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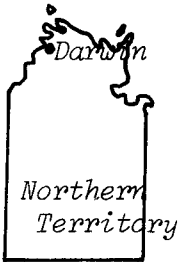
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ACROSS AUSTRALIA.....

FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER

PREVALENT ATTITUDES AND SCHOOL POLICY
TOWARD NON-STANDARD DIALECTS.

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We, as teachers, usually find it difficult to accept the oral language patterns that some of our pupils bring to school. "We are prone to inject an element of morality into our pseudo-standard of English." (Cheney 1976,p.58).

As Hall (1959) so ably comments, "Our native speech is inextricably bound to our perception of friends, community, religion, nation and other peoples."

Basically, non-standard dialects are viewed either as a deficit form of standard English or a different but equal language system. These are basically the two main models. Wolfram (1973,p.68) says that, in the deficit model, speech differences are viewed and described with reference to a norm and deviation from that norm. The control group norm is, of course, middle-class speech or standard English. Nonconformity to this norm is seen as an indication of retarded language acquisition or under-developed language. Nonstandard dialects are considered as the pathology of non-organic speech deficiencies, and the patterns of these dialects are labelled with such terms as 'misarticulations'; 'deviations'; 'replacements'; 'faulty pronunciations' and the like.

The 'difference' model sees non-standard dialects as self-contained systems in their own rights. They have their own phonological and grammatical rules and are equally legitimate both socially and psychologically, as well as being syntactically functionally equivalent to standard English.

The deficit views took precedence in the early 1960's as researchers probed into the language situation. The alleged solutions to the

findings were evidenced by the surge of intervention programs in language arts for ethnic minority and other socially and economically disadvantaged groups (for example, Head Start; Follow Through; Upward Bound; Title One; Bereiter/Engelman Pre-school Program and others).

Educators and the general public favoured the deficit model, while linguists leaned heavily on the difference side. Moreover, educationalists had their secretly felt attitudes and concepts fully reinforced and positively correlated by the research findings of Bereiter and Engelman, who viewed black children's language as a 'non-logical mode of expressive behaviour' (Bereiter et al. 1966: p. 113.) They saw children coming to school without a language. Prominent men like Bernstein, (1961, pp.163-176) for instance, commented on the apparently great limitations of disadvantaged and minority children's language, the lack of willingness or perhaps ability, of these children to use language as easily or as often as non-disadvantaged children. His recent findings, though, present a considerably different picture. (Bernstein, 1968).

The child utilizing non-standard dialects was seen to be either verbally destitute, that is, not yet having developed a functionally adequate or structurally systematic language code, or to have a 'system' but an under-developed language behaviour, this leading to cognitive deficits.

Our negative attitudes are, in essence, social ones, and are a consequence of a mismatch in communication across cultures. This is caused generally by the inability of the dominant culture's members to understand non-standard dialects. Subsequently, we make inferences about a speaker because of the 'way' he speaks. We see the speaker as 'unintelligent', 'ignorant', and in extreme cases, even doubt the 'dignity and worth of such a speaker'. (Johnson, 1971: p.91).

One still frequently hears classroom teachers referring to non-standard dialects as 'bad, sloppy and inferior'. The school's dilemma is both a social and a linguistic one. The children's language experiences are not the kind the school can build upon. Parents, friends and relations speak a non-standard dialect of English and the school accepts and fosters a standard English form. The school's legitimation for doing this is obvious, and standard English must be used as a criterion upon which to base language studies, if not in the early years, then later on in the primary grades. School policies though, are not only based on attitudes, but false assumptions which fortunately, to date, have been negated by enlightened educators. The reasons for maintaining these misconceptions seem to be emotional

rather than logical ones. Schools equate difference with inferiority. Teachers reach for other excuses such as 'poor auditory discrimination; genetic incapacity; lazy tongues; physical defects; and environmental/social correlates', to justify their complacency over the linguistic problem. Perhaps the most misleading piece of published material has been that associated with the idea of 'non-verbalness'.

When educators label children as 'non-verbal', it sets off a chain of events that is called a 'prophecy fulfilment'. (Johnson, 1971 (a): p.180). This means that teacher expectations and children's performance are positively correlated.

Recent sociological and linguistic research has clarified many misconceptions and myths about non-standard dialects. (See Labov, 1969:p.179; Kohl, 1968; Hymes, 1964; Gumperz, 1968:pp.381-386). This has not, however, drastically altered the attitudes of many teachers and we take no comfort in Dale's (1972:p.234) statement that social values and attitudes with respect to language are not only strong but also remarkably stable. In fact, Burling (1973:p.105) sees people as incapable of looking at grammar variability other than in terms of 'right' and 'wrong'.

It is obvious though, as Johnson (1971:p.86) points out, that 'Black dialect' academically handicaps the Black children who speak it. It also vocationally and socially handicaps those who use it, although empirical research has not yet substantiated the extent of the handicap.

The attitudinal biases towards linguistically adequate but socially stigmatized language varieties is, no doubt, the biggest problem we face. (Wolfram 1973: p.78).

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