"What do we do about student grammar – all those missing *-ed*'s and *-s*'s?"
Using comparison and contrast
to teach Standard English in dialectally diverse classrooms

REBECCA S. WHEELER
Christopher Newport University, Newport News, VA

ABSTRACT: *This paper explores the long and winding road to integrating linguistic approaches to vernacular dialects in the classroom. After exploring past roadblocks, the author shares vignettes and classroom practices of her collaborator, Rachel Swords, who has succeeded in bringing Contrastive Analysis and Code-switching to her second and third-grade students (children 7 and 8 years old) in urban Virginia, in the southeastern US. The author then shares principles that have allowed her to successfully defuse social and political concerns of principals, central school office administrators, teachers, students, parents, politicians and reporters, as she shows how to use tools of language and culture to teach Standard English in urban areas.*

KEYWORDS: *Code-switching, contrastive analysis, urban education, African American English, African American Vernacular English, Standard English, literacy, achievement gap, grammar.*

Grammar? Knowledge of grammar? Whose knowledge do we presume when we refer to grammar? These questions lie at the core of my work in dialectally diverse classrooms. A range of answers is readily apparent with a quick glance at how teachers (both in-service and pre-service), the lay public, journalists and politicians respond to student writing as in Figure 1. This essay comes from a third-grade, African American student.
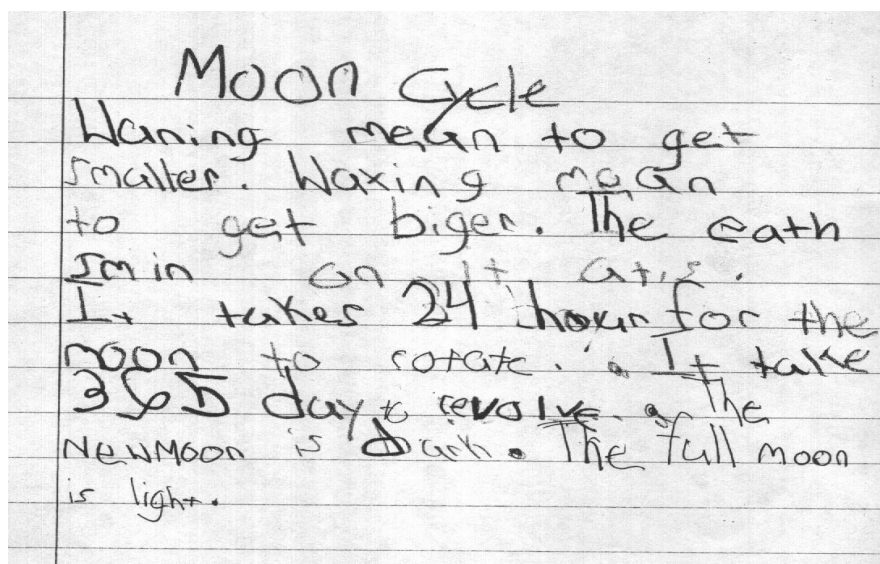

Figure 1. Third-grade writing

It's uncanny, the consistency with which audiences respond. After commenting on organization and sentence structure, all home in quickly on "errors" of grammar. "It's atrocious!" *"It hurts my ears!"* "Where to begin?" "Clearly, the student is struggling,"

"has forgotten", "doesn't know how – to show plural, possessive, and make subjects and verbs agree". Indeed, as I have polled hundreds upon hundreds of people over the past decade – students and teachers, educators and the lay public - all speak in unison: They see error, mistake, struggle, ignorance, confusion. A language of deficit in which only knowledge of Standard English counts. As we believe, so we see.

While linguists have gone to great lengths to unseat such deficit views about non-mainstream dialects (Labov, 1972), the rest of the world seems to persist in a cosmology with "widespread, destructive myths about language variation" (Wolfram, 1999, p. 78). For whether Black or White, a teacher is likely to consider a child speaking African American English as slower, less able, and less intelligent than the child who speaks Standard English (Labov, 1995). Such *dialect prejudice* fuels a teacher's negative expectations for the child and, in consequence, the child's life potential narrows (Baugh, 2000; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Nieto, 2000). It is no wonder that under these conditions, "the longer African American inner city kids stay in school, the worse they do" (Delpit, 1995; Rickford, 1996, p. 1).

Seeing deficit and broken English, teachers attempt to correct student grammar, righting its wrongs, showing students the way they "should" do it. Teachers red-pen student papers, adding the "missing" –*s, -ed, -'s*. Over and over, they remediate.

Yet any linguist (and thus far, apparently, *only* linguists) will tell you that student vernacular grammar has nothing to do with mistakes in Standard English (Green, 2002). Instead, we linguists see the patterns of African American English, the most extensively studied American English dialect across 50 years of sociolinguistic scholarship. We know that correction does not work as a method for teaching the Standard dialect to speakers of a vernacular (Gilyard, 1991; Piestrup, 1973; Wolfram, Adger & Christian, 1999). We know that the most effective way to teach Standard English to speakers of a non-mainstream, stigmatized dialect is to use an ESL technique – Contrastive Analysis. In Contrastive Analysis, the practitioner contrasts the grammatical structure of one variety with the grammatical structure of another variety (presumably the Standard) in order to add the Standard dialect to the students' linguistic toolbox (Fogel & Ehri 2000; Rickford 1999; Taylor, 1991; Rickford, Sweetland, Rickford 2004; Sweetland, ms.; Wheeler & Swords, 2006). Indeed, the research is robustly clear: "teaching methods which DO take vernacular dialects into account in teaching the Standard work better than those which DO NOT" (Rickford, 1996).

