

January 2006

# Vernacular Literacy

Peter Elbow

*University of Massachusetts - Amherst*, [elbow@english.umass.edu](mailto:elbow@english.umass.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.umass.edu/eng\\_faculty\\_pubs](https://scholarworks.umass.edu/eng_faculty_pubs)



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Elbow, Peter, "Vernacular Literacy" (2006). *English Department Faculty Publication Series*. 6.

Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.umass.edu/eng\\_faculty\\_pubs/6](https://scholarworks.umass.edu/eng_faculty_pubs/6)

This is brought to you for free and open access by the English at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Department Faculty Publication Series by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@library.umass.edu](mailto:scholarworks@library.umass.edu).

---DRAFT---

[I'd be happy to get responses and suggestions about this essay. I will be using some form of these thoughts in a book I'm writing about speech and writing]

## Vernacular Literacy

Peter Elbow 5/07

### Dante and Vulgar Eloquence

In the early 1300s, Dante wrote a small radical book. He argued that the vernacular spoken language of his region of Italy was “nobler” than the Latin used for any serious writing at the time. He bluntly emphasized that this vernacular was “low,” calling it the language of children and illiterate women. The low spoken vernacular was, of course, a *version of Latin*--but Latin as it had radically evolved in people's mouths over ten or more centuries since the classical period of Rome. By Dante's time there had developed around Europe a wide array of different vernaculars--“vulgar Latins” as they are technically called.

In writing his radical celebration of the vernacular, Dante used Latin, for he wanted to reach serious “literate” readers. His title was *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, but *vulgari* in Latin, doesn't mean *vulgar* in our sense of the word--it means simply *ordinary*--and in this case (in the genitive case) *of the ordinary people*. His title can be translated: *the eloquence of the language of ordinary people*.

In a sense, that's the theme of my essay--which is really nothing but an extended rumination on the fact that a word that used to mean “ordinary” now means “disreputable, coarse, or obscene.” More precisely, my essay is about how one kind of *literacy* in our the culture--what counts as a proper or acceptable language for writing--is at war with the language of ordinary people. I'm arguing that our culture's version of proper literacy works against those without privilege and against the spoken language and the linguistic sophistication that everyone carries in their bodies.

When Dante much later wrote his masterpiece, *The Divine Comedy*, he finally used the vernacular language he'd celebrated earlier--the language of children and nursemaids widely deemed illiterate. Many scholars of the time derided his decision to use this low language for the highest religious and philosophical epic (which many call the greatest poem of all time). But his huge poem became a founding document for the language now called Italian.

But it needed many centuries for this evolution to happen--and for the other vernacular vulgar versions of spoken Latin (French, Spanish, Portuguese etc.) finally to become accepted as literate languages. What I want to call attention to is how the cultures of these new upstart national languages (along with English)--forgetting their “illiterate” roots--now somehow have the gall to turn around and try to exclude our present day vernacular spoken languages and call them illiterate and unfit for writing.

My paper is part of a larger project I've been working on for a while about bringing more of speaking and spoken language to writing. Two years ago, I talked at 4Cs about how to make more use of speech in the early drafting stages of writing. Last year I talked about how to use

speaking for the late revising stages of writing. (I've put these two talks into a single essay, "Enlisting Speech for Writing," that can be downloaded from my UMass website, <[works.bepress.com/peter\\_elbow/](http://works.bepress.com/peter_elbow/)>.

In those talks, I was not directly fighting against our cultural assumption of a single standard for the language and grammar of "correct" or "proper" written English--what I call "proper literacy." I was exploring ways to use spoken language for writing even when final drafts must end up in the language of proper literacy. My stance was pragmatic. This essay is more speculative: I'm fighting against the deeply ingrained assumption of a single standard for proper literacy.

