

Language, conflict and community: linguistic accommodation in the urban US

Rosalind Raymond Gann^{*1}

¹East Tennessee State University, USA

Viewed freely, the English language is the accretion and growth of every dialect, race,
and range of time, and is both the free and compacted composition of all.

Walt Whitman

Schools have linguistic agendas. Seldom do schools promote ‘the accretion and growth of every dialect’. At best, schools offer students access to standard language — a culture’s prestige codes, control over which is an important factor in social mobility (see Delpit, 1995). Seldom do we accomplish this as fully as the public expects, for even in the most idyllic circumstances, teachers do not control classroom discourse to the extent people imagine. Students arrive in schools with a variety of dialects, determined by region, neighbourhood and social class. When we offer access to prestige codes, we model a series of verbal dance steps, which students may imitate and replicate. But what happens if the ‘dance’ in which we seek to engage students is felt to be unfriendly or even inimical to the students’ home culture? And what if more than one ethno-linguistic variety is represented in a classroom — groups which alternately bond and collide?

Between 1991 and 2002, it was my privilege to work as an English teacher and reading specialist in a rustbelt city in the United States. The school system which employed me served a range of races and socioeconomic levels; however, the racially isolated schools to which I was assigned — middle schools, and in one case a K-8 school for delinquent and ‘pre-delinquent’ youth — served overwhelmingly low-income and African American youngsters. There was a sprinkling of white youngsters in these schools. Most of them were what sociologists describe as ‘Urban Appalachians’, young people whose families had migrated to our city from the mountains of Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, Virginia, West Virginia, the Carolinas, Pennsylvania and New York to find employment. Annual tests of literacy and achievement characterized the racially isolated schools as ‘low-performing’.

One such school was New Vista xMiddle School.¹ It occupied a half-block of real estate in the city’s Lower Basin section, a run-down, high-crime neighbourhood, with broken-windowed and abandoned buildings, a place where police distrusted the (mostly African American) community, and the community feared the police.

^{*}East Tennessee State University, Box 70684, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Johnson City, TN 37614, USA. Email: Gannr@etsu.edu

The three-story New Vista Building was festooned with ornate stonework and gracious balconies. A grassless concrete plaza took the place of a playground. The library had a good collection of classics, but science books were woefully out of date. The halls were poorly lit, and everywhere were falling plaster, graffiti and peeling paint. Wooden boards replaced panes of glass. Long windows brought light into classrooms, and teachers dressed things up with posters.

New Vista was a ‘magnet’ school, intended to draw students from diverse neighbourhoods to a unique programme called ‘Project Arrow’. Research had shown that students who fell behind their age group were unlikely to complete high school. Students at New Vista had previously failed at least one grade — often two. Our programme was supposed to help over-aged students complete a three-year middle school programme in two. Magnet schools in our district had been devised to deal with desegregation: therefore, most ‘magnet’ schools were integrated, well-equipped and well-funded. None of this was the case at New Vista, whose accelerated programme offered fast-paced academics to students who were chronically truant, in trouble with the law, and who almost universally disliked school. Though New Vista’s staff was caring, professional and competent, our programme seldom resulted in academic success. For students to complete three years’ work in two, it was necessary to perform academic tasks they had never been good at, and at break-neck speed. Material had to be covered so quickly that there was little time to draw connections between the standard curriculum and students’ culture. Students often responded to academic assignments with something analogous to allergic reactions. Many failed and were compelled to attend summer school following our programme. Few passed standardized tests. I was receiving training in applied linguistics while I worked at New Vista, and I wondered if any of the problems had to do with the discourses we were trying to teach.

Three varieties of English were spoken at New Vista and other racially isolated schools in our district. There was the linguistic variety that we English teachers were supposed to inculcate in our students. The district was not unenlightened on matters of language, and wanting to avoid monikers which suggested one dialect was the superior way to speak English, it diplomatically christened the target variety ‘Marketplace English’. Some books called it ‘America Standard’ or ‘Edited American English’. To the ear, it sounded like CNN. Names do not matter. Whatever one called this linguistic variety, the students steadfastly resisted our attempts to induce them to speak it. A few academically ambitious students used it in essays, and the dramatically mischievous controlled this dialect in brilliant parodies when mimicking teachers. A handful of renegade students from (usually black) middle class homes learned African American English² quickly and never told their peers that they spoke American Standard, for this was the detested language of standardized testing, office discipline, officious public address announcements, textbooks that bored, landlords, social workers, probation officers, and courts. It was the prestige language — the language of power. I came to think of it as New Vista’s ‘official’ language. The students, who despised the institutions associated with this variety, declined to speak it, maintaining it sounded ‘white’ and ‘fake’.