TRY TELLING THAT TO A PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

That's effectively what Elizabeth Gordon (2005) attempted to do in the bicultural country of New Zealand (see Part 1 of this double issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*). In 1987, Gordon and others partnered with Maori linguists to recognize that the "country has more than one culture and more than one language" and so the "English syllabus must take account of bi-cultural principles" (pp. 52-53). Her team sought to teach English grammar "comparatively": Structured examination of the grammars of Maori and English was carefully planned, with excellent resources produced in support of teachers as they led grammar discovery in the classroom. With

excitement and anticipation, I read of her project, envisioning how I would share New Zealand's enlightened approaches with teachers and students with whom I work.

Yet despite Gordon's team's being crystal clear that "the purpose of this approach to language study was not to make teachers and pupils fluent speakers of Maori" (p. 54), the Minister of Education found the proposal "politically unpalatable" and refused to ratify it, commenting: "For goodness sake, one does not study English by speaking Maori" (p. 55). My heart sank. I should have known.

Ten years later, Oakland, a town just outside Berkeley, California, also tried to address the multiple linguistic cultures in their English classes. The incident came to be known as the "Oakland Ebonics Debate" (or debacle) of 1996. Briefly, the Oakland School Board issued a resolution suggesting that the language spoken by many African American students be taken into account as teachers taught Standard English. That seemed straightforward enough.

And so, although Oakland clearly affirmed that every student would learn Standard English, you would never have known it from the firestorm of protest which erupted from all quarters. Initially, Jesse Jackson came out like a furnace blast: "[In] Oakland, some madness has erupted over making slang talk a second language." "You don't have to go to school to learn to talk garbage," said Jackson (Seligman, 1996). William Raspberry, nationally syndicated columnist, similarly condemned. "As I recall," Raspberry observed, "it sounds rather like what our mothers used to call Bad English" (Raspberry, 1996). The newswires were on fire with backlash. And still, the children suffer. Nearly 10 years later, entertainer Bill Cosby has joined the decrying ranks:

> Just forget telling your child to go to the Peace Corps. It's right around the corner. It's standing on the corner. It can't speak English. It doesn't want to speak English. I can't even talk the way these people talk. "Why you ain't, where you is." ... I blamed the kid until I heard the mother talk. Then I heard the father talk. This is all in the house. You used to talk a certain way on the corner and you got into the house and switched to English. Everybody knows it's important to speak English except these knuckleheads. You can't land a plane with "why you ain't". You can't be a doctor with that kind of crap coming out of your mouth (2005, paragraph 11).

What and whose "knowledge about language" or "knowledge about grammar" governs? Clearly, to the public, grammar *is* Standard grammar. Anything else is broken, deficient, non-language, and the speakers are deemed broken, deficient, non-starters.

War images are appropriate: Such virulent, entrenched public opinion becomes the most hazardous of professional minefields. In the remainder of this paper, I will describe how my collaborator, Rachel Swords, a third-grade urban educator and I are bringing a linguistically informed response to non-mainstream dialects in schools (Wheeler & Swords, 2004; Wheeler, 2005; Wheeler & Swords, 2006). I'll share a vignette from her classroom, describe how she transitioned from being a traditional to a linguistically informed language arts teacher and show how she uses a contrastive approach to teach Standard English with her vernacular-speaking students. Finally, I will describe the terms in which I present this work to teachers, administrators, politicians and the public and I will mention various major projects our research center has currently under way in the schools. My hope is that my experiences might

help others navigate their way through the educational Scylla and Charybdis before us.

CODE-SWITCHING IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS: A LINGUISTICALLY INFORMED LANGUAGE ARTS IN TIDEWATER, VIRGINIA

Let's fast forward to 2002, Tidewater, Virginia. Here is a snapshot from the classroom of my former student and collaborator, Rachel Swords, as she works on code-switching in her diverse 3rd grade classroom.

Twenty squirmy third graders wiggle on the autumn red carpet as Mrs. Swords takes a seat in the comfy rocking chair before them. It's reading time and the children can choose whatever book they wish to hear that day. "*Flossie and the Fox!*" "*Flossie and the Fox!*" the children call. Since Mrs. Swords had brought Flossie to class, the children couldn't get enough of it. Never before had they experienced a story where characters spoke like they and their mom and dad and friends did at home. By the third time the children had heard the story, they broke into unison choral response at one particular point, "Shucks! You aine no fox. You a rabbit, all the time trying to fool me."

But the fox walks a different verbal path. In reply, he tells Flossie, " 'Me! A rabbit!' He shouted. 'I have you know that my reputation precedes me. I am the third generation of foxes who have outsmarted and outrun Mr. J. W. McCutchin's fine hunting dogs.... Rabbit indeed! I am a fox, and you will act accordingly.' "

Soon, the children knew the book. They absorbed fox-speak and Flossie-speak.

