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LANGUAGE, CULTURAL IDENTITY AND EMPOWERMENT IN THE DOMINANT CULTURE

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Lack of a common means of verbal or written communication always creates problems of interpersonal communication and gives rise to misunderstandings and (possibly) prejudice against one or other party. On the surface, there would seem to be a good deal of merit in the suggestion that "if everyone spoke the same language, all these problems would disappear". However, the matter is not as simple as it seems, for questions must be asked as to what language should be chosen, the dialect of it, and to what extent cultural factors, deeply related to the true understanding of how thought is expressed within a language, need to be addressed. In Australia, most reasonably well education Anglo-Celtic Australians asked these questions would immediately think of Standard Australian English (SAE), though working-class and indigenous Australians may consider it too "posh" and out of touch with their lifestyles. Few from the dominant group, however, would be even remotely aware of the degree to which cultural factors influence how thought is expressed in a language (as already mentioned), and how this influences the spoken language and, more particularly, the written language in a literate society.

In Australia, SAE is the language of choice for serious writing, for academic communications, written and verbal, for conferences and business meetings and for serious journalism. It is also the normal daily language of the dominant group in the culture. SAE is, however, not always fully comprehensible to speakers of dialects of English in Australia, other than SAE, be they Aboriginal, immigrant or working-class people. For instance, a distant in-law of mine, whom I met only once, and before I became a teacher, could not understand my SAE speech, and asked for a translation, telling me that I "speak funny". I had difficulty in understanding him, also, a working-class Caucasian Queenslander from a provincial area, because of his omission of consonants in the middles of words. Culturally, I would not have felt comfortable telling him I found his speech "funny", and so I simply told him I didn't hear what he had said.) Although pronunciation and vocabulary can be factors, problems non-SAE speakers have with SAE appear to be largely because of the structures used to express thought in

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expository writing and speaking, the use of the abstract, the passive, complex clause relationships (Martin, pp. 16-32), and complex negatives. Many of these are cultural factors, belonging to the ruling classes of the former colonial masters, for the final choice of the dominant language within any nation or region is inevitably political and historic, in that the dominant culture's language becomes the language of success (or success as measured by that culture).

Martin, a systemic-functional linguist, looks at the structure of the genres used by the educated, dominant group in our society. He points out that adults use factual writing to "analyse and interpret the world in new ways" (p.33). Indeed, he stresses,

> *For adults....Exposition is for real. It is used to interpret the world in new ways (in science and social science, for example), and it is used to challenge existing social orders (in politics, for example).* (p. 34).

Ideology exists within language, often the latent ideology of the culture, but can be challenged, Martin postulates, when issues are in crisis, recent examples being racism and sexism, which went unchallenged a hundred years ago. "Ideology", according to Martin, "has primarily to do with power. " (p. 34).

Because ideology and genre are closely related, whatever the culture (Martin, p.36), it is important that the group challenging the ideology, or trying to make changes, use genres which support the message. These genres may be unwritten ones. Martin has concentrated, rather, on written language, specifically the genres in factual writing, and how different groups select Hortatory or Analytical forms of the Exposition genre to express their points. (Elsewhere, he neatly sums up Analytical Exposition as "persuading that", and Hortatory Exposition as "persuading to".) He concludes that those individuals who have failed to master expository writing lack power in our society, including the power to initiate change (read policy change), for "Control of written genres is very much tied up with the distribution of power in all literate cultures." (p.50).

To redress the balance and give those who do not come from the dominant culture wider opportunities in society, Martin recommends that children be taught the different genres of factual writing. This is also, basically, what we are doing when we teach foreign students and immigrants English and Academic Purposes. Teachers of Aboriginal and Islander students, whether

children or adults, need to plan input on the genres for academic and society success, for our students need to gain these skills to widen their choices and increase their input into decision-making.

Exposition, Martin points out, is impersonal, compared with speech, because it is supposed to be rational, and rationality (or the appearance of rationality) is valued by the educated. He analyses how this is achieved, for instance, by the use of abstract nouns, with the sentences restructures from the verbs and adjectives of speech or of more personal writing. For example, "concern" (verb) becomes "concern" (noun), "responsible" (adjective) becomes "responsibility" (noun). Language signals of reasoning can be conjunctions, prepositional phrases, verbs or nouns, within the sentence. Structures, Rothery states in an accompanying essay, are learned, and are part of our sociocultural learning. Thus, teachers, she suggests, must intervene to develop these skills in students who cannot simply pick up the dominant culture's written expression from the home environment (those who do so being generally from better-educated Anglo-Celtic Australian families with book-filled homes). Students from other backgrounds Aboriginal and Islander students, students from Non-English Speaking (NESB) Backgrounds, working-class students and those from other cultures - all should be given the special teaching necessary to open the doors of opportunity provided by the factual writing genres of the dominant culture, Rothery believes (p.76).

These arguments, as expressed by Martin, Rothery and others, are admirable in intent. Still, it needs to be asked whether there is a subtle discriminatory factor in these ideas. Martin, however, appears to see it as the empowerment of persons disadvantaged by lack of the dominant culture's written genres, by providing them with tuition in its structure, as a way of facilitating change - not necessarily of maintaining the status quo. Such change could conceivably include changes in how language is used to express ideas.