There was also the language most of our students had learned from infancy —

African American English (AAE), which some books call African American Vernacular English. The descendant of the plantation creole spoken by slaves brought to the United States in the seventeenth century, it still retains many of its African syntactic features (Wolfram *et al.*, 1999). For a majority of our students, this variety of English was an essential feature of their identity. They used it with ease, pride and naturalness. It was the language of the rap stars and sports figures they idealized. This was the language of the hallways, everyday conversation, the lunchroom, arguments, fights and the athletic programme. Some instruction occurred in African American English, because African American teachers who spoke it shifted into it as they taught, since students preferred it. Even some of us WAVE (White American Varieties of English) speakers sometimes code switched, or changed over to African American English during lessons via the process of linguistic accommodation [i.e. copying the speech characteristics of one's interlocutor in order to make oneself better accepted or better understood (Shephard, 2001)].

A third — stigmatized — dialect was heard usually in diluted form. This was Appalachian English, also called Southern Mountain English, a language spoken by a minority of our students with ancestry in the mountains of Appalachia, and a variety of which its speakers were ashamed (Wolfram *et al.*, 1999). A glance or a giggle from a classmate could suppress it. If my ear served me correctly, the Appalachian English speakers tended to code switch into something resembling African American English. I had hoped to create a classroom atmosphere where diverse speech styles were initially *accepted*, even celebrated, and where students were tactfully *invited* to begin using American Standard English, when called for in academic discourse. But if I could trust my ears, mine was a classroom where students became fluent in African American English, a highly stigmatized non-Standard variety — though one which carried a certain negative prestige³ (Labov, 1982).

The phenomenon was not restricted to New Vista. I had become aware of it years before when I first began teaching in the school district of which New Vista was part. Colleagues often discussed how 'the kids all got to sound alike after awhile'. The reconstructed examples below show the sort of change I remember noticing:

Example 1

- (a) Appalachian English: *Scrooge is a-scared o' the ghost.*
- (b) AAE: *Scrooge be scared o' the ghost.*

Example 2

- (a) Appalachian English: *Scrooge keeps his money for hisself.*
- (b) AAE: *Scrooge cheap.*

In Example 1, the speaker employs a-prefixing, a dialect marker of Appalachian English which could make the student user an object of ridicule. A more acceptable choice would be 1b, which has the African American English marker 'invariant be'. Again, in Example 2a, the speaker's use of an irregular reflexive pronoun characteristic of Appalachian English might make this student the object of teasing in an urban school like New Vista. If the student adopted 2b with its copula deletion, he or she would be accommodating to AAE, and would be more likely to be accepted.

A minority of my colleagues argued that we were seeing a form of 'reverse racism', where black students used language as an excuse to discriminate against their white classmates. I rejected this explanation because when white students adopted New Vista's lingua franca, they were usually accepted into the student culture.

As teachers, we bear a tremendous responsibility for the learning atmosphere of our classrooms. I have always tried to do what I could to make students feel valued and important, whatever dialect they used, but peer pressure is a subtle and very powerful thing. I had to admit I was hearing very little Appalachian English in my classroom, even in attenuated forms. I kept an eye on my Appalachian students and encouraged them privately, but this did not change what occurred in class. I had to admit that I might not be in control of the discourses in my own classroom.

As I learned more about linguistics, I realized I might be dealing with a phenomenon of linguistic accommodation, where Appalachian students were choosing to adopt the speech style of their African American classmates. The accommodation phenomenon had been extensively documented in the sociolinguistic literature, though not between these two groups (Giles, 1994). Using the techniques of sociolinguistic fieldwork, the occurrence of linguistic accommodation at New Vista could be tested rather simply. Therefore, at the start of the 2001–02 school year, I sought to obtain the necessary permissions for a small, self-funded project, which would be tied to my doctoral dissertation. I aimed to establish whether Appalachian students spoke differently in the presence of African American conversation partners from the way they did normally. The design would be based on the presence of nine linguistic markers — features such as invariant 'be' or future predictive 'Ima' that Appalachian English does not have, or has to a lesser extent than African American English. I had no Appalachian students in my classroom that year, but would invite students from other teachers' rooms to participate. The procedure would involve five hour-long open-ended interviews, which I would tell the students I was conducting for the purpose of studying 'teenage speech'. Two interviews between Appalachian speakers would establish a 'baseline' condition for participants, and three would be in a 'multi-ethnic' condition, where Appalachians would speak with African American interlocutors. I would tape record, transcribe, measure and statistically analyse the incidence of African American linguistic markers under the two conditions to check for statistical significance. Participants would be paid for their time with a college-level dictionary and a small gift certificate at a local clothing store.