Mrs. Swords invites the children to role-play. "Who would like to talk like a fox today?" Hands shoot up all over the 3rd grade passel. "Ok, Devon, you be the fox." "And who wants to talk like Flossie?" Mrs. Swords inquires. In her blue belted pants, with neatly tucked white shirt, Heather jumps up and down, "Me, I do! I do." "Alright, Heather, you play Flossie."

Back and forth, back and forth, Devon and Heather play.

Children in the class keep tabs. They had already learned that language comes in different varieties or styles, and that language comes in different degrees of formality, just like our clothing. Children had already made felt boards, and cut-outs showing informal clothing, and formal clothing, and had talked about when we dress informally, and when we dress formally.

And the children had taken the next steps. They had already looked at, discovered patterns in language – the patterns of informal language, and the patterns of formal-speak. They were primed. Indeed they were supported in this game by earlier work together in Mrs. Swords' class.

Heather, stretching her linguistic abilities, banters with Devon. "My two cats be lyin' in de sun."

Wait a minute. The class quickly checks the language chart on the classroom wall. Their chart shows how we signal plurality in both informal and formal English. Heather had stumbled. She had used the formal English patterns, "two cats" – where plurality is shown by an "-s" on the noun) when she was supposed to be following the informal patterns ("two cat" – where plurality is shown by the context or number words).

Mike hollers out, "Heather, wait a minute! That's not how Flossie would say it! You did fox-speak! Flossie would say 'My two cat be lyin' in de sun.' "

> Heather stops. Hands on hips, she considers the wall chart. Mike was right! She regroups and recoups. "My two cat be lyin' in de sun!" Heather and Devon are back in their roles. Only one more minute till they swap sides.
>
> In this way, the children practice choosing the forms of language appropriate to the time, place, setting, and communicative purpose. They code-switch between the language of the home and the language of the school.
>
> Sometimes in writing a story, in order to develop a character, children choose the language of nurture, the language they learned on their grandma's knee. Other times, formal times, like when the children write up their research on the relative lengths of dinosaur teeth for their math story boards, they know they'll choose the language of the professional world, because they know that other teachers, the Principal, and school visitors will see their work.
>
> Throughout, children learn to masterfully choose their language to fit the setting. And they do so with joy, verve, and command (Haussamen, Benjamin, Kolln & Wheeler, 2003, pp. 15-16).

VERNACULAR ENGLISH IN SCHOOL WRITING: STUDENT GRAMMAR AND TEACHER RESPONSE

During the fall of 2000, I initiated exploratory research in a local school system – a "majority minority" division, where a majority of the system's students were African American. My intent was to ascertain 1) whether student vernacular language patterns occurred in student writing and 2) how teachers conceived of and responded to student vernacular. My hypothesis was that student vernacular language did occur in student writing and that teachers took a traditional, correctionist approach to student vernacular. If I found this to be the case, my next step would be to initiate professional development for teachers in sociolinguistic approaches to language varieties and research-based approaches for teaching Standard English, in order to improve students' performance on year-end, state-wide tests of writing.

Accordingly, I sought and received permission from the Director of Research and Evaluation of the school division to collect data from an elementary school with a large, African American population (74% African American, 67% economically disadvantaged). I collected approximately 100 essays from five, third-grade classrooms and then did a grammatical analysis of the essays in order to identify whether morphosyntactic patterns of African American English (AAE) occurred in student essays. My analysis revealed nearly three dozen, African American English syntactic patterns (subject-verb agreement; *be* understood; past time shown by context; possessive shown by adjacency; plurality shown by context; *a* v. *an*, and so on). As expected, teachers saw student writing as error-filled, with missing endings, and they saw students as confused and stumbling with English.

While ultimately I was not able to offer that particular school professional development, in the fall of 2001, I began using the data I had gathered – student essays and the results of my grammatical analyses – as core content materials for my teacher education classes. My intent was to help foster education students' transition from a traditional correctionist to a linguistically-informed contrastivist approach to vernacular language in the classroom. In this way, our teacher education classes became an experiential learning environment.

I presented education students with 60 elementary essays showing the full range of AAE grammatical structures in the data set. Students kept reflection journals, in which they noted their thoughts about and responses to the elementary student grammar. I taught students how to employ contrastive analysis, a technique from second language acquisition. With contrastive analysis, education students discovered for themselves that student language followed a pattern. Then, once having identified a given grammatical pattern (e.g., possessive, plurality, subject-verb agreement, etc), students would then discover the corresponding grammar equivalent in Standard English. We then talked about "code-switching", and how people choose language to fit time, place, audience and communicative purpose. We explored how these techniques would play out in the process-writing classroom, specifically in the endgame of the editing process, where students were expected to transition their grammar into the Standard English expected by the school system. Of course, in order for students to use code-switching in the writing process, a great deal of classroom preparation was needed: set-up of the whole idea of language variation, mini-lessons, practice, and so on.

