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Critical reflections on the role of the sociolinguist in UK language debates

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Mark Lewis invites us to reconsider the theory of social change that underpins Labov's *principle of error correction* (PEC), which assumes that change will occur when researchers share their (privileged) linguistic knowledge with the wider public. This is a welcome invitation, for it opens up space for critical reflection on the role sociolinguists can play in public debates about language. As my use of the term *critical* suggests, I align with Lewis' position that we must relinquish Labov's (1982) quest for 'objectivity' in favour of critical reflexivity. This involves

interrogating our own positioning, interests and investments, the nature of the knowledge we produce, and how this relates to other sources of knowledge and opinion. In this spirit, I reflect on my own experiences as a sociolinguist who has made relatively modest attempts to intervene in UK debates about language, with questionable success. In doing so, I take up Lewis' call to incorporate a language ideological analysis into social-change efforts and to refocus attention on the material and institutional aspects of inequality.

My focus is on recent attempts by some UK schools to ban the use of local dialect in the classroom and encourage their pupils' parents to do the same at home, including in the area where I grew up, Teesside, northeast England. The rationale behind the schools' actions was the need to give the working-class pupils involved the best possible chance of educational, and later, employment success. These initiatives attracted widespread attention when they were reported in national newspapers (see e.g. Fricker 2013; Renaud-Komiya 2013; Williams 2013). In the conversations that followed, sociolinguists expressed consternation that negative and uninformed views about regional dialects were regaining currency despite forty years of scholarly efforts to demonstrate that these varieties are systematic, logical, and equal to 'standard English' (e.g. Trudgill 1975), as well as collaborations with educational practitioners on the design of teaching materials on language variation (see Cheshire 2005 for a review). As in past responses, the PEC approach seemed relevant. The letters sent home to parents by the schools (and reproduced in the media) were premised on a number of erroneous assumptions about language, including, for example, the idea that erasing regional dialect features from children's speech will help them to improve their writing. I had done research on children's language in Teesside that directly invalidated some of these assumptions. My role as a sociolinguist, then, in line with the PEC approach, was to highlight and 'correct' these mistaken beliefs. As part of this endeavor, I published an article in a national newspaper, *The Independent* (Snell 2013a). However, it quickly became clear that the sociolinguistic knowledge I had to offer did not resonate with all readers. Take, for example, the following comment that was posted to the online version of the article:

This article is, to use the author's words, unhelpful and damaging, and is typical of an academic's view. So you are a native of Teesside and still use the 'problem' words and phrases? Well that's all well and good, but not everyone can be a lecturer at King's College. Teesside is amongst the most deprived areas in the UK and as such most of the kids in school here today will find their lives defined by trying to get and hold onto jobs. You may find the words 'Gizit' and 'You's' to be perfectly acceptable but few employers will agree with you. I can assure you that the historic use of 'you' as a plural of 'thou' will be utterly lost on the small business owner who just wants to find decent staff for the shop floor. I can only pray that ... the Russell Group academics poke their heads into the real world from time to time. (Tom Carney, comment posted to *The Independent* website on 10 February 2013)

Criticisms like these were at least partly a product of the oversimplification involved in condensing my argument into less than 600 words of news copy, but they also raise important points about the wider politics of language debates. For example,