## The Problem

Here's what we already know about speech and writing. We live in a culture with a mainstream privileged dialect--a mainstream version of "standard" English--and lots of other dialects. Because the privileged or prestige version of written English is the only one accepted for careful serious writing, our culture's version of literacy works against those without power or privilege. In this way, attitudes about language can carry racism and classism. For example, most white people accept that they aren't supposed to think that people are stupid if they have a darker skin. Yet many white people feel comfortably considering someone stupid if he speaks a language like African American English (AAE). The same dynamic tends to function in the case of languages stigmatized by class rather than race. Because of these pervasive conceptions of literacy, speakers of "wrong" versions of English often have a harder time feeling comfortable writing. To write, they must use what they often feel as an alien language--even an enemy language.

**Footnote.** Patricia Irvine and Nan Elsasser report on their research at the College of the Virgin Islands:

[The students' initial] reluctance to write [was] directly attributable to the denigration of their native language and their conviction that they do not in fact possess a true language but speak a bastardized version of English. It is difficult if not impossible to write without a language, and it is emotionally draining to attempt to develop voice and fluency in an education system that has historically denigrated one's own language" (85/406).

But in their classrooms, the researchers invited students to read and write in their highly stigmatized Caribbean Creole vernacular English and found these consequences:

Both remedial and honors students wrote more, and wrote more carefully and convincingly, in the Creole-centered courses [and also did better on exit exams on the grammar of standard English,] than did our students in the English-centered classes. (144 ?page number in Shor volume]

We already know this (and I've published essays and spoken at 4Cs about the benefits of inviting speakers of Black English to write in their spoken language.)

Now in this essay, I want to reframe this problem and bring an additional lens to bear. Instead of focusing on privileged vs nonprivileged language, I want to focus on *writing* vs. *speech*. I'll argue that proper literacy is not just at war with nonprivileged dialects; it's at war with spoken language itself--*even* with privileged or mainstream spoken English.

By around the age of four, every human child who isn't brain damaged or left in the woods to be raised by wolves, has mastered the essential structures of a native language (or

two). Every human who learns a language from infancy possesses a rich, complex, intricate, complete, and rule-governed language. The linguist Steven Pinker puts it this way:

A preschooler's tacit knowledge of grammar is more sophisticated than the thickest style manual or the most state-of-the-art computer language system. . . . The complexity of language, from the scientist's point of view, is part of our biological birthright; it is not something that parents teach their children or something that must be elaborated in school. (6)

It happens that certain languages that children learn in this way are stigmatized and called primitive or broken or mere slang (e.g. AAE, Spanglish, Hawai'ian "pidgin"--more accurately named Hawai'ian Creole English). But

There are Stone Age societies, but there is no such thing as a Stone Age language . . . . The Kivunjo construction [that corresponds to our dative] fits entirely inside the verb, which has seven prefixes and suffixes, two moods, and fourteen tenses; the verb agrees with its subject, its object, and its benefactive nouns, each of which comes in sixteen genders. . . . [T]he complex Cherokee pronoun system seems especially handy. It distinguishes among "you and I," "another person and I," "several other people and I," and "you, one or more other persons, and I," which English crudely collapses into the all-purpose pronoun *we*. [Pinker. "Chatterboxes" N].

AAE has a richer more complex tense-and-aspect system than mainstream English.

Curiously, the one language that every human masters--even the privileged child--somehow turns out in our culture to be considered unfit for writing. Anyone who wants to write has to use a dialect that's different from what he or she mastered. For some (as in my case), the differences relatively small--though I found them confusing. "The very fact that [prescriptive rules for correct writing] have to be drilled shows that they are alien to the natural workings of the language system" (Pinker 384). For others who grew up with in certain nonmainstream versions of English, the differences are striking--and even more confusing. To compound the problem, people whose native language is furthest from correct written English are usually given the worst schools.

## Definitions

I know my claim is arguable--that proper literacy is at war with spoken language itself--even privileged or mainstream spoken English. I'll give support for it, but first I need to define some notoriously vague and vexed terms: *spoken language*, *written language*, and *literacy*.