That fall, one enterprising, in-service teacher, Rachel Swords, was enrolled in the *Language Varieties* seminar. As she confronted her own beliefs about student language – that students were making errors and needed correction – she was abashed to think that maybe there was another interpretation; When students wrote *My goldfish name is Scaley,* or *The Earth revolve around the sun,* or *It is 365 day in the year*, they are not making mistakes but following different grammar patterns. She was tantalized by the possibilities. As she reflected on her practice, it was clear Rachel was ready for a change.

Rachel had begun her career three years earlier by correcting every sentence she deemed incorrect. However, as time went on she found that her students were asking significantly fewer questions. She would call for questions and her students would begin: "Mrs. Swords, why you be… is you? Ain't you? Never mind." The students knew she was going to correct them. They tried to ask the question in the form the school system wanted, but they didn't know how. Rather than risk the embarrassment of being corrected in front of the class, students became silent.

Before our class, she had tried another, more passive approach. When a child asked "Mrs. Swords, why you be teachin' math after lunch?" she would repeat their question in Mainstream American English ("Why do I teach math after lunch?") and then answer it, also in the same language variety. While this method didn't embarrass the children or hinder their questioning, the children's language did not change. Even though Swords consistently corrected their speech and writing, her students still did not learn the Standard English forms.

That fall, Rachel's principal put up the results of the 2000 state-wide tests. Given what she was learning in our graduate seminar, she saw the results in a new light: In every case, African American children were performing much lower than the White children, not just two or three points, but on average nearly 40 points below White children. But now, with the possibility of new insights and new teaching tools – a sociolinguistic approach to language, contrastive analysis and code-switching, Rachel saw a different picture. For the first time, she thought perhaps *she* was failing to serve her children. She realized she had taught all her children using the same English

techniques but with very different results. Her white children were passing and her black children were not. Rachel was courageous. She decided to take what she was learning in our graduate seminar and apply it in her classroom. Indeed, she went further than that. I had offered education students the linguistic theory, a set of data, and a range of tools – contrastive analysis, contrastive analysis charts, and a method of code-switching during the writing process. Rachel, a classroom teacher, turned theory into practice, making a sociolinguistic approach real, day-by-day, in her second- and third-grade classrooms.

From theory to practice: A teacher's linguistically informed approach in the writing classroom

Realizing that she had to make the concept of variation tangible with her students, Rachel led her children to discover that we *all* vary our self-presentation, situation by situation. "What do you think might be an informal kind of place?" she asked. Taquisha's hand went up. "Home or the mall." Jamal added, "The neighborhood with your friends." "Good!" Rachel affirmed.

Rachel made a tree map from the school's Thinking Map series to organize her children's responses. The children explored formal/informal places, formal/informal clothing, formal/informal behavior, and so on. By the time they finished, here's what the set-up for formal/informal places looked like.

Places	
Informal	*Formal*
home, neighborhood	jobs
street with friends	school
mall	church

Then she made the link to language, leading the children to explore how their language might differ between formal and informal situations. The students explained that "yes, sir" and "excuse me" were formal and that "yo, wuz up?" and "he ain' nobody" were more informal. The class thought back on an exchange between two students. One student, in excitement had exclaimed, "Yo, Mz. Swords! Dat junk be *tight!"* A second student took conversational charge to set right the student's language choice. "McKinzie! You ain' sposed ta talk t' Mrs. Swords dat way." "Oh, ok. Ms. Swords. Dat stuff be cool!" Clearly, students had come to school already having a good grasp of language *style* (the variation language shows in levels of formality) within their own variety, in this instance AAE. In this way, students used their own prior knowledge to define formal and informal language.

Rachel then applied that understanding to the grammar of sentences. Using chart paper, she created two columns of sentences drawn from her students' own writing with the left one written in vernacular English ("I have two dog"), the style many students speak, and the right showing the same sentences written in Standard American English ("I have two dogs"). Rachel labeled the SE examples as "formal language" and the vernacular examples as "informal language". They began with plural patterns, because she knew that her students would immediately see the difference between the formal and informal usage.

The class then compared and contrasted the grammar of the sentences in each column, thus applying the number one most successful instructional strategy – comparison and contrast – to grammar itself (Marzano *et al*, 2001). Immediately, one child said, "Oh, that's wrong. All the ones on that side (informal) are wrong and the ones on the other side (formal) are right" (see Godley *et al*, in press). But another child said, "How is it wrong? Mrs. Swords wrote it!" Students were clearly confused. After all, since this was Rachel's second year of working with these children, and she had spent more than a year teaching them the right and wrong way to construct a sentence, they couldn't figure out why she would purposely write an incorrect sentence.

To address the students' confusion, Rachel reminded them about their explorations of formal and informal styles of clothing and language. They looked at how language varies by region of the country and she talked about how she switches her language to suit the setting. For example, at home she might say, "I'm fixin' to go the store – ya'll need anything?" However, she wouldn't ask fellow Virginia teachers, "I'm fixin' to make copies – ya'll need any?" Instead, she might say, "I'm going to make some copies, do you need any?" Rachel talked to the students about how she changes language setting by setting and told them that when she makes these language choices, she is *code-switching*.

Moving back to the chart, Rachel asked students if they understood what each sentence meant and asked if the informal sentence, "I have two dog," had the same meaning as the formal one, "I have two dogs." Again, the class agreed they did, so she asked, "If we can tell what they mean, what differences do you see between the two columns?"

