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COMMENTARY ON:

**Communicating about Communication: Multidisciplinary Approaches to
Educating Educators about Language Variation**

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I appreciate very much the big picture approach taken here – stepping back to view the “achievement gap” in education from a broad perspective, providing an informed overview of the various factors involved – and then returning to look more specifically at language.

As the authors acknowledge, many of the advances of linguistics have remained largely confined to the academy, and many of us who teach linguistics still find that our students – and the public in general – know very little about language. This lack of knowledge of language is unfortunate but not surprising; though some teacher education programs include courses on linguistics, linguistics is not comprehensively integrated into teacher education, and is thus also largely absent in primary and secondary curricula. However, linguists are becoming more and more active in K-12 education in a variety of productive ways, and we are beginning to bridge the gap between academic linguistics and education. The authors note two important

challenges of work by linguists who are educating teachers about language variation: (1) “the need to couple language variation awareness with readily accessible, specific examples of language variation, and (2) the need to provide information about how to work with language variation within the increasingly diverse classroom” (lines 31-35).

I thought it might be useful to provide some background first to better situate their important work within the larger field. Much research has been conducted to identify ways in which raising awareness of language can be of use to K-12 teachers, and thus of benefit to their students. (See, for example, Denham and Lobeck 2005; Adger, Snow, and Christian 2002; Baugh 2000; Wheeler 1999a, 1999b; Andrews 1998, Mufwene et. al. 1998; Smitherman 2000; Delpit 1988; among others.) Many educators are also acutely aware of the need for language study, though the goals for its integration and implementation in the classroom are typically different from those of linguists. These goals include accountability requirements that demand that students demonstrate high level literacy skills (Abedi 2004); an increased focus on writing which calls for expert control of text and sentence structure, as well as vocabulary, and state assessments demand expert reading skills. Further, although some of the unique linguistic demands associated with the content areas have been identified (e.g., Lee and Fradd 1996; Abedi and Lord, 2001), educators’ lack of understanding of language leads to inaccurate assessments of and responses to English language learners and other students whose academic language skills lag behind their social language skills (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, and Christian 2004; Heath 1983; Short 1994). Improving teaching and learning for these students often involves revising linguistic practices, texts, and knowledge about second language learning (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short 2004). In addition, the possible role of dialect differences in the persistent achievement gap among students is often mentioned but not well understood. Indeed, there is a high degree of politicization with respect to language use in school about which the public, including teachers, is often naïve, as witness conversations during the Oakland Ebonics controversy that referenced myths about dialects more often than scientific information (Vaughn-Cooke, 1999). Teachers therefore need a broad understanding about the structure of language and its use to help their students understand how language works so that they can use it well for reading, writing, and speaking in the increasingly multicultural and multilingual classroom (Fillmore & Snow, 2002). Nevertheless, though widely used English Education textbooks in the US (Christenbury 2000, Atwell 1998) include chapters on dialect diversity and discuss the value of home language, it appears that primary and secondary teachers continue to rely on traditional approaches to language, approaches that are inconsistent with what we now

know about language structure, variation, change, acquisition, and use as a social tool. (See Denham and Lobeck 2009.)

The paper by Charity Hudley & Mallinson offers some excellent ways to get a foot in the door; that is, to get informed knowledge about language to the teachers who can best use it in their classrooms. They suggest using a variety of methods: courses, workshops, websites, and wikis, and they emphasize future work must be interdisciplinary (linguists, educators, psychologists, education specialists, sociologists, ESL specialists, speech language pathologists).

Points for Further Discussion

Workshop content. I realize that the authors are at the beginning of a larger project of dissemination via workshops; however, it would be really useful to learn more about the content of the workshops they have already conducted. Many of us have conducted similar teacher workshops, and having some way to share and disseminate the content would be valuable for all of us. (I would add to the workshops mentioned the Western Washington University Linguistics in Education workshop hosted and organized by Kristin Denham, Anne Lobeck, and (middle school teacher) Dave Pippin the last three years. The WWULiE workshops grew out of the Tufts workshop mentioned by the authors, and have been attended by people from around the country.)

The authors state that at their workshop “participants have gained a greater understanding of the difference between random errors and differences in linguistic forms that are influenced by students’ language backgrounds...” I understand the main point here – which is what we’re all helping our students to recognize – but what are examples of the “random errors”. Examples would be useful here.

Assessment. Another very important piece of the authors’ work is the assessment of the workshop content. Though their assessment is largely anecdotal at this point (“You changed my life!), they mention that the NSF grant that Charity Hudley has aims to do more assessment, and also to help other linguists refine and implement future workshops. Excellent!

More on dissemination. The wiki the authors have developed is an important piece of broader dissemination of informed materials on language for educators. LSA’s Language in the School Curriculum Committee has discussed for years the creation of a clearinghouse of materials for use in the integration of linguistics into K-12 education, as well as materials that would be useful for teachers (and not necessarily the K-12 students themselves).

Many of us have materials, but some kind of central repository would allow for better collaboration and further dissemination of linguistic materials for K-12 teachers and students.

