

Giuliana Ferri

University of West London
giuliana.ferri@uwl.ac.uk

‘I speak slang, but wiv the teacher ‘normal’’. Language ideology in the primary classroom

Summary

The paper is a work in progress investigating the perceptions of Standard English expressed by a group of children in their last year of primary school in a multicultural and multilingual educational setting in London. The theoretical framework employed to interpret the data, a series of group interviews with small groups, is that of language ideology. The idea brought forward in the paper is that language ideology is a habitus (Bourdieu, 1991) which attaches certain values to the prestige variety of a language, while devaluing non-standard varieties. Through the adoption of this theoretical lens, the paper attempts to evaluate the educational implications of this ideology.

Keywords: language ideology, habitus, Standard English, multilingual, non-standard

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present a series of vignettes that provide a snapshot of children’s perceptions of Standard English and their ‘lived’ experiences of language use in a multilingual setting, in the specific a multicultural school in London. The limited scope of the empirical sample is supplanted by the richness of the data collected in a series of interviews with a small number of children in the final year of primary school, at age 11. The author intends to collect a wider sample of interviews in the near future, and write a more extensive paper. Therefore, this should be considered as a pilot study or a work in progress.

One particular episode illustrates the day to day interactions in an inner London classroom that provided the initial stimulus for this paper. In the course of an informal conversation on the language used in text messages with a group of 11 years old pupils, the author disclosed that she regularly used abbreviations when writing messages. One of the boys in the group asked, bewildered: “Miss, but can you speak slang?” Their reaction of disbelief to the idea of a teacher using ‘slang’ exemplifies the role of educators as ideology brokers (Blommaert 1999) in disseminating the ideology of language standardisation, with its assumptions of invariance, uniformity and correctness. The present paper represents an occasion to reflect on the implications of this ideology of standardisation in educational settings, particularly in a multilingual context. It aims to describe the difficulties experienced by pre-adolescent children in an urban, multilingual and multicultural educational setting in conforming to the expectation that they should use spoken and written Standard English

in school. In the specific, the author aims to discuss their emerging views on language, in particular their ideas on Standard English and what they consider 'slang'. In regard to the specific context of the data collected, it is important to emphasise the unique character of London as a 'global' or 'hyperdiverse' (Kyambi 2005) city, where schools experience high levels of diversity in terms of languages spoken, ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. In particular, London has now become denationalised, meaning that it does no longer represent England in terms of lifestyle and points of reference (Block 2008). As a reflection of this fact, the children appearing in the vignettes are all multilingual with the exception of one monolingual English speaking child.

Language ideology

Ideology is the process of meanings, signs and values in social life, controlled by a dominant group or social class, according to Gramsci's (1992) notion of hegemony. In the complex relationship between the material and ideational spheres, ideas are produced by specific material conditions and transmitted within institutional apparatuses, becoming sets of naturalised patterns of thought and behaviour (Eagleton 1991; Blommaert 2005). Thus, ideology appears natural and given, "the stuff which makes us uniquely what we are" (Eagleton 1992: 20), as a form of unreflexive thinking. Althusser (2008) stresses the importance of the emotional sphere over the cognitive to explain how ideology becomes a frame of reference for thought and behaviour, echoing Voloshinov (1973) who considered the established systems of ideology as crystallizations of behavioural ideology. This predominance of unconscious patterns of behaviour in the transmission and maintenance of a dominant ideology is exemplified in the notion of hegemony (Gramsci 1992). Hegemony operates through consensus rather than coercion, as a "system of lived habitual social practices" (Eagleton 1991: 115). The consensual rule of a hegemonic view is therefore established through the role of institutions such as schools, family and organised religion. Equally, the idea of habitus in Bourdieu (1991) represents a set of internalised practices, a cultural unconscious, underlining the apparent spontaneity with which dominant values and norms are reproduced.