One child explained, "In this one (the formal form), the noun has an '–s' on it." Rachel asked, "What does that mean? What is the '–s' doing there?" They said, "It's making it more than one." They talked about how the "–s" makes it more than one. She then explained that this is the way we show "more than one" in formal language (see Figure 2). To help guide children, she created a heading – "How to show 'more than one'" – for the contrastive patterns they were discovering. Under the formal column, following the children's observation, she wrote "-s."

Then the class looked at the informal example, exploring its patterns. Reminding the children that the examples had the same meaning, she asked how the informal sentence shows us that the number is more than one. One student said, "You know it's more than one because it has the number 'two' in it." So Rachel wrote in the informal column "number words", and commented that "Number words show there's more than one." Then the class looked at "Taylor likes cat." There's nothing in that sentence that tells you it's more than one cat. The children explained, "You have to look at the whole paragraph." So she wrote, "Other words in the paragraph," and commented, "Other words in the paragraph show there's more than one." Next the class looked at "All the boy are here today." Rachel asked, "What tells you there is more than one boy?" One child replied, "The other words in the sentence – 'all'." So, she wrote on the chart, "Other words in the sentence." Another boy explained patiently, "Mrs. Swords, you can't have part of a boy, so of course you have all of one boy… So, this hasta mean more than one boy!" The children explored and named the contrasts in grammatical patterning between formal and informal language. The plural

chart (along with charts for possessive and tense) stayed up on the classroom walls for easy reference during the school day.

Plural Patterns

Informal	*Formal*
I have two dog	I have two dogs
Taylor likes cat	Taylor likes cats
All the boy ...	All the boys...

How to show "more than one"

number words   '*-s*'

other words
- *in the paragraph*
- *in the sentence*

common knowledge

Figure 2. Discovering the rules for plural patterns across language varieties

Rachel has transformed her classroom. The tools of her trade? Rachel understood and lived the conviction that:

- English comes in different varieties;
- Each variety is structured, rule-governed and grammatical;
- We choose the language features to fit the time, place, audience and communicative purpose
- Language is not "correct or incorrect," "right or wrong", but instead works or doesn't work in a setting.

She uses contrastive analysis charts and the scientific method to lead her children in active, inductive discovery of the grammar rules underlying students' community language and Standard English. Then she integrates children's explicit understanding into the writing process. As students enter the editing phase, they learn to code-switch between informal and formal English as the context demands.

Code-switching and Contrastive Analysis succeed in fostering Standard English mastery

In previous years, Rachel had seen the usual achievement gap in her classes, with African American students scoring far below their white classmates. In 2002, after one year of using code-switching and contrastive analysis, her students' performance on the year-end tests dramatically improved. Indeed, African American students equaled their white classmates in reading and writing, and outperformed the white students in math and science. Similarly, in 2004, Rachel's black and white students performed equally on statewide, year-end tests of reading.

Such results have been more formally documented elsewhere. In Chicago, Hanni Taylor had been concerned that her African American college students were not learning formal English. So she decided to compare how freshman composition students performed in response to two teaching methods. In one class she used the correctionist approach. In the other, she helped students discover how the grammar of their home language contrasted with Standardized English grammar.

Her results were striking. By the end of the semester, students taught with traditional methods did not improve. Indeed, their Standard English performance got *worse* – these students used 8.5% *more* African American features in their formal writing. The class using *contrastive analysis* showed remarkable success. These students used 59.3% *fewer* African American vernacular features in formal writing. By contrasting the language varieties, students were able to learn the detailed differences between the two and therefore limit how much AAE grammar transferred into their Standard English writing (Taylor, 1991).

Comparable results come from a New York study of African American elementary students. Educational psychologists Howard Fogel and Linnea Ehri (2000) analyzed whether traditional approaches or contrastive ones were more successful in teaching African American children Standard English. The results were eye-opening: while students in the traditional groups showed *no improvement*, students learning through contrastive analysis nearly *doubled* in their ability to produce Standard English forms (p. 222). Clearly, contrastive analysis holds great promise in fostering Standard English mastery in our schools.

The same kind of approach was also implemented by teachers in DeKalb County, Georgia, who helped young speakers of minority dialects explicitly contrast their mother-tongue with the Standard. Thus, when a fifth-grader answered a question with a double negative ("not no more"), the teacher prompted the student to "code-switch," to which the student replied, "not any more". The children learned to switch from their home speech to school speech at appropriate times and places, and that "the dialect they might use at home is valuable and 'effective' in that setting, but not for school, for work – or for American democracy" (Cumming, 1997, p. B1). This program was designated a "center of excellence" by the National Council of Teachers of English.

Most recently, Julie Sweetland has reported in her dissertation on the success of a sociolinguistic approach to teaching writing in the multicultural classroom (Sweetland, ms.), as contrasted with a writing process approach, and a traditional approach to language in the dialectally diverse classroom. Her research took place with 13 upper elementary classes (188 students, 9 teachers). Nine teachers received sociolinguistic training supporting "culturally-sensitive teaching for students who speak AAE" (Sweetland, 2006). Six of these teachers then taught a curriculum that "that incorporated dialect awareness learning activities, literature-based writing process activities, and contrastive analysis of selected differences between AAVE and Standard English – a particular constellation of methods and techniques referred to as the Sociolinguistic Approach (SA)." Sweetland used two comparison groups, a Writing Process group and a No Treatment group.