Strictly speaking, there is no difference at all between spoken and written language. That is, *any* kind of language can be spoken from the mouth or written by hand, and linguists have worked with huge bodies of recorded spoken and written language to show the vast overlap. Still, the terms *spoken language* and *written language* can serve as useful shorthand terms to distinguish two kinds of human language that differ in interesting and important ways. (The linguist who probably did the most authoritative research on the overlap between spoken and written language, Douglas Biber, nevertheless uses the terms in this shorthand way in a recent overview of all the research on the complex relations between speech and writing.)

*Spoken language* is a useful shorthand for the language that people start speaking and internalizing from infancy; the language whose main structures people master by age four or five; the language that we speak most spontaneously and comfortably in conditions of safety and confidence; a language that has complex and intricate grammatical rules that people follow without any awareness of them. This complex language is what comes out of our mouths without planning when we have a thought or feeling we want to communicate in conditions of safety and comfort--and the language we sometimes use in talking to ourselves inside our heads. It differs, of course, from the language of the grammar handbooks.

**Footnote.** Of course, there are some complications and blurred lines here. Sometimes a child acquires a *second* dialect or language so deeply and thoroughly--especially at an early age--that it counts as native. It comes equally easily and naturally without planning or monitoring in conditions of safety or intimacy. We see tiny examples of this blurring all the time. As a child I used to say *Mom--me and Denny are going over to his house*. My parents seem to have stamped out this construction well enough that it doesn't pop out any more. However I sometimes find myself blurting *Denny and me are going . . .* How about Hillary Clinton saying *the issue with which I am most deeply involved*? She said it fluently in a free give-and-take dialogue--not a prepared speech--but I suspect it's not the grammar that comes out most freely and naturally without monitoring in conditions of complete safety. We can't draw hard and fast lines about details of what's native and not native. George Steiner convincingly claims that he has three native spoken languages.

*Standard written English (SWE)*. Many varieties of English are written and published. I'm not referring to all of them with this term--not even to everything published in *mainstream* books and magazines. I'm referring only to one slice of mainstream writing--but an incredibly important and powerful slice: "correct edited written English." When people champion Standard Written English, they sometimes call it "*proper* literacy" or "*literate* writing." Some linguists label it the "grapholect." To describe it more fully, I'll call on the linguists, Walt Wolfram, Carolyn Adger and Donna Christian:

[It] tends to be based on the written language of established writers and is typically codified in English grammar texts. It is perpetuated to a large extent in formal institutions such as schools, by those responsible for English language education. (10)

They don't actually call it "written English"--no doubt because there are so many written Englishes--and spoken Englishes. They call it *Formal Standard English*--or *Prescriptive Standard English*. The important point for me is their observation that "There are virtually no speakers who consistently speak formal standard English as prescribed in the grammar books" (10). (Halliday also distinguishes spoken and written language in this way--while also noting that any kind of language *can* be spoken or written. In his account of the difference, he focuses on written language as typically *monitored*, and spoken language typically not monitored.)

*Standard spoken English*. People commonly talk about it, but it's hard to nail down. It's not the English of the grammar books since virtually no one speaks that language. It's the language that comes out of the mouths of mainstream or privileged people when they actually *speak* in comfortable conversations--that is, when they are *not* trying to "speak correctly" and follow grammar book rules. This comfortable speech uses the language that mainstream people have been internalizing from age three and four.

