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### Diversity in the Linguistic Classroom

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#### I. INTRODUCTION

The linguistic classroom presents a unique opportunity for raising students' awareness about diversity and multiculturalism as students approach these issues through linguistic diversity. This is especially relevant for sociolinguistics classes in which students learn how and why different social groups speak different languages and dialects, and how speakers convey social relationships and social identities through the way they speak. In this chapter I will refer to changes/developments in one undergraduate course, *Aspects of Sociolinguistics*, taught at the University of Pittsburgh. The course in some sense represents a fusion of elements from undergraduate courses I have taught over the past

five years at two different Universities in the Midwest. Some of the courses themselves separately emphasized diversity as well as theoretical issues in linguistics. However, the Aspects of Sociolinguistics course satisfies several general education requirements and is therefore geared towards the non-specialist student population and not just linguistic majors. In this chapter I focus on teaching linguistic awareness vis-à-vis linguistic diversity rather than on the inequities facing speakers of minority dialects in the classroom (Siegel, 1991; Smitherman & Villanueva, 2003). I show how students can be taught to view language as more than just a communicative device and rather as a social practice through which people channel cultural and social identities (Eckert, 2000).

With respect to diversity, the main goals for students in the course are as follows:

- \* understand the reasons for language variation (dialects).
- \* appreciate differences in language use as legitimate.
- \* understand that linguistic differences also reflect differences in class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and by extension cultural differences.
- \* reflect on how social inequalities are manifested through language attitudes.

## II. IMPLEMENTATION

Since one of the requirements that the course fulfils is a writing requirement, the evaluation materials are structured so that students develop critical writing and thinking skills which are not only important for linguistic analysis but which are applicable to other areas of study as well. Listening and speaking are essential when discussing issues of linguistic diversity so students are asked to make in-class presentations of their own

work as well as lead discussions on selected journal articles/websites on specific topics. In lectures and in class-presentations, students are asked to comment on their peers' contributions to class discussion. In the latter part of the course they also comment on their peer's individual poster presentations which are based on research. To cover the course material I combined lectures, classroom discussions, student presentations, classroom exercises and guest lecturers. The diversity oriented topics include language and social class, language and gender, language and ethnicity/race and sociocultural differences in language use. Below I give a synopsis of the latter two topics with some detail on implementation.

## **Topics**

### *Language and Ethnicity/Race*

Some of the subtopics covered include:

- \* African American Vernacular English (Ebonics)

Students are introduced to differences in the use of English among African Americans (Siegel, 1991). This includes linguistic differences and differences in the historical development of the variety as opposed to other varieties of American English. In addition, they learn that persons of other ethnicities (e.g. whites, Asians) use the variety as well, (Sweetland, 2002).

- \* Linguistic Profiling

It is often the case that embodied in perceptions of a speaker's dialect are attitudes (positive or negative) towards the speaker himself/herself. Students are familiarized

with sociolinguistic methodologies for getting at speaker attitudes, *matched guise technique* (Purnell, Idsardi, & Baugh, 1999). In this study, one speaker uses different dialects (Ebonics, Chicano English, Standard English) to ask about the availability of apartments and judges the responses of landlords. The fact that the Standard English voice received the most responses generated lots of discussion among the students. I connect the discussion to current events and popular media by having them review and discuss CNN and NPR reports on the issue and relate them to the classroom discussion.

\* Linguistic stereotypes and how these are portrayed in film and animation.

Here students review how non-standard dialect speakers are portrayed in Disney animations, in cartoons in printed media and in popular film. The main idea is that speakers of non-standard dialects are typically portrayed negatively as villains, foolish while Standard English speakers are generally portrayed positively.

\*Language use among Americans of different heritages.

The main point here is that English is not the only language used in the US and that Americans are bilingual or even multilingual. In this way students learn about the language varieties used by historically underrepresented groups (in this case linguistic minorities). Perhaps the most shocking realization for students is that English is not the official (legislated) language of the US (at least at the federal level)).

### *Sociocultural differences in language use*

Under this topic we discuss culture specific norms of language use and general discourse. For example, among African-Americans, the ritualistic insults of the *Yo' Mama* games are often 'foreign' to the typical undergraduate student. To others these seem offensive but from AA cultural perspective are within the realm of normalcy. We also discuss conversation politeness strategies among the Navajo, where indirectness is highly valued.