Sweetland found that students who participated in Sociolinguistic Approach lessons "showed a significant decrease of non-Standard dialect features in writing and reduced their overall usage of AAVE features in Standard English writing contexts more sharply than students in comparison groups" (ms.) In particular, after the intervention, students were given a paragraph containing AAE grammatical features. Their task was to identify the vernacular features and then translate (code-switch) to Standard English. Students taught with the Sociolinguistic Approach scored 68.9% on the task, while students in the status quo group scored 60.4%. The 8.5% point difference is statistically significant, revealing that students taught with linguistically informed approaches learn Standard English forms better than those taught with traditional methods (Sweetland, 2006, ms).

FROM COLD SHOULDER TO FUNDED WELCOME: NAVIGATING THE MINEFIELD OF PUBLIC EDUCATIONAL POLICY

Getting a foot through the schoolhouse door turns out to be no simple matter for linguists.   As I have moved outside the academy to reach a diverse range of audiences (for example, education students, Central Office school administrators, Directors of English Language Arts, Directors of Staff Development, Directors of Academics, the lay public, journalists and politicians), I have evolved a number of principles to help get my message across. I share these in hopes they may ease others' way too, as we offer linguistic approaches to language varieties in schools:

> *Whatever you do, do not name the variety (Walt Wolfram, personal communication)*
> In our case, that means we do not refer to African American English (AAE) in the classroom, with parents, teachers, and so on. I've tried it, and the result is a stone-wall angry resistance that shuts down *all* other communication. Perhaps this may be because we work south of the Mason & Dixon line in the US, but the pandemic, national vehemence during the "1996 Ebonics Controversy" suggests otherwise.
>
> Similarly, leave race out of it. That means do not mention the achievement gap, even though closing the Black/White test score gap (Jencks & Phillips, 1998) is a national mandate under US federal legislation (No Child Left Behind Act, 2001). Referring to the achievement gap or to the disparate performance of Black and White students entails referring to racial groups, and this has consistently gotten me into trouble. In one elementary-school workshop, a teacher challenged, "Why are you singling out Black students?" She found my answer – "because the federal government requires us to do so" – utterly unsatisfactory, and the ensuing discussion ended up occupying 15 minutes of a 50-minute session. I don't do *that* any more. This work is not about race. It's about choosing features of language to fit the setting.
>
> *Affirm Standard dialect mastery as goal*
> Next, I explicitly and repeatedly affirm that the goal is to foster Standard English mastery. I actually tell participants that I do subliminal advertising for Standard English – "We're teaching Standard English here; Our goal is

teaching Standard English; We assure that all students are able to speak Standard English; We're showing you successful tools for teaching Standard English." This seems to defuse participant anxiety that my intent is "to teach Black English", or that I believe that "anything goes".

Let teachers discover respect for the home language themselves
I used to speak of honoring the students' home language and building a bridge from home speech to school speech. The floor fell through. The director of one educational organization retorted: "We're not having any of that bad language in our schools. Zero tolerance!" So, I dropped any explicit mention of honoring and respecting students' home dialects. Instead, in our approach, teachers, principals and so on, come to that conclusion on their own: "Your work is so respectful of the students and their culture." Only then do I nod and agree.

So how *do* we talk about movement from vernacular to Standard English in ways that educators and the public can understand?

Anchor in teachers' needs: What to do about student grammar?

When beginning work with a new set of teachers, I put a student writing sample on the overhead projector (see Figure 3).
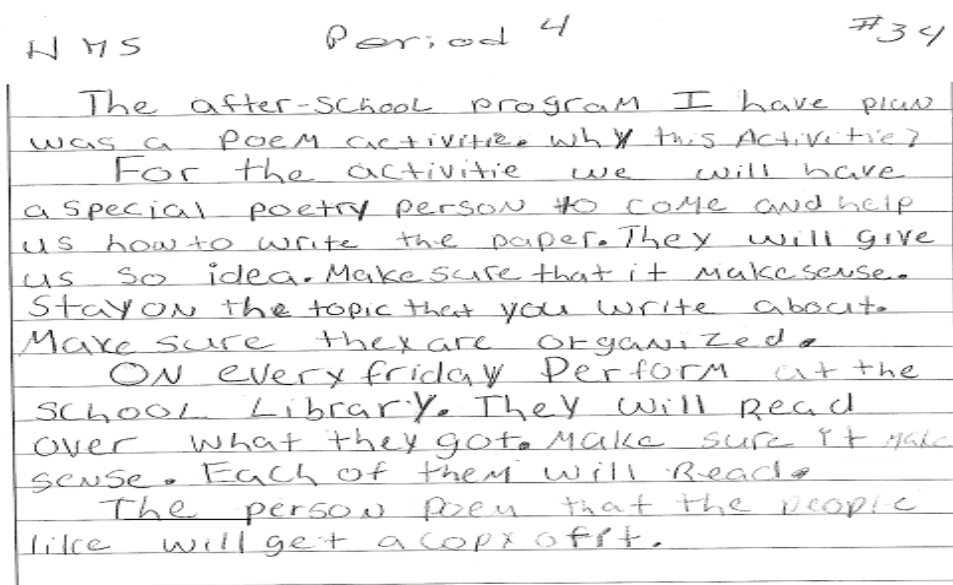

Figure 3: Eighth-grade essay illustrating student vernacular grammar (*have* + bare verb; third-person singular subject-verb agreement; plurality shown by context; possession shown by adjacency).