The required approvals, however, did not come until we were five months into the school year and in the interim, most of New Vista's Appalachian students dropped out of school, the census of white students plummeting from 22 to eight, of an initial pool of 450. High dropout rates among Appalachian students had long been a problem in our district (Maloney & Borman, 1987) and had led to suggestions that students from this ethnic background were 'pushed out' of our district's schools (Berlowitz & Durand, 2000). The fact that these students were vanishing made them almost impossible to study, but made it all the more imperative that such studies be conducted. Of the eight white students remaining at New Vista, five agreed to participate. Careful social histories showed that only three of these five had

migrated from Appalachia themselves, or had Appalachian migration in their immediate ancestry (a parent or grandparent). I therefore broadened the study to include examination of the way students who were speakers of White American Varieties of English (WAVE) accommodated to African American English at New Vista.

The eleven students who participated spoke of enjoying the experience. Although the interviews were held in my classroom after school, the atmosphere was very different from that of a conventional class. Participants were on an equal footing with the researcher and were encouraged to test out their hunches. No topic was off limits. I asked participants their views of school, the curriculum and the language that teenagers used. Profanity was not forbidden, and they were encouraged to use my first name. As we worked together, I realized how incisive and thoughtful our students could be in the right context.

Study results indicated the presence of African American English linguistic markers in the speech of all WAVE participants in the study. This was true even in the mono-ethnic condition when they spoke only to each other (Gann, 2002). Three of the five WAVE participants showed a statistically significant rise in AAE marker usage when conversing with African American interlocutors as measured by Chi-square.⁴ Why was linguistic accommodation at our school occurring? A way to understand the results was in terms of what linguists call solidarity theory, which states that people match their speech to an interlocutor's in order to be liked and accepted (Hudson, 1978). WAVE students could be altering their speech to appeal to AAE-speaking classmates. Another explanation was the strong relationship between group identity and language choice. Language fosters ways of seeing the world, and invites others to share a worldview (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985). The WAVE speakers in this study, like their African American classmates, had been consigned to a badly maintained school for students who were academic failures. The student body at New Vista and in 'low-achieving' schools across our district could be said to have formed an educational underclass, and the students attending these schools, black and white, might have been using African American English to articulate a common experience. Linguistic choice is sometimes related to ideology (Fairclough, 1989) or what Michael Halliday (1978) calls 'reality bearing'. At New Vista, African American English may have been serving as what Halliday calls an anti-language, a linguistic code used by a special population — prisoners for example — to enact their resistance to those in power by excluding those not in the anti-group. Through the anti-language, the anti-group articulates an alternate view of the world.

By declining to speak Standard English, were our students communicating how they felt about the ill-equipped school, the break-neck pace of the 'Project Arrow' programme, and its lack of 'fit' with their abilities, home dialects, literacies and cultures? Perhaps WAVE students, along with African Americans, deemed AAE a fitting linguistic code in which to enact their alienation from the programme at New Vista. The three Appalachian participants may have accommodated to AAE out of a weakening of ties to their home culture. Only one of the participants had been born in Appalachia. Two were urban Appalachians, young people two to three

generations removed from life outside the city. They shunned Appalachian English, which they called ‘Hillbilly Talk’ and considered old-fashioned at best. They connected this linguistic variety with ignorance, and lack of the *savoir-faire* needed for urban life. Said one Appalachian participant, ‘I don’t talk like white people ...’ cause white people talk like Hillbillies’. African American English, on the other hand, was viewed as practical, trendy and powerful. African American students and their parents were seen as more capable of negotiating with New Vista’s administration. The WAVE students’ wish to be users of the student ‘power code’ affords another possible explanation of their linguistic accommodation.

One last and more troubling explanation of the linguistic accommodation pattern at New Vista related to the possible wish of the WAVE students — who were after all a tiny minority — to be as inconspicuous as possible in our building and to blend in with the black majority out of feelings of intimidation. While WAVE students at New Vista universally made friends among classmates, all WAVE participants spoke of physical and verbal harassment by African American students whom they did not know. This usually occurred when WAVE youngsters were in parts of New Vista’s building where they were away from their regular teachers and classmates. The administration ignored these incidents. If they were formally dealt with, they had to be reported to central administration, and these were counted against the school. Part of the explanation for the high Appalachian dropout rate at New Vista may have lain in this pattern of unacknowledged harassment. Much of the linguistic accommodation literature suggests that when inter-group tension is high, people are likely to revert to their home dialects. This is called linguistic divergence. But it seems we had the opposite situation at New Vista, where a very tiny WAVE minority sought to blend with the huge African American majority, with which it alternately bonded and collided.