But why call it “standard” if it often violates the rules in grammar books? The justification is largely negative, for this brand of spoken English is almost impossible to define positively:

If native speakers from Michigan, New England, and Arkansas avoid the use of socially stigmatized grammatical structures such as “double negatives” (e.g., *They didn't do nothing*), different verb agreement patterns (e.g., *They's okay*), and different irregular verb forms (e.g. *She done it*), there is a good chance they will be considered standard English speakers . . . . In this way, informal standard English is defined negatively. In other words if a person's speech is free of structures that can be identified as nonstandard, then it is considered standard. (12)

Unlike people in many other cultures such as in England,

The basic contrast in North America exists between negatively valued dialects and those without negative value, not between those with prestige value and those without. . . . North Americans in commenting on different dialects of American English, are much more likely to make comments about nonstandardness (“That person doesn't talk correct English”) than they are to comment on standardness (e.g., “That person really speaks correct English”). (12)

It's as though mainstream speakers walk around saying, “I don't know much about standard spoken English, but I know it when I don't hear it.” The standard is a wide *range* or *plurality* of different Englishes. (There's a lesson here for writing.)

Of course some people do learn to speak something very close to “formal standard prescriptive English”—and they can speak it fluently without having to think or plan or monitor their words. We see this in some faculty members or public speakers who lecture a lot. If the conditions are right, anyone *can* gain automatic control over any language—in any medium, speaking or writing. If we look at different *registers* of English, it's fair to say that *many* people become fairly automatic in more than one register. But when people become fluent in more formal registers that are far from comfortable conversation, it's usually through *learning*--whereas what distinguishes natural spoken language is the fact that it's learned by *acquisition*. (See Krashen for classic explorations of learning vs. acquisition.)

*Literacy*. This word has a far greater range of meanings than *spoken* and *written* language. In effect, the bar for literacy is continually raised. Literacy was originally considered the mere ability to put spoken language into writing--where spelling and grammar didn't matter. I call this *vernacular* or *vulgar literacy*. It's a kind of literacy I want to celebrate. When I hear people say, “But his writing is so *illiterate*,” I say to myself, “That's a contradiction in terms. If it's writing, it's literacy.”

But of course say that kind of thing all the time in our culture and it signals a “new” meaning for literacy. The bar has been raised so that literacy now commonly means the ability to produce not just written language but *correct* written language. “Literate writing” must conform to the spelling and grammar conventions of revised edited written English. I call this *proper literacy*.

And the literacy story doesn't stop here. The bar keeps going up. In recent decades, there's emerged almost an industry exploring the notion of literacy as a richer and more

interesting concept. There's a field called "New Literacy Studies"--spearheaded by scholars who are called "The London Group." There are now whole academic departments and programs with the title *Literacy Studies*. The central point in all this work can be summed up in a useful oversimplification: Every genre and situation and discourse community has its own literacy--it's own complex set of conventions of what's required before your language is acceptable. Also, this scholarship on literacy tends to have a social-justice edge:

Stop deluding people into believing that they're literate if they can read and write right. There are always other requirements sometimes involving race and class. Stop pretending that you can catapult people into middle class "good behavior" with "literacy campaigns" that teach reading and writing.

So this line of thinking leads inevitably to the concept of *multiple literacies*. To take an illustrative example, you be "illiterate" among rap poets if you were too "literate" in the traditional sense. The word *literacy* has gone through a common linguistic process: after it was used metaphorically as in "visual literacy" (which has nothing to do with letters or written words), this metaphor began to feel literal. Everyone now talks of "scientific literacy" and "math literacy" without a sense that they are using a metaphor.

These recent literacy scholars have done important and useful work--with which I have no essential disagreements. (For an overview, see a useful collection: *Literacy: A Handbook*, ..Rose. But sometimes I wonder whether it's useful to stretch the word so far. Even one of the prime scholars, Brian Street, argues that since the word literacy means "letters," it's not so useful to apply it to pictures and other nonverbal phenomena [xx]. In fact, if we use a word for *writing* to talk about skill with *images* or *numbers*--sometimes even to talk about any competence at all--I wonder if it doesn't actually reinforce a harmful bias in our culture: "You are stupid and incompetent unless you are good at writing.")

So Yes, there are multiple literacies--many of them subtle and hidden; literacy is very complex. But I want to focus back on the two old fashioned meanings: *vernacular/vulgar literacy* (producing writing) and *proper literacy* (producing "correct" writing). I'm interested in vernacular literacy because I think it's undervalued; and proper literacy because it's overvalued.