In order to anchor in teacher's feelings, needs and responses, I generally structure my discussions as follows:

Wheeler: Ok, here's a sample of student writing. Now, let's assume that as an English teacher, you have already addressed broad matters of focus, development, and organization. Let's assume that you have already treated sentence variety and word choice. Now is the moment to work with the student's grammar. Have you ever seen a paper with usage like this?

Teachers: *[Heads nod. They chant nearly in unison.]* Oh, yeah!

Wheeler: You have, eh? One or two times?

Teachers: You know it! I'll say! Boy oh boy…

Wheeler: Ok. And what do you do?

Teachers: We correct those errors.

Wheeler: Um hum… You do, huh… and how's that work? Did it solve your problem?

Teachers: Noooo!!!

Wheeler: So, you've corrected these issues over and over? Spent a few Saturday nights at the task? More than you want to remember?

Teachers: Yes!!!

Wheeler: It didn't work, did it? All that correcting didn't work.

Teachers: That's it…

Wheeler: Yeah, I know. That's what the research says – correcting student grammar like this does not work to teach Standard English. I'm here to show you some tools that *are successful* – a research-based, data-driven approach from linguistics. It's called Contrastive Analysis and code-switching. Wanta see it?

That's the set up.

Notice that I do not name the language variety. Indeed, at this point, I do not even suggest that any particular variety exists. Given that teachers believe that the writing of vernacular-speaking students is rampantly riddled with mistakes, it is too big a conceptual step to suggest that, a) these are not mistakes, *and* b) the features actually constitute a system, a distinct language variety. For the moment, I focus on leading teachers to discover pattern where they had thought chaos and ignorance reigned.

Thus, my explicit purpose is to offer teachers tools to solve a problem with which they have been struggling – how to respond to a students' vernacular grammar and how to help vernacular-speaking students learn the Standard dialect. The same basic approach extends to other audiences (journalists, politicians, friends, and so on). Anchoring in the societal goal of teaching Standard English, I say that I bring data-driven, research-based tools to the endeavour, a method that relies on students' critical thinking skills, and builds on existing knowledge on the road to Standard English mastery. Over the past six years, I have found that this approach keeps the lines of communication and the opportunities for collaboration open.

Compromises on the way to social justice

Many years ago, one of my graduate advisors commented that unlike physics or chemistry, linguistics was too young a field to have settled on the lies we tell beginning students or practitioners to facilitate their understanding of our field. We hope the lies reveal and simplify without doing violence to core facts of language and linguistics. Yet, in this business of seeking to communicate with the public and in-service teachers, the compromises I make are sometimes stark.

I have compromised (some would say unacceptably) on a range of issues.

First, despite the ethical injustice involved, I do not challenge the societal goal that students and citizens will command Standard English. To suggest that vernacular dialects be accepted broadly in the world of school, government and enterprise would bar me from the schoolhouse and silence a linguistic viewpoint for yet another generation. Instead, I strive for two goals of human justice: 1) to help teachers see students for the smart, talented, potent human beings that they are, and 2) to help create a context in which students feel self-respect – capable, confident and potent as human beings and as strategic users of language. To gain those goals, I align myself with teaching Standard English.

Second, I do not teach a broad dialect-awareness curriculum. While I greatly admire the work of Walt Wolfram and his former students (notably Kirk Hazen and Jeffrey Reaser) as they have built a middle-school curriculum based on the language varieties of North Carolina and West Virginia, I take a much narrower path. It does concern me that my focus on teaching Standard English probably results in students and teachers not learning broad and diverse information about language and language varieties. However, school systems hire me to help teachers respond to students' usage and mechanics. So, that's the tack I take. But more profoundly, a focus on Standard English is the approach which keeps me welcomed in the schools, where I can then share basic linguistic truths discussed in this chapter.

Finally, the labels I use for vernacular and Standard English – "Formal v. Informal" English – are, of course, not technically correct. Actually, I use a range of terms for the contrast: Formal/Informal; Everyday/Standard; home speech/school speech; language of nurture/business English, and so on, with "Formal v. Informal" as the predominant ones. The term I do not use in the schools is African American English. That, in the words of an urban public school Supervisor for English Grades 6-12, would be "political suicide". By contrast, this same Supervisor has commented:

> I can teach *formal/informal* and children will get it. Teachers will get it. They understand. I can use it with teachers, with students. Heck, I can stand up in front of the school board with TV cameras running and talk about helping our children change from informal to formal English and nobody will get upset. Nobody in the schools, on the board, nobody in the community will get upset. And they will all understand the basic idea. Remember who your audience is – it's teachers K-12, and it's students in those years. Other terms [community English, language of nurture, African American English] point fingers and get people upset. Formal and informal does not single out any group. We ALL change our language to fit the setting; it's inclusive and unifying. With those terms, I don't owe anyone apologies, and I don't have to give any explanations... (personal communication).