Tom Carney begins by drawing attention to my own privileged role in this debate as an academic at an elite university (King's College London), highlighting the point that '[t]here is no "view from nowhere", no gaze that is not positioned' (Irvine & Gal 2000:36). Evidently, members of the public see through claims for 'objectivity' and 'scientific detachment' (Labov 1982:166). I return briefly to this issue later, but in the main, I want to take up Tom Carney's central argument that the prescriptive teaching of 'standard English' is necessary to give working-class children access to employment opportunities (echoing the sentiments of the Teesside school's head teacher). This 'stock argument' (Blommaert 1999:10) has emerged repeatedly in debates about language in education in England over at least the last hundred years, prompting us to historicise the schools' actions. Crowley (2003) has highlighted the role of social class in these debates, describing the discursive processes through which spoken 'standard English' in England came to be defined, not in linguistic terms, but in terms of the social characteristics of a privileged group of speakers, as the language of 'the educated' and the 'civilised' (Crowley 2003:126; see also Milroy 1999; Coupland 2000). The central issue here is class, rather than race (as in the US case taken up by Lewis), but in both England and the US, it is clear that arguments about the relative value of different ways of speaking are really arguments about who gets to define what counts as authoritative usage. These arguments therefore cannot be settled solely in linguistic terms (Bourdieu 1977:652). Consequently, as Lewis points out, it is imperative that we focus less on individual beliefs about language and more on the ideologies that create hierarchies among speakers (see also Gal 2016:458–59). In the space remaining, I briefly outline why the ideological approach advocated for by Lewis has advantages over the PEC approach in relation to debates about regional dialects in UK schools.

First, and perhaps most obviously, linguists can demonstrate that stigmatised dialects of English are linguistically 'equal' to other varieties, but teachers, parents and pupils know very well that these varieties are not socially equal. Our efforts at linguistic error correction may thus appear not only as unhelpful but as disingenuous too, because they fail to acknowledge the social and political conditions under which a ban on local dialect makes sense to teachers (and to members of the public like Tom Carney). Before we can counter dangerous beliefs about language we first have to understand how they are socially produced and accepted as convincing and effective (Woolard 1998:10). Related to this, the second point is that an ideological approach seeks to reveal and challenge the 'stock arguments' that have perpetuated standard language ideology and the practices it engenders (such as banning local dialect at school). This includes the notion that speaking 'standard English' will help working-class children achieve employment success and social mobility. As already noted, a spoken 'standard' was discursively constructed in England as the language of the highest social classes (and consequently dialects were associated with the lower classes). When particular linguistic forms are ideologized as representative of particular types of people they may be further construed as depicting, quite naturally, the qualities conventionally associated with those people. Through

this ideological process of ‘iconization’ (Irvine & Gal 2000) so-called ‘standard’ forms have come to be understood as emblematic of intelligence, competence, eloquence, and superior moral character (and ‘nonstandard’ dialect forms of the converse). This iconic reading of language differences is reinforced by a process Irvine & Gal (2000) term *erasure*, through which facts inconsistent with the dominant ideology are rendered invisible. For example, working-class speakers who use forms prescribed as ‘standard’ may still be stigmatized as ‘nonstandard’ speakers from the ideological perspective of the middle-class listening subject (who disregards or perceives as anomalous the use of so-called ‘standard’ forms) (Flores & Rosa 2015:166; Lewis, this issue). The point is that even where working-class children are willing and able to change the way they speak, this may do little to alter the way they are perceived by others. This casts doubt on the social mobility argument and highlights instead the ideological processes through which educational policies and prescriptions on ‘standard English’ function as ‘gate-keeping mechanisms that reproduce both the experience and the social effect of stratification and inequality’ (Gal 2016:459).

Finally, the PEC approach is premised on there being a spoken ‘standard’ against which ‘Teesside English’ or ‘African American Vernacular English’ (or any other ‘nonstandard’ variety) can be evaluated. While there are benefits to this approach, given that schools generally work with the same normative categories, it also reinforces these categories and associated power structures (Pietikäinen 2016:268; Lewis, this issue). In contrast, scholars working within a language ideological framework treat categories such as ‘standard English’ as ideological processes rather than linguistic fact, thereby minimizing the risk that our work be interpreted as reifying these categories. Further, once we move away from the notion that discrete, bounded varieties of English exist as sociolinguistic ‘realities’, it becomes evident that working-class children’s repertoires include forms that are conventionally associated with schools’ prescribed ‘standards’ alongside local dialect forms and a range of other semiotic resources (Snell 2013b); however, again, this fact tends to be erased in debates about language in education because ideologies of language and class have rendered working-class speech as naturally deficient.