So the goal of this essay is to celebrate the concept of vernacular literacy; but to get there, I need to focus on proper literacy: the ability to get written language to conform to the conventions of correct revised written English.

In a long essay about writing and literacy in the largest sense, it might seem odd to focus on the literacy of the *surface dimension* of writing--and ignoring the more substantive and sophisticated dimensions of literacy that the new literacy scholars have so richly explored (e.g, what is said and how it's organized and rhetorically presented). But my reason for narrowing my focus is virtually the same as the reason why new literacy scholars widened theirs. That is, literacy as correct spelling and grammar has tended to dominate our culture and cloud people's minds. Literacy in this sense is linked with deep power--even with magic. *Grammar* and *glamour* are actually the same word. (In the Middle Ages, you could escape hanging for a serious crime if you could say the Lord's Prayer in Latin.) The new scholars and I are both saying, "Let's explore how literacy *really* functions." They're looking at how literacy really functions in the form of various linguistic features and skills actually required for acceptance and

membership in various communities. In contrast, I'm looking at how literacy really functions an assumption deeply rooted in people's minds in our culture.

For surface literacy is often *more* important than substance when we look at how readers actually read. The surface is what people tend to see first in writing; or rather they see the surface first *if* they see something wrong or different about it. So too with speech: we notice an accent or dialect first if it's "other"--or skin color or hair or clothing. People often have more psychic energy tied up in surface than in substance. They can be more intolerant of *language* they disapprove of (grammar, spelling, dialect, accent) of than *ideas* they disapprove of. Surface is often linked to identity (as into skin color): "who I am," "who they are," "who is 'one of us' or in our 'family'."

### **A Long-Running "Literacy Campaign": Against Spoken Language**

We can see most clearly how proper literacy is at war with spoken language if we look at school writing and academic discourse.

*School writing.* Teachers usually insist on more conservative linguistic standards for student writing than they use and accept for the published writing of colleagues. Wolfram, Adger, and Christian describe a "written language style that a student must eventually learn . . ." (129-30). In order to use this style, they say that students should not write

--"a lot of trouble" but rather "a good deal of difficulty" (129)

--They should avoid the first person and not write, "I find soccer to be very popular," but rather "Soccer seems to be very popular" or "It seems that soccer is very popular."

Note that the warning is not against *stigmatized* dialects of spoken English; it's against mainstream privileged spoken English. This helps explain the widely noted fact that most comments by teachers on student writing are corrections of language. Of course these are not all corrections of language that would have been right for speech; many would be wrong for speaking too. The point is that when students try to stretch themselves into a language they are not comfortable with and don't know in their bones, they create all kinds of grammatical tangles. (The Haswells looked at eight hundred pages of evaluative teacher comments and found that two-thirds of them were about how well the student produced "a conventionally correct or stylistically approved text" [4]. See also Connors and Lunsford who looked at written comments on three hundred papers. Most focus on correcting and editing--not just for error but for "deviation from algorithms and often rigid 'rhetorical' rules" [217].)

Consider also what happens when we call a student into our office to talk over a horribly tangled, clotted essay. "But what are you trying to say here?" we ask. The student very often blurts her main point in speech--usually clear--often fine for writing. But the student's struggle to use *written language* for an essay had somehow made unavailable to her the language she had the best command over: spoken language.

Second person constructions ("you") are an interesting marker of the difference between the dialect for school writing and normal spoken language. Most teachers discourage second person constructions in serious school essays. Whether the focus is on the functional audience of teacher or the fictional audience of "educated reader in the field," students meant to learn not to write, "In your lecture last week, you contested . . .," nor even "Because of our cultural



norms, you probably assume . . . .” In contrast, academics readily write in the second person to students in textbooks, and sometimes refer to readers as “you” in academic essays. So students are in a bind: they are constantly told to keep their audience in mind and write to it--yet they are also discouraged from actually writing to readers. They must learn the tricky and unnatural skill of writing to an audience (often the teacher) while not *syntactically addressing* anyone at all.