Similarly, an African American teacher with nearly 30 years of classroom experience comments on how code-switching transformed how she works with 14-year-olds:

> With code-switching and formal/informal English, kids become involved. It's not an attack on them. I used to kill them with *ain't*. I would mark each instance of *ain't*, and would deduct five points for it. I would make marks up on the board each time a child said *ain't* in class. Students did not eradicate

ain't from their vocabularies. Instead they used the forbidden term *more*, approaching me with "*ain't, ain't, ain't, ain't*". Clearly, I had become part of the problem.

Now, with formal/informal English, I am no longer the proper, overbearing teacher doing the nice/nasty. The kids used to say, "There she goes, doing the nice/nasty talk." That's no longer my cross to bear. Instead, I can point at the chart and ask the kids. "What kind of language is this? Is it formal or informal? Is that the kind we want in this setting?' So, it's the chart, the whole framework that supports me. It's not me telling the students how they should be. Instead, together we can decide what kind of language fits the setting. (Eighth-grade, middle-school teacher, 30-year veteran).

UNIVERSITY/SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

So, where does this work play out, with whom and under what funding? Currently, state and federal agencies support my work in contrastive analysis and code-switching in the schools. The Virginia Department of Education has funded our research center [Program for Research and Evaluation in Public Schools (PREPS) of the Darden College of Education, Old Dominion University in Norfolk, VA, USA] as we facilitate system-wide, K-12 reform in a school division on the remote, rural Eastern Shore of Virginia. There, we have focused on assessment for learning and Standard language development. Recently, the superintendent affirmed our code-switching work as the division's single most important reform initiative, since it fosters respect and helps teachers recognize students' integrity, voice, innate ability and potential even as we work toward ensuring that students master the conventions of Standard English.

The US Department of Education GEAR-UP program (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs, Grant # PRP334A050167) is funding school-based professional development (2006-2009) in Contrastive Analysis and code-switching to teach Standard English at an urban middle-school in Tidewater, Virginia. The student population (ages 12-14) is 97% African American and 90% economically disadvantaged. In Year 1, I work shoulder-to-shoulder with English teachers as they explore and integrate CA/CS into the reading and writing curriculum. In Year Two, we build a rubric to extend the approach across the curriculum, in social studies, history, science, math, and so on. In Year 3, we will consolidate gains and complete CA/CS supplemental materials to maintain teacher capacity in the school.

Increasingly, school divisions approach us for help with grammar – "What do we do about students' grammar, the missing *-ed*'s and the missing *-s*'s?" We use a collaborative inquiry model where teacher, teacher educator, community member, and staff developer work "side-by-side" around practice-centered conversations in action research. At the moment, quickly upon the release of our book, *Code-switching: Teaching Standard English in Urban Classrooms* (Wheeler & Swords, 2006), we are producing supplemental materials so that more teachers can more readily use linguistically informed techniques to teach Standard English among minority-dialect speakers.

CONCLUSION

And so, teachers and the public discover that children are not making mistakes in Standard English, but are following the patterns of another variety, the language of nurture. Teachers slowly learn to stop punishing and disdaining students for the grammar of the home, and instead recognize students' robust linguistic knowledge. Now, we can use successful, research-based tools (Contrastive Analysis and code-switching) to *build on* students' existing knowledge, as we add another variety, Standard English, to their linguistic toolbox. Teachers comment on how respectful this approach is, recognizing the integrity of the students, their homes and communities.

I close with two stories from Rachel's 8-year-old students. One day, two students were talking in the hallway between classes: "I ain't got nothing to do after school." A teacher, overhearing them, interjected, "You are not to talk like that." Rachel's student stopped, looked at the teacher and replied, "Oh, I see. You want me to use Formal English. Ok." And the child rephrased, "I don't have anything to do after school."

The second story comes from the reading classroom. Half of Rachel's class was participating in a read-aloud in another third-grade classroom. The other teacher kept interrupting one of her students as he voiced the Standard English text through the sounds of his home language variety. Where the book showed, "The boy walks to school in the morning," the child spoke, "The boy walk to school." The teacher interrupted, *"Read what's on the page!"* The student took another try, "The boy walk…" *"No!"* interrupts the teacher again, *"Pay attention to the end of the words! WalkS. There is an 's' on the end of the word, say it!"* Of course, by this time, the child was demoralized, embarrassed, well on the way to shutting down and disengaging from learning in school. Tamisha, Rachel's student, leaned over and whispered, "The book uses Formal English. I know you're saying the words like at home, in informal style. The teacher wants you to use Formal English when you're reading. So be sure to look at the ends of the words and try to say them out loud."

The linguistic autonomy and power of these children is inspiring – such presence of mind, such sure-footed, quick analysis, and confidence in their own linguistic understanding. These stories are nectar that draws teachers to new understandings of what to do with student grammar. We compare and contrast; we analyze and reason; we use the scientific method and critical thinking skills, to foster Standard English mastery. That is, we teach core, foundational skills for citizens of a 21st century society.

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