Cameron (2006: 143) argues that in many accounts and discussions on ideology, language is treated as a given entity, "like the mythical turtle that supports the world on his back", failing to explain why individual language users subscribe to the values of hegemonic ideologies. Indeed, the role of language in the cycle of production and reproduction of ideology is dual and it stands in a dialectic relationship with systems of ideas and beliefs. Whilst language is a vehicle for the fashioning and expression of ideologies, it is at the same time shaped by social and ideological forces. In this sense, Cameron (1995, 2006) opposes the universalistic idea of language as a system of abstract signs, and favours the idea formulated by Voloshinov (1973), that signs are multiaccented, meaning that they are a reflection of the different social positions occupied by individual speakers. From this perspective, the apparent consensus surrounding language hides another reality

in which material differences between social groups generate contrasting and conflicting experiences of language use and of the meanings attached to different language varieties. In other words, those meanings are never neutral, rather they are acquire a fixed and naturalised semblance through the work of ideology. This latter point is exemplified by Bourdieu (1991) through the notion of symbolic capital, which compares linguistic exchange to an economic exchange in which words are not only signs that convey meanings, but they also represent a linguistic capital. Words are “signs of wealth intended to be evaluated and appreciated” (Bourdieu 1991: 66). In this economic transaction, the most valuable linguistic capital will yield the highest symbolic profit.

Language ideology and education

The prestige associated with the use of a dominant language variety is the result of social mechanisms which are reproduced by institutional powers. In particular, the education system is invested with the specific role of divulging the standard variety of a national language. The value attached to linguistic practices is the result of habitus, a learned response that takes shape first within the sphere of the family and the immediate community, and subsequently in schools, where the primary model will be either valued or devalued, if not conform to dominant linguistic practices. In this process, language becomes a symbolic capital and schools are in a central position in ensuring the reproduction of the ideology of a standard, unitary and correct language. This symbolic dominance is transmitted in the ordinary aspects of everyday life, to the extent that the idea of a standard and correct language becomes a self-evident and transparent idea that requires no further investigation. Within the sphere of the school system, teachers possess a linguistic capital that students need to acquire (Eagleton 1991), in particular the values of language standardisation and a rigid normativity in language use (Cameron 1995, 2006).

The determinism of the habitus implies that individuals have no choice but to subscribe entirely to the dominant ideology. Nevertheless, this deterministic view can be partly challenged with the adoption of Bakhtin’s (2006) concept of centrifugal and centripetal forces in language, according to which the idea of a unitary language is the result of “specific verbal-ideological movements” (p. 246), representing centripetal or centralising forces, opposed to centrifugal or decentralising forces. This means that language users are immersed in a dialogical relationship between the surrounding heteroglossia, or “the multiplicity of social voices” (Bakhtin 2006: 263), and the correct standard form, or the norm. This relationship, in its turn, creates a tension between the dominant forces that shape individual consciousness and the reality of the individual steeped in heteroglossia. In this respect, Bakhtin (2006: 341) describes “the ideological becoming of a human being” as the conflict generated by the process of assimilation of the words of others, embodying the authoritative word, and the internally persuasive word:

Alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralisation and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralisation and disunification go forward.

Bakhtin 2006: 272

Language ideology has a profound impact on education. In fact, one of the challenges faced by educators is represented by the need to articulate this struggle between the external authoritative word and the internally persuasive word, or the lived experience of the individual speaker. Significantly, the position adopted by Fairclough (1992) is that although learning to master Standard English is a matter of ensuring equal opportunities for all students, at the same time it is necessary to become critical towards its authoritative force, in order to articulate the experiences of speakers belonging to different language communities.

The authority of Standard English

The emphasis on appropriateness and on the use of Standard English, both written and spoken, has been at the forefront of educational reform in England for many years:

Standard English can be recognised by the use of a very small range of forms such as *those books*, *I did it* and *I wasn't doing anything* (rather than their non-Standard equivalents); it is not limited to any particular accent. It is the variety of English which is used, with only minor variation, as a major world language. Some people use Standard English all the time, in all situations from the most casual to the most formal, so it covers most registers. The aim of the national curriculum is that everyone should be able to use Standard English as needed in writing and in relatively formal speaking.

DFE 2013: 94–95

Standard English developed over centuries as a codified written language used by scholars and writers, although all speakers of a particular language style-shift according to context as there are no single-style speakers (Trudgill 1995). In fact, languages never achieve complete standardisation although standard language cultures affect how speakers think about their own language, leading to a devaluing of other forms, which become illegitimate in the popular mind (Milroy, 2001). Thus, the idea of the neutrality, superiority, clarity and correctness of Standard English represents a 'common sense' thinking about language that becomes naturalized and 'invisible', as a taken-for-granted belief (Woolard & Schieffelin 1994). In this ideological context, the acquisition of Standard English becomes intertwined with the acceptance of extra linguistic values such as morality and order, so that the perceived failing standards of the language become a metaphor for the general decay of moral standards and the dissolution of the moral order (Cameron 1995). However, this idea of a uniform language free from variation differs from the practices of young speakers in urban, multilingual schools, who use language in creative ways, mixing the local variety of English with other languages (Rampton 2015). It is also at odds with the recent literature on

English and globalisation which highlights precisely the fragmentation of the language and the power differentials between speakers in different parts of the world (Seidhofer 2004; Jenkins 2007; Dewey and Jenkins 2010). This power differential is also visible within British society in the ‘othering’ of immigrants and their languages (Cameron 2013).