### **Exercises**

As an ice-breaker and for getting at the idea that dialect differences are systematic and rule-governed rather than linguistic aberrations, I usually have students complete an exercise on a-prefixing (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2006). For example, *She was a-hollering* and *They make money a-building house* are acceptable but not *\*A-hollering is fun* or *\*They make money by a-building houses*. I use this exercise because the Appalachian variety is very salient for students in the Midwest/Pennsylvania area and the a-prefixing is also used in American Folk songs that the students are familiar with (e.g. Oh Suzanna). By working through the exercise students come to the realization that there is a correct way to use a-prefixing, i.e. there are some places where it cannot go. The larger lesson is that all dialects are similarly rule governed.

A second exercise is one I call *Language/Dialect Myth Busters*. In this exercise students are asked to contribute their views on dialects, which are then critically assessed by their peers, e.g. Myth: A dialect is something someone else speaks; Reality: Everyone who speaks a language speaks some variety (dialect) of that language; Myth: A dialect

results from unsuccessful attempts to speak the standard/ 'correct' form of the language; Reality: Dialect speakers acquire their language by adopting speech of those around them not by failing to adopt standard language features (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, 2006).

A third exercise I do in class involves the recognition of dialects. Students are asked to give their opinions on differences and similarities in the speech of places surrounding Pittsburgh. They are then asked to compare their judgments with dialect maps of the Midwest and Northeast. Invariably they are better able to judge the varieties in regions closest to them but at the same time have negative opinions of dialects further away in addition to having no opinion. For example, one student suggested that maybe since in the past Ohioans (Steubenville and other areas closer to the border) competed with Pittsburghers for jobs (steel industry, coal mining), this may have over time influenced some Pittsburghers perception of the Ohio dialects as 'odd' sounding.

### **Guest Lecturer**

As a way broadening and enriching the students' multicultural experience with language I invited an American Sign Language (ASL) instructor to give a lecture. The experience was very rewarding for students as the instructor herself used ASL in everyday interaction. She gave an overview of the history/development and use of ASL and also shared personal experiences with the students. We worked with an ASL interpreter for the entire class period, which for many students was the first experience with meaningful interaction with an ASL speaker.

### III. OUTCOMES

Perhaps the best way to judge outcomes is by the quality of the work produced by the students. Several of the research papers students did investigated issues of multiculturalism and diversity. For example, several students researched minority languages spoken in the US, one paper was titled, *Hispanic Immigration and Resulting Language Difficulties: the development of Spanish and English Code-mixing in the US*; others looked at language variation in ASL and language use among African Americans. One student looked at differences in the local variety of English spoken in Pittsburgh, *Syntactic Variation in Pittsburgh Speech*. Along the lines of forensic linguistics and language attitudes, one student did a paper entitled, *Identifying Discrimination through Use of Language*. Another student looked at the portrayal of language diversity in the media in a paper titled, *Ali G: Perceptions of ethnic minorities and the use of language in satire*. The main results of these research papers were presented in conference-style poster sessions during the final week of classes. Students were able to share their insights on the different topics and so increased their peers' understanding of the subject matter. Below I provide samples of students' comments from the Survey of Student Opinion of Teaching, specifically in references to the question; What aspects of this course were most beneficial to you? The comments strongly suggest that the educational goals were attained.

*\*This course provided a greater understanding of the socioeconomic differences between cultures and it has forced me to consider more critically the assumptions and prejudices concerning linguistic variations from society to society.*

*\*The comparison of other linguistic cultures to our own.*

*\*I found a new way of seeing my own language use, as well as viewing the language of others. This class 'de-stigmatized' and redefined words like 'slang'.*

*\* It allowed for an open mind and showed that language differences were not bad.*

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

I trust that I have shown here that a linguistic class such as this one can create an environment in which students gain knowledge and appreciation for their own linguistic and cultural backgrounds as well as that of others. Of course there are lots of other topics, exercise etc I would like to add or exchange (as is the case with any course every time you teach it) but I came away from this course pleased that the lessons learnt went beyond sociolinguistic theory and improved writing and oratory skills. I felt strongly that I was able to positively affect the student's attitudes towards language differences and thereby cultural differences.

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