Another online resource which might be of use in educator workshops – and which we hope teachers will help to further develop – is the online website TeachLing, “a repository of lesson plans related to language and linguistics for use in K-12 classrooms. Some of them have been developed by linguists, some by K-12 teachers, and some by both” (<http://teachling.wwu.edu>). Some of the collaborative work that Anne Lobeck and I have conducted with teachers and K-12 students has resulted in lesson plans posted here.¹

The authors’ discussion of service learning is an excellent way to further some of the fledgling projects on linguistics in education, and to get the word out in innovative ways. Here in Washington State, we have also had university-K-12 partnerships. WWU students have worked in the elementary and middle schools, leading linguistics lessons in before- and after-school programs. The lessons have incorporated K-12 students who know or use a language other than English at home, and they have helped to create and organize the lessons. Most of these have also incorporated cultural information. The few teachers who attended learned a lot too! It would be great to expand these kinds of opportunities in the ways that the authors suggest.

Suggestions for Workshop Materials

Separating spoken and written language. The authors do not provide the content of their workshop materials in this article (and I am not suggesting that this article is the place to do so), so perhaps they make a clearer distinction than is suggested here between spoken and written language. However, some of the “standardized English privileges” in Table 1 collapse spoken and written in a way that does a disservice to the issue, I think. For example, (1) reads, “Standardized English-speaking students can usually be assured that the newspapers, magazines, and books they are asked to read for school will be communicated in the type of English that they are already familiar with.” This privilege assumes that standard-English-speakers’ *speech* matches newspaper, magazine, and book printed language. Though there may be a closer match than for non-standard speakers, it is still very different. I have found it’s helpful to focus on the fact that there is a distinction between spoken and written language for everyone, regardless of dialect. And (4)

¹ And two other sources not included that may be of use, and could perhaps be included in the Print Materials for Educators on the wiki, under More Resources: Denham and Lobeck (2005, 2009).

reads, “When standardized English-speaking students encounter standardized tests, they can usually be assured that test instructions and test materials will be written in the English that they are already familiar with.” This privilege points out an unfairness and inequity that we do want to remedy. We must be sure that the standardized tests measure the knowledge they intend to, rather than features of language. However, we *do* want everyone to be able to read and comprehend well “School English,” and we don’t want to suggest to educators just joining the conversation that we are moving away from a focus on “Standard English.”

Emphasizing the distinction between spoken and written language is very important for educators (and students in general). We often tend to collapse them as one and the same, though the distinctions are clearly numerous. We all agree that there should be a written standard – that is uncontroversial. The issue of a spoken standard is much more complex and controversial, however. It can be useful to point out the distinction between spoken and written that exists for *anyone*. (A useful exercise is to have even “standard-speaking students” record conversations and write them down verbatim. They’ll find that their written language is completely different from spoken language, genre aside.)

Exploring language change. It can be sometimes be challenging to make linguistic material immediately accessible and relevant (especially if only given a one-day workshop, for example). As many of you probably know well from teaching introductory linguistics courses, it is very effective to give examples from older varieties of English in order to help us (all) to recognize that our biases are socially-determined rather than linguistically-determined. Wolfram (1997), Wolfram, Adger, and Christian (1999), Denham (2005), Denham and Lobeck (2010) and others all provide a great many of these examples that educators have found very useful.

Ways to Reach Even More Educators

The authors’ primary goal – and that of many of us – is to communicate information about language variation to wider audiences. They focus on addressing educators whose students speak non-standardized English varieties, which is a really good way to get a foot in the door, and have educators realize the relevance of the linguistic workshops. Another approach to communicate accurate information about language and language variation is to emphasize the scientific approach to language study that’s at the core of linguistic analysis. Other linguists (Honda and O’Neil 1993, Honda 1994, Honda, O’Neil, and Pippin 2004, Denham 2007) have had great success with this approach in teacher preparation and in K-12 classrooms directly. In fact, a

handful of linguists have had great success teaching linguistics directly in primary and secondary classrooms. (See Keyser 1970, Fabb 1985, Goodluck 1991). Using language as the data in a demonstration of the scientific method and discovery learning can be relevant across the curriculum, in a wide range of classrooms (language arts, social studies, science, and even math), at both primary and secondary levels.

Because there is great variation in local and/or national educational standards with respect to language education, it is especially important to approach the task of getting information about language to educators in a variety of ways. So, for example, in the places in which at least one linguistics course is required for prospective teachers, linguists can develop course curricula and materials that help teachers productively apply linguistics in their classrooms. However, in places in which there is no linguistics education for teachers, the task must be approached in other ways – by developing materials that are easily accessible for non-specialists, by sitting on regional/national standards boards, by developing materials and course modules that can be used as continuing education credits, by becoming involved in textbook and other materials development, by pursuing grants that bring together linguists and educators. Working at the local level can also effect broad-reaching change by exposing teachers to the benefits of linguistic knowledge, by developing assessment tools that demonstrate how important linguistic knowledge is, and by developing materials and lesson plans that can lead to linguistically-informed teaching and learning.

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