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Social Justice Issues in the Education of Aboriginal English Speakers

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Introduction

Professor Viv Edwards of the University of Reading recently, in a plenary address to the International Conference of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages in Melbourne, noted how common it is for those who represent the dominating groups in societies to declare of the members of their societies: "We are all the same." Of course, we *are* all the same in that we are all members of the human race. However, the implication doesn't follow that the dominant group can say of all other groups: "What suits *us* must suit you too!" This attitude, which Megan Davis, Head of the Indigenous Law Centre at the University of New South Wales, has labelled "majoritarianism," has underlain much of what has gone on since colonial times in Australia with regard to language and education.

The Indigenous language inheritance of Australia has been whittled away under the advance of English until more than half the two- to three-hundred languages of the time of settlement have gone (Leitner 2004:10) and it has been estimated that most of those languages that remain could disappear within a generation or so (McKay 1996:3). Meanwhile, English and English-based contact languages have supplanted Australian languages as the languages most widely spoken by Indigenous Australians.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, showing remarkable ability to accommodate, have taken the contact languages to themselves and indigenized them, bringing into existence new creoles and a new English which operate largely according to the phonological and semantic systems of their traditional languages, and with significantly modified English morphology and syntax. But again majoritarianism has intruded, and so-called pidgins and Aboriginal English have been at best ignored, and at worst derided as "rubbish language."

Current educational orthodoxy seeks to rank all school learners according to their performance on NAPLAN tests, that is, on how well they perform on the language – and literacy in the language – which belongs to the dominant group. (There it is again, the assumption: "we are all the same"!) Needless to say, those whose English dialect has been ignored in the testing process end up being ranked at the lowest levels.

Aboriginal academic Jaky Troy (2012:135) recently argued that "in providing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with languages education in and about their own languages, teachers are giving them access to their most basic rights." Here she was echoing what had been expressed 40 years earlier in the U.S.A. when the Conference on College Composition and Communication made a resolution which, in part, said:

We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language – the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American English has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another... (quoted by Nero and Ahmad 2014:33).

In terms of social justice, it seems to me that there is a recurring pattern, worldwide, of suppression of one group in society by another by means of a language that can be called "hegemonic" (Orelus 2014). I'd like here to explore it a little further in the wider context.

Worldwide, four main areas have emerged where language rights in education are contested. These are the areas of

- Language variation
- Language education
- Language ownership
- Language policy

Issues of Language Variation

It is a fact that language is a phenomenon which entails variation, in that speakers in different locations and social contexts will use a language differently. One way of dealing with this is to prioritize the forms of language, not on a linguistic basis (since they are linguistically equivalent) but on a social or political basis, so that it can be said that one form of the language can be treated as more legitimate than others. So the language associated with one group of speakers – those who are already the most privileged – will be treated as the “standard,” the one which is deemed to be fixed and unchanging, inherently superior, accent-free and the model for all the rest. This way of dealing with language has been called by Lippi Green (1997, cited in Nero and Ahmad 2014:19) the “standard language ideology.” The standard language is, of course, an abstraction and in practice it can’t live up to the various expectations of the standard language ideology. But what holds sway is often not what is true, but what is assumed to be true.

A corresponding myth, which derives from the standard language ideology, is what American linguist Walt Wolfram (2001:345) has called the “language subordination ideology”. That is, that varieties which diverge from the standard are not the real language. There is, as Wolfram has put it elsewhere (1999:61) “an entrenched mythology and miseducation about dialects”. The word “dialect” tends not to be used in its linguistic sense of a regional language variety, but in a pejorative sense (Crystal 1992:101), implying that it is less than a language, though linguists would say that the standard variety is no more than a dialect which has been standardized. Local dialects may be officially treated as non-existent. Adriano Truscott (forthcoming), national president of the Australian Council of TESOL Associations, has complained that Aboriginal students who do not speak standard English are treated as invisible. Torres Strait Islander academic Martin Nakata (2012:85) has said “our local language was not considered one.”