While empowering individuals to use the dialect of the dominant culture, such measures should never be used to denigrate non-SAE speech and writing, coming from other class or cultural backgrounds. Many persons in Australia today use two or more languages in daily life, and this may include two or more dialects of English. Dixon (1980, pp.74-75) notes that in Aboriginal communities "there is a dialect continuum, ranging from standard English, at one extreme, to what we can call 'Aboriginal English' at the other." Each individual person, says Dixon, will vary his or her speech along that continuum, depending on the situation. Older people, with an Aboriginal language as the mother-tongue,

may use a more extreme (more Murri) form of Aboriginal English, whereas the younger people may use several dialects ranging across the continuum from SAE to the broad Aboriginal English of their grandparents, depending on whom they are speaking with. Aboriginal students in Townsville, observed Phillips (1990), may use an Aboriginal English at home, often a version at the end of the Aboriginal English continuum closest to working-class English, and have to learn to use SAE for formal schoolwork. Torres Strait Islander students in Townsville may speak "lingo" or a Creole at home, perhaps both, as well as an Aboriginal English with other members of the Murri community, and SAE in class. Immigrant NESB students often use the mother-tongue at home, and English in class and outside the home, depending on the situation. This multicultural, multilingual (or multi-dialect) situation, actively discouraged in the 1950's, * has since the 1970's been better tolerated. Multiculturalism has come to be seen as an enrichment of this nation, which once saw itself as mono-cultural (an erroneous perception, forgetting its indigenous Aboriginal and Islander peoples, and the NESB immigrants already here). However, food and festivals appear to be viewed more tolerantly, even enthusiastically, than diversity of language and dialect. Multiculturalism also appears to focus on and benefit NESB newcomers, more than the original possessors of this land.

Many societies, through history, have maintained an archaic dialect or a separate language for religious or other formal purposes, for instance, Latin as the language of education and worship in many parts of Europe. Aboriginal Australians, traditionally, spoke both the regular language and an avoidance language commonly referred to as ("mother-in-law tongue") and often the languages of some of their neighbours, using each were appropriate. It is indeed possible to use one form of the language (one dialect) for formal purposes, while using another dialect, language or languages in other situations. People for whom the language for formal purposes is not the mother-tongue should then be given opportunities for learning to use it competently, as Martin has recommended. On the other hand, speakers for whom SAE is the mother tongue should be encouraged to learn another community language, as an enriching experience, not simply as a token gesture in Year 8 only.

English, as a living language, will inevitably undergo change, and the SAE of today may well be less acceptable in two or three generations. English has long borrowed words from other languages and language growth from modern technological developments has been phenomenal.

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* I well remember the pressure to " speak Australian " after my return in late 1949 from a family visit to South-West England where I had attended school - and the home pressure, from my mother, to avoid the supposed taint of Australian-sounding speech.

Different interest groups, age-groups and regions will probably continue to have their own, often changing jargon, slang or other vocabulary differences, and perhaps structural differences, within their own subgroups.

On the other hand, television, perhaps even more than radio did, is creating more standardisation in language. Standard Italian, for instance, is spoken more widely in the villages where once the regional dialect was usual to the surprise of emigrants revisiting to the home village after many years. It should be remembered that American English is now acknowledged as the dominant English of the English-speaking world, with more speakers. Television has tended to standardize the use of English, and American phrases are being used in place of some Australian and British words and phrases, particularly in the print media. Most Australians readily understand these Americanisms, whether they use them or not.

Schmidt (1985, pp. 2-3) describes the processes of "language death", including "deaths" of dialects of a language, as a diminution in its social function, so that its use gradually declines, the language finally dying when its last speakers die, the language having been replaced by a "more prestigious one" in the younger people. This has happened with Cornish and Dalmatian and many other overseas languages, as well as with many Aboriginal languages. It is unlikely to happen to English, or to certain community languages such as Cantonese, because each has many speakers; but it could, and most likely will, happen to some of the dialects of English, if enough people living in the one locality are not using them. Dialects (and languages) which survive will be those spoken by a large enough group of people, where the dialect continues to fill the communication needs of the community or social group using it.

Language is part of cultural identity, and acceptance of bilingualism or multilingualism helps preserve the self- respect a person feels when accepted and valued as a whole person. Willmott believes (1986) that persons who know who they are, and preserve their culture, function best in both worlds, behaving completely differently in the different milieu, as is appropriate. Acceptance by the wider community of the idea that to be fluent and highly literate in SAE does not mean suppression of the home language or dialect will be enhanced by education of the target groups. With specific instruction in the genres of written English used by the dominant group in Australian society, people from communities in which SAE is not the home language can function competently in <u>both</u> their tongues, achieving whatever happens to be the place they aspire to in Australian culture. Surely, having a <u>choice</u> of what dialect of English, or what language, to speak in different situations, is what a mature, tolerant society is all about.

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GLOSSARY

Murri: Queensland term for Aboriginal person. Sometimes includes indigenous peoples generally, including Torres Strait Islanders.

lingo: an indigenous language, in this case, one of the Torres Strait languages.

Creole: a pidgin which now has speakers for whom it is the mother-tongue.