Schools are not separate from the communities in which they are situated. While there were racial tensions at the New Vista Middle School, these were far fewer than in the surrounding neighbourhood. In particular, relations between the African American community in which our school was situated and the overwhelmingly white police force were extremely tense. One evening a week after my data were completed, an unarmed black youth was chased by police on foot for delinquent traffic tickets. He was cornered and shot in an alley about a mile from our school. The officer was white. Nearly a week of urban rioting ensued.

Schools were closed for several days. When they reopened, I had my students write about what happened. Their papers held accounts of what had occurred at the scene of the riots. Based, according to their authors, on what they had learned from their friends, these accounts were not in ‘Marketplace English’. Relying on my intuition rather than my English teacher habits, I stifled my ingrained reflex to standardize verb forms and responded instead to the fear and frustration behind their narratives. In the matter of mechanics, I confined myself mostly to correcting punctuation and spelling. None of the WAVE speakers came to school that first week. During the riots, there had been isolated attacks on white people in the Basin area, and parents may have been wary of sending WAVE students back to our neighbourhood. Slowly they began to drift back.

The riots heightened my awareness of something teachers know subliminally, but of which we may not take sufficient account. A classroom and its discourses are outgrowths of their community. Teachers may serve as guides, resources and experts on prestige codes, but language is the quintessential expression of a community's culture. If the dominant language of a neighbourhood is African American English, this will be the variety spoken in its schools. Even in a school where some students travel into the neighbourhood from elsewhere, this will be the case. During my years in New Vista's district, my colleagues and I were told many times that teachers 'controlled the conditions for success'. The implication was that our students should speak flawless Standard English at school. But the truth is that a language community has much more effect on classroom dialect than its teacher. Why should it not? When I taught EFL in Turkey, I thought it natural that my students spoke Turkish-influenced English with its idiosyncratic lexicon. Why would one not expect AAE to predominate in an African American venue?

I had been concerned that students in my room did not attempt to speak Standard English. It had baffled me that WAVE students chose African American English as their second dialect. But now, something clicked into place. New Vista was located in the heart of an African American community. The WAVE students were isolated and in need of friends. The neighbourhood was an arena of racial tension. In muted form, our school reflected the problems of the neighbourhood. As much as one wants every school to be a sanctuary from racial prejudice, New Vista was not. Nor was it a hotbed of racial problems like the community outside where an innocent young black man had been shot. But interracial conflict was present and in-school bullying had racial overtones. Prejudice was reflected in classroom discourses, and it was unrealistic to expect teachers to eliminate the problems single-handedly. New Vista Middle School was less than an ideal place for WAVE youngsters to learn, but educational discrimination comes in many guises. There were several outstanding and well-funded schools in our district integrated by race and class. There were also 'racially isolated' schools like New Vista. The district's least promising students, black and white, had been consigned to New Vista, and few educational resources had been allocated to help them.⁵ It was not the best place for any student of any ethnicity to learn. Some of the bullying of the WAVE students, I thought, might be connected to the African Americans' perception that New Vista was a ghetto.

In 2002, I left my teaching position at New Vista to accept an assistant professorship at East Tennessee State University. A former student, an African American, who had been in my seventh grade class years before, contacted me during a return visit to the Midwest. Her reading had been at a primary level when she entered my class, and I had worked with her and several other students with reading problems after school. She had made dramatic progress, though our guidance department had predicted this student lacked the intelligence and home support to finish school. Later, my former student had asked me to be her mentor. Now she spoke of funding her high school education by working in a nursing home. In Standard American English, a linguistic code I had never heard her use before, she spoke of passing coursework and standardized tests and invited me to her high school graduation.

Later, over lunch, the student talked of plans for college, again in Standard American English. It occurred to me that during the years of schooling, this student must have gradually acquired Standard English as prescribed by our district's curriculum. Perhaps because she now experienced herself as successful, she found it fitting to encode messages in a dialect of success.

Receiving diplomas at that same graduation were over two dozen of my former students — some black, some white — young people I had been seriously worried about. They had found the courage within themselves to persevere against troubling odds. These hard-to-reach students also evidenced the dedication and competence of staff whom they had met along the way, personnel who had faced daunting odds in order to teach. Among the line of graduates was a young urban Appalachian woman, now 18, whom I had known as an intelligent, but very shy 13-year-old, a speaker of attenuated Appalachian English, whose comments in class discussion had been continually interrupted by the laughter of classmates. I had encouraged this student, but had wondered how she would fare in a school system that 'pushed out' so many Appalachians. Now, I was gratified to see her donning the yellow cord of an honour student. Family spirited her away after the ceremony, but I would have been interested to speak with her, both to congratulate her, and (I admit it) to satisfy my linguist's curiosity as to what dialect she would use.