It seems it is fair game, even among those who speak them, to disparage non-standard dialects and their speakers. David McRae (1994:8), seeking to promote literacy among speakers of Aboriginal English and creoles, cited comments from Aboriginal people: “I don’t believe in Aboriginal English. It’s just a bastardized form of the proper English that they have to learn” and “The kids here all speak English. Bad English of course, lazy English, but English.” Sadly, the Chair of the Prime Minister’s Indigenous Advisory Council, Warren Mundine, has said: “I’m not a supporter of Aboriginal English” (NITV News 14 March 2014, updated 10.18 a.m.) and, when I queried him on this, gave as his justification: “every Australian child needs to leave school with strong levels of literacy and numeracy” (pers. comm. July 2014), obviously assuming that literacy and the home language can’t go together. If Aboriginal people themselves have taken on board the misperceptions about dialect, the task of achieving social justice for them becomes all that harder.

The assumption of the invalidity of Aboriginal English also carries over into speech pathology. Judy Gould (2008:197), a speech pathologist experienced in the assessment of Aboriginal children, has documented that “Australian Indigenous children who are exhibiting language differences are more likely to be presenting [incorrectly, on the basis of standardized tests] with language delays or disorders” and she has argued that Australian Indigenous populations need language assessment methodologies which are not biased towards the standard language.

Issues of Language Education

It is a problem for education when, as Viv Edwards noted, educators representing the majority say of all groups within an education system “we are all the same.” If this is the case, it will be assumed that where learners exhibit a lack of control over the features of standard English they must have some kind of language – or even intellectual - deficit. Treating a person’s dialect as a deficiency is, of course, a myth serving to support an education system which is inadequately adapted to the language inputs of those it exists to provide for. The fact is that, with respect to the dialects brought into the education system, we are *not* all the same. Difference, from the point of view of one dialect, may look like deficit, but it is not. The idea of compensatory education, well-intentioned though it might be, misjudges the language competence of non-standard dialect speakers and fails to see that what it interprets as an educational problem is actually an educational resource (Nero and Ahmad 2014:3). It is a denial of the basic right to education which builds on, rather than dismisses, prior learning. As John Baugh has put it,

This issue at hand is...not one of genetic or intellectual inferiority, resulting in linguistic deprivation; it is more properly a reflection of the difference between acquiring a first language versus the more difficult task of acquiring a second dialect of the first language (Baugh 1983:7).

Another issue affecting the education of Indigenous students is what Kral (2012, citing Harvey Graff) has referred to as the “literacy myth,” that prospect according to which “literacy is associated with ideological promises emblematic of modernity and progress and linked to economic growth and development” (Kral 2012:267). Writing from her experience in the Ngaanyatjarra lands, where standard English was seen as the unique language of literacy, yet where, culturally it was secondary to the mother tongue, there was a clear lack of “meaning and purpose” (p. 269) in the promises of literacy. Truscott (forthcoming) has referred to a “distortion of language policy” where the needs of Indigenous learners are bypassed with the assumption that “literacy” can only mean “literacy in standard Australian English.”

Attempts to reverse the subservience of Aboriginal speakers to standard Australian English tend to be rejected. Bilingual education, in the Northern Territory, despite well-documented positive outcomes over 20 years (Nicholls 1994) was terminated in 1999 to give way to more English. The idea of cultural accommodation in education, despite significant support (e.g. McConaghy 1993; Irrluma 1988) has come up against opposition even from Indigenous spokespersons such as Martin Nakata (1999), who argue that what he calls the “cultural agenda” is not the responsibility of the schools but of the communities, and from others who, according to Beresford (2003:253) “have worried that a culturally appropriate curriculum can be used as a cover for a ‘watered down’ curriculum.” On the other hand, Indigenous spokesperson Mark Rose (2012) sees the failure to include Indigenous perspectives in education as a “blindspot” of educators which amounts to “silent

apartheid,” and the idea of “going soft” on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as “racism by cotton wool” (p. 71).