In summary, sociolinguists’ attempts to correct mistaken beliefs about regional dialects using ‘objective’ linguistic facts have ignored (often deliberately) the broader sociohistorical context within which discourses of working-class linguistic deficit have developed. I have argued, in line with Lewis, that it is more productive to investigate the ideological processes that create linguistic hierarchies, and that we should also interrogate our own positioning in relation to these processes and to the other social actors involved. Tom Carney highlighted my privileged position in the debate as an academic, but I am also someone from a working-class background who has a strong sense of identification with many of the children I have researched, and this also influences the ‘knowledge’ I produce. Lewis’ critical perspective further refocuses our attention on the ways in which language is implicated in gate-keeping encounters that routinely reproduce material inequalities (whether

related to race or class position). These include the educational prescriptions on spoken ‘standard English’ discussed above, as well as, for example, class (or other forms of) bias embedded in curricula documents and high-stakes examinations (see e.g. Johnson 2015). Lewis argues persuasively that too narrow a focus on misconceptions about language distracts from these kinds of issues and thus from the ‘material consequences of representations of language’ (Lewis, this issue, p. 338; see also Block 2014:104). At the same time, if we want to intervene practically in areas such as schooling in line with a social justice agenda, accounts of ideological struggle and critical reflection may not suffice (since schools and other professional institutions are unlikely to wholly embrace these). This is where the article strikes a weaker note, for the final suggestions on how to practically overcome the limitations of the PEC do not live up to the strength of the critique (inevitably, perhaps, given the space constraints and the complexity of the problem). Needless to say, there are no easy solutions, but I end with some tentative suggestions specific to the issue of language variation in UK schools.

A first step is to find new ways of collaborating with educational practitioners. One model is the joint data session, where researchers and practitioners work together to analyse research data (see e.g. Rampton, Maybin, & Roberts 2015). This might involve sharing with teachers recordings of children’s interactions, thus giving them the opportunity to see working-class pupils’ speech in new ways and also to share with us their perspectives on language, policy, and pedagogy. Related to this, it would seem productive to consider how our work on language variation in the classroom might connect with educational research on talk-intensive (or ‘dialogic’) pedagogies (Lefstein & Snell 2014). There is now a growing body of research in this area to suggest that participating in rich and cognitively challenging classroom discourse can improve educational outcomes for working-class children (e.g. Resnick, Asterhan & Clarke 2015; Alexander 2017). School initiatives to ban local dialect work against these pedagogies to the extent that they create an environment in which some pupils may feel less confident in oral expression, especially where teachers overtly correct pupils’ use of dialect forms (Cheshire 1982; Godley, Carpenter, & Werner 2007). If pupils are reluctant to contribute to whole-class discussion, they will miss out on the dialogic exchanges necessary for learning. This is one area where educational professionals may welcome our interventions, and where such interventions might contribute to substantive social change.

In closing, I would like to thank Mark Lewis and the journal’s editor, Jenny Cheshire, for (re)opening this important debate and for encouraging us to confront the complexity of the social problems we aim to address.

NOTE

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The (in)significance of facts in sociolinguistic engagement

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Critical reflexivity seems expedient in a robust, burgeoning field such as sociolinguistics. Assumptions, principles, and approaches nurture implicit and explicit disciplinary canonization based on our cognitive framing and background experience—and these tenets deserve to be scrutinized judiciously.¹ In fact, I have to admit that some of my own research unwittingly contributed to the construction of a set of 'sociolinguistic myths' about the development and status of African American Language (Wolfram 2007) as well as some questionable assumptions about the nature of social engagement (Wolfram 1998; Wolfram, Reaser, & Vaughn 2008). I therefore welcome this critique of the *principle of error correction* as a theory underlying social change. The study of language in its social context is historically embedded in an ideological struggle that pits 'popular beliefs' against 'expert authority', thus making it vulnerable to overstatement and overgeneralization—by the sociolinguistic intelligentsia as well as those speaking for popular culture.

At first glance, the oft-cited trifecta of principles guiding sociolinguistic engagement—(a) the *principle of error correction* (PEC), (b) the *principle of debt incurred*,