This paper has dealt with linguistic accommodation among urban youth. Adolescents, Penelope Eckert (2000) reminds us, are apt to treat language much as they do clothing, trying it on, deciding what fits their budding sense of identity and discarding what doesn't fit. In the case of the African American student who had invited me to her graduation, Standard English may once have seemed like a verbal 'dress-for-success-suit' — a piece of linguistic attire no seventh grader from her neighbourhood was likely to need any time soon. But instead of throwing it away, she had hung it in her linguistic closet and years later she made the decision to wear it for the right occasion.

What does this mean for those awestruck enough by young people and their kaleidoscope of cultures to teach English? First of all, it is important to acknowledge that some teaching situations are by their nature difficult. Unusual obstacles mean that we may not see immediate results in our classrooms or on standardized tests. We must be patient and counsel those yapping 'accountability!' at our heels to be patient as well. If teaching equips people for life, then when we teach English, access to prestige codes, spoken and written, must be part of the curriculum. How else can we offer students escape from conditions that would otherwise circumscribe their lives? Adolescents are by nature resistors of the conventional, and we should not be surprised if students refuse to speak Standard English for days, months or years at a time. Particularly where students speak a non-standard variety natively, they may choose to do so at school as well. This can represent a way of enacting ethnic identity and resistance to school authority. Minority teenagers' preference for non-standard speech codes may be a way of responding to the experience of oppression from a wider culture.

Schools with more than one non-standard variety may present linguistic accom-

modation and not always to Standard English. I thought the causes of the linguistic accommodation at New Vista Middle School were multiple. It was an expression of solidarity on the part of the WAVE speakers with the African American classmates and bespoke an admiration of African American culture. It also evidenced a weakening of the Appalachians' ties with home language and culture. Accommodation may also have evidenced shame on the part of Appalachian teenagers, in a situation where they received little affirmation of their ethnicity. All speakers seemed to be using AAE as an anti-language to express frustration with the programme at New Vista. Linguistic accommodation may also have been used to render the WAVE speakers less conspicuous in a school where they sometimes felt unsafe and unwelcome.

It is difficult to know what to make of the WAVE students' complaints of 'racial harassment'. While WAVE speakers were never seriously injured in the course of the reported 'racial harassment', the mere fact that WAVE students perceived the problems in this way is of concern, and it is unfortunate that more was not done to make this minority within the school more comfortable. Inevitably, classrooms are influenced by the communities in which they are situated.

Much like a fossil record, linguistic variation maintains the history of a community. Linguistic accommodation is a natural phenomenon and is manifested differently in different places. Teachers can no more prevent its occurrence than they can stop pigeons from roosting on the gutters of an urban school. While the presence of linguistic accommodation should not be seen as a negative reflection on English teachers, it is important to teach students to control Standard English as it offers students a way out of impossible situations. Working with students to co-construct understandings of literature and language can encourage students to develop their individual voices and make day-to-day instruction interesting. But if students resist when taught prestige codes, and if they enact their distaste through anti-language and general lethargy, it is still our responsibility to teach them the culture's language of power. I suggest we persist.

Notes on contributor

ROSALIND RAYMOND GANN grew up in Brooklyn, New York where she attended James Madison High School and Brooklyn College. She received her Masters from the Smith College School for Social Work and practised clinical social work for 17 years. Later, she became an English teacher and reading specialist, working in inner city education. She holds a doctorate in literacy from the University of Cincinnati. She is now an Assistant Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at East Tennessee State University where she teaches reading education and reading linguistics.

Notes

1. To ensure confidentiality, the school is referred to by pseudonym, and neither the school district nor its host city is named.

2. Until recently, the preferred name for this variety was African American Vernacular English (AAVE). However, in the light of the growing body of literature in this variety, the term African American English is now preferred.
3. Certain stigmatized linguistic varieties are thought to convey upon their speakers the opposite of refinement — a kind of crude power.
4. A t-test run on the entire sample was not statistically significant; however, this was thought to be because high scores were cancelling out low scores.
5. At the time of the research, a two-year 'Let them Fly' programme, funded by the local board of health was in its second year at Project Arrow. The goals of this programme were bio-social rather than educational in nature, and it terminated in 2001.

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