely fire and disease. These two share the entailment of “breaking out” and “spreading.” As such, they pose a serious threat to others and need to be contained.
2. In the process of preparing this manuscript on a plane, I was asked by the person sitting next to me about my occupation. When I replied that I was a linguist, his first question was, “So did you have anything to do with that Ebonics stuff a couple of years ago?” When I replied that I did, his immediate response was, “What did you think? I thought it was stupid.” Subsequent conversation indicated that the passenger was a fellow faculty member at North Carolina State University.
3. For all the rhetoric about the linguistic status of Ebonics, the underlying goal of the Oakland school actually was quite conservative, and even assimilationist with respect to its advocacy of proficiency in Standard English. The board never wavered in its goal of teaching proficiency in the dialect of mainstream, middle-class America. All it really proposed was recognition and respect for the intricate, systematic nature of AAVE, yet the resolution was popularly interpreted as advocating that students be taught in Ebonics and teachers be taught to use Ebonics in instruction.

4. In this respect, England seems to be a prime example of how quickly a government can retreat from an enlightened perspective on language awareness and language planning. In the mid-1980s, the National Education Curriculum adopted a strong set of language awareness materials only to retreat to a more traditional curriculum that now largely excludes explicit instruction in this area. As Bourne (1997: 41) puts it, “Language policy in education in English is now balanced on the knife edge between the most detailed and explicit language planning through legislation ever set in motion in the United Kingdom, and a return to a long tradition of inexplicit (some would say covert) control through funding mechanisms.”
5. Although there are more cases regarding the rights of bilinguals that now end up in litigation, they still seem relatively infrequent for a society as obsessed with litigation as the United States is.