From an educational perspective, a neutral approach to Standard English such as that presented in the National Curriculum is in danger of creating a deficit view of the students, according to which the experiences that children bring to school are detrimental to their acquisition of Standard English, not being valuable symbolic capital. This is reflected in the current approach adopted in the English school system with a return to a formal style of teaching characterised by an emphasis on grammatical rules and ‘proper’ usage. The excerpts of the interviews with pre-adolescent children before entering secondary school reveal this ‘common sense’ thinking on Standard English in an urban, multilingual, multicultural educational setting and how the deficit view emerges from their recounts of their experiences with teachers. Three themes emerge in particular: first, an acknowledgment of the ideas of correctness, uniformity and invariance of Standard English as opposed to the ‘non-existence’ of non-standard English, which children refer to as ‘slang’. Second, Standard English as a ‘posh’ language: children demonstrate an implicit recognition of the social function of Standard English as a marker of prestige. Finally, while acknowledging the superiority of Standard English, children express resistance to the accepted view of this language variety through an emerging articulation of language as an expression of cultural and social identity.

I. Correctness, uniformity and invariance: the authoritative and the internally persuasive words

Key for the interviews: I = interviewer; A = Child A; B = Child B; C = Child C; D = Child D; E = Child E; F = Child F; H = Child H; (.) = pause

In this vignette, two children who are advanced bilinguals born in the UK recall their experiences of language in school. One child remembers being reproached for not using Standard English in her writing, showing the following written feedback on her work: “Please use Standard English in your writing”.

1. I: *What do you understand by “Please use Standard English in your writing?”*
2. A: *It means when you use like proper English*
3. I: *What is “proper English”?*
4. A: *It means when you (.) em (.) when you using- em (.) like words that actually exist*
5. I: *But would people use words that don’t exist?*
6. A: *but it’s not in a dictionary so you can’t write it (.) like the word innit*
7. B: *I think I am the only one who speaks Standard English here in this class, at home my parents are like, I am glad you speak proper English unlike the other kids in your school*

In this excerpt, children express the commonly held perception that Standard English is a form of ungrammatical, non-existent and incorrect language, according to the authoritative word of school and of the dominant discourses on language. Interestingly, children demonstrate an implicit knowledge of register and context when discussing the contraction “innit” meaning ‘isn’t it’ in Standard English:

8. A: *I think it is another way of saying ‘isn’t it’ but just in a different way, you can use it when you want people to agree with you. I think you can use it, if you’re are thinking of another word but it doesn’t come*
9. C: *I think it is half and half, ‘cos sometimes you can use it and sometimes you can’t-*
10. C: *It is standard at home, in school with your friends-*
11. I: *And teachers?*
12. A: *No, ‘cos you know they’re old*

This brief exchange provides an example of the challenges faced by educators in bridging the gap between the aforementioned ‘authoritative’ and the ‘internally persuasive’ words. On the one hand, they have embraced the common sense understanding of the superiority of Standard English, but on the other they demonstrate an implicit understanding of context and register. This aspect becomes more evident in the next excerpt.

II. The social function of Standard English as a marker of prestige

Another strand that emerges from the conversations is the status of Standard English as a marker of prestige. Children D, E, and F discuss their understandings of English in the following excerpt:

1. I: *What is Standard English?*
2. D: *Posh <exaggerating and very slowly, acts ‘posh’> Can you come here, please?*
3. E: *<also affecting a posh voice> Oh, darling! Can I have my breakfast?*
4. I: *why is this standard?*
5. D: *the words are pronounced clearly and properly*
6. I: *Who speaks like that, do you know anyone?*
7. D: *The teacher (.)*
8. F: *Because they’re always upper class and they’re always pushy and they always pronounce the words (.) em (.) and Standard English sounds more like proper English and you have to pronounce the words more (.) em (.) in non-Standard it would be like: YO YO and clean my car man!*

As in the previous excerpt, non-Standard English is a ‘made up language’, while Standard English is ‘correct’ and ‘proper’ and it is spoken by ‘posh’ people. However, in their stylisations of Standard English in turns 2 and 3, they display an ambivalent attitude towards the authoritative voice of the dominant language ideology. On the one hand, they have assimilated the idea of Standard English as a habitus (Bourdieu, 1991), or according to Bakhtin (2006) they have internalised the word of others. On the other, their mockery of

Standard English seems to contradict that same idea. This indicates a struggle between the authoritative voice and the internally persuasive word.