The Issue of the Ownership of English

A lively issue in the English-teaching world for the past twenty years (see Malcolm 2013) has been: Whose *is* this English that we are teaching? It was long taken for granted that English, properly spoken, belonged to the English. Increasingly, then, the normative English came to be seen as coming from the United States. For some time, it went without saying that *native speakers* of English were the authorities on the language, though these might come from various “inner-circle” locations including the U.K., the United States, Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. It was becoming clear that, since standards in these locations varied, there was no single standard of English. Finally, claims came to be made by speakers of non-native and non-standard varieties that English belonged to them and the English-teaching profession has had to take account of these.

In Australia, it has gone without saying that English belongs to those who speak the standard variety. However things have been changing. The fact is that the distinctive dialect of English spoken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians is the accomplishment of their own speech communities. Unlike the English of the mainstream, which was essentially transported here, the English of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders was indigenized here by means of processes which ensured the maintenance of certain phonological, linguistic and conceptual features of Indigenous languages. The claims of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander speakers that English belongs to them lead to the inescapable fact of the “pluricentrism” (Higgins 2003:619) of English in Australia. There is, then, a basis here for a claim of a right to the use of more than one English in the accessing of education in this country.

The Issue of Professed and Defacto Policy

There are two problems with respect to social justice and language policy in education. On the one hand, language policies which explicitly enforce appropriate recognition of Aboriginal English within education systems tend not to exist. On the other hand, policies which do exist meet the demands of political correctness but often little more.

Aboriginal English has been recognized as belonging in the education system since the publication of the National Policy on Languages (Lo Bianco 1987) and the need to identify and support learners who speak Aboriginal English was further emphasized in Recommendation 25 of the *National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* in 1994. The *National Aboriginal Languages and Literacy Policy 1993-1995* saw it as a priority to develop “bi-lingual or bi-cultural education programs” (DEET 1993:7). Aboriginal English is recognized in the Australian Curriculum. Yet, in fact, funds for Aboriginal education flow to programs such as Accelerated Literacy, which has an academic focus and deliberately excludes reference to cultural content (Robinson et al 2009), or Direct Instruction, which ignores Aboriginal English and which Truscott (forthcoming) describes as remedial and catering only to a narrow understanding of literacy.

In fact, a gap between language policy and practice has been observed not only in Australia (Truscott and Malcolm 2010), but in Jamaica (Nero 2014) the United States, (Nero and Ahmad 2014; May 2012), Canada, the United Kingdom, various European countries and India (May 2012) and has

variously been described as the gap between policies and defacto policies (Nero 2014; Shohamy 2006), visible and invisible language policies (Shohamy 2006; Truscott and Malcolm 2010) and explicit and hidden agendas (Shohamy 2006).

The power of speakers of the standard language is so entrenched that, increasingly, language policies express good intentions with respect to recognition of language rights, but practices betray resistance to this recognition.

Conclusion

In summary, social justice to Indigenous Australians who speak Aboriginal English is routinely infringed through:

- pervasive ideologies which deny the existence or validity of their language;
- subjection to an education which assumes, for most purposes, the abandonment of that native Australian variety of English which is the language through which they should be accessing education;
- denial of any path to literacy other than the standard language;
- contestation of their claims to ownership of English, though it is their language of birth, and
- lack of protection through language policies based on equal language rights.

There is no doubt that we need enlightened language policies, but we need also to recognize that good policy can co-exist with practice which contradicts it. Linguistic intolerance is a symptom of a social malaise which goes beyond language. What is prejudice? It is pre-judging – judging someone before we know them. Nero (2014:240) observed in the West-Indian scene that language policies of inclusiveness were “constantly bumping against actual language use resulting from a colonial history.” Though we may be loath to admit it, we too have a colonial history which even includes the assumption that the country we occupied had no prior inhabitants. Slowly, immigrant Australians have come to take account of the country’s first occupants, but the temptation is always there to limit our aspirations for them to making them like ourselves. Education needs to be founded on better relationships with these people, and to be fundamentally two-way, recognizing different starting points, different pathways and, potentially, different outcomes.

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