III. Resistance, emerging view of language practices as relating to social environments

Child B in the first excerpt is the only monolingual child in the group, and although she initially distanced herself from the other children who “can’t speak proper English”, she later displays an awareness of social context and she identifies with the rest of the group against the teachers and the lack of understanding of the difficulties faced in mastering formal language:

1. **B:** *They think if you are in England you should speak the proper way and not speak in slang. It is not like when you speak to your friends, they want you to speak proper English. Imagine walking in an interview for a very good job saying: ‘innit, fanks for the job ma:n’, and you will not get the job because you need to be formal and like proper English. Teachers don’t understand that we are brought up like this, speaking to our friends like this, then it’s sort of in us, then it’s gonna be a bit of a hard job to get it out of us and they sort of do <bossy voice> stop talking like that! And they don’t understand that it’s gonna take us time to getting used to speaking formally!*

Interestingly, Child B raises an important issue in multilingual classrooms: the expectation that all children use English, and in particular ‘proper’ English, the standard national language loaded with symbolic capital. Coupland (2007) refers to the concept of speech repertoires, underlining the limits imposed on individual language users in choosing the appropriate style from their own repertoires, particularly in educational settings. In this sense, although the school has provided children with the metalinguistic skills needed to discuss Standard and non-Standard English, there still remains an untapped opportunity to adopt a critical and more reflective perspective on language (Cameron, 2007). However, as observed by Rampton (1995, 2015) in the phenomenon of ‘crossing’, values attached to language are renegotiated within multilingual peer groups, through the creative reframing of linguistic resources. Although the groups observed in Rampton are older than the children in the present paper, it can be observed that they too show emergent signs of a growing awareness of the stylistic resources of language in different social contexts. As an illustration, Child F reflects on the necessity to adapt the linguistic resources available in order to survive life in a ‘bad neighbourhood’, although this fact should not in his view become an impediment to learning Standard English:

2. **F:** *If you grow up in a bad neighbourhood then you have to speak slang, innit (.) you get used to it, but if you grow up in watcha you call it, innit, good neighbourhood (.) they will be like, em, properly say the words, but you can learn slang, and, yeah, speak proper English.*

Returning to Bakhtin, it is possible to observe in the above excerpts that each utterance lives in the tension created by the centrifugal and centripetal tendencies that govern language. The ambivalence and tension is felt by all participants: non Standard English has negative connotations, it is a 'made up language', it is sloppy and 'rude', but at the same time it has a subversive function in separating them from the world of the teachers and of school, and as such it is referred to as 'slang'. This fact is exemplified by Child H, who declares with pride: *I speak slang, but wiv the teacher 'normal'*.

Conclusion

The linguistic awareness displayed by these children demonstrates their ability to engage critically with language. In their mockery of 'posh' language, their voicing of 'slang', their use of non-standard speech and playful language use, they challenge the determinism of the habitus, through the creative styling of the voices available to them. However, the issues of power and inequality remain unresolved in the chasm between the linguistic practices that children bring to school and the requirement to use Standard English. As Hymes (1996) argues, the linguistic competences acquired within different communities are ignored if they fail to adhere to the model of language promoted in school. This fact, in its turn, produces linguistic insecurity:

A latent function of the educational system is to instil linguistic insecurity, to discriminate linguistically, to channel children in ways that have an integral linguistic component, while appearing open and fair to all.

Hymes 1996: 84

Language is used as a marker of identity and as a sign of group membership, a fact of which children in the above excerpt show a growing awareness, albeit still in an unarticulated form. This is most evident in multilingual contexts, where children from a variety of linguistic, ethnic, cultural and religious heritages share a common membership as young people living in urban contexts, using the local vernacular as a form of shared identity. However, this fact should not represent an impediment to master Standard English and achieve the academic success that is associated with it, provided that more innovative pedagogical solutions are found in order to help children navigate critically their own uses of language, fostering metalinguistic skills, and building on the linguistic resources that they bring to school. This paper has presented a snapshot of language use in an urban and multilingual environment, although further research is needed, collecting more extensive data in order to investigate the effects and the educational implications of the ideology of standardisation on this age group.

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