*Academic writing.* What about the language academics themselves use for academic publication? We too are supposed to avoid the language of speech. Consider these changes that copy editors of academic journals made to some of my manuscripts on their way into print:

--*having no sense of . . .* was “corrected” to . . . *lacking a sense of . . . .*

--*It was a topic I wanted to learn about* was corrected to *The topic was one I wanted to learn about.*

--*kept giving more* was corrected to *continued to give more*

--*It was a topic I wanted to learn about* was corrected to *The topic was one I wanted to learn about*

Note that there was nothing *wrong* with my original locutions--nothing particularly colloquial or low in register. And they didn’t eliminate “I.” So what were the copy editors doing? They were *removing the taint of speech*. They judged their corrected versions more appropriate for academic writing *because* the language would not comfortably come out of anyone’s mouth--not even of a privileged person speaking her native language. “*The topic was one I wanted to learn about.*” Who would ever say that unless they were trying--consciously or not--to reach for something different from idiomatic speech? I love how tiny and trivial some of these corrections are because they illustrate so flagrantly this fear of the taint of speech.

In short, the prose that teachers require of students for important essays, and the prose we mostly write for academic publication, make up a dialect or register or linguistic code that’s inimical to the language of speech. Most teachers feel it’s their duty to teach students to master this kind of prose--even if it’s a bit restrictive. (I can’t help being amused by an important dimension of the MLA budget. The profit is small on most of their books, but their *Style Manual* and *Handbook* sell massively and go through edition after edition--yielding a hefty profit. It’s not so far wrong to say that this scholarly organization lives off of the anxiety of members about getting something wrong.)

*Objection:*

*Come on! Teachers and academic journals aren’t so stuffy any more.*

I agree that many teachers aren’t so linguistically conservative any more, and much academic writing has become adventuresome--some of it notably experimental. In fact my larger argument is that written language is changing--and fast--even in the academy. But it would be a mistake to underestimate the grip of proper literacy in the academy. Given the progressive attitudes toward language that are most often voiced in our journals and in CCCC sessions, most of you may forget the narrow restrictive language standards for “good correct writing” used by many faculty members in the schools and across the college and university departments (especially teachers not in composition).

In fact, instead of retreating at this point, I will escalate my claim. It's *not only* students and academics who feel they must avoid speech-inflected language for serious writing. I'll argue that our culture--the part of our culture that I'll call the "culture of literacy"--leads most people to feel they must avoid spoken language when they want to write most anything they'd call serious or "literate." They tend to feel this even if they speak the mainstream privileged brand of spoken English, and even they have successfully finished schooling.

*Objection again:*

*This is absurd. Look at the informal and colloquial language currently published all over the place--even in The New York Times and The New Yorker. We see lots of written language infused with spoken registers of English in publications of high prestige and wide circulation. John McWhorter takes an entire book to describe the colloquialization of published writing. He puts his charge in his title: Doing Our Own Thing: The Degradation of Language and Music and Why We Should, Like, Care.*

Yes, yes, I accept this point. I myself have been busily collecting samples that would seem to refute my own ambitious claim that serious writing outside the academy is at war with speech. *The New Yorker* is famous for its editorial attention to style, correctness, and taste, yet listen to this sentence I copied down from there: "Which only shows how far things have sunk." What interests me is not so much the violation of correct grammar--the way it's an in-your-face sentence fragment and (remarkably) begins a new paragraph. What's important to me is the larger point: the language is trying to sound like blurted speech.

And consider another *New Yorker* sentence. Paul Krugman is explaining what economists mean by the term "money." He writes as follows: "Currency--pieces of green paper with pictures of dead presidents on them--is money, and so are bank deposits on which you can write checks." (And he's not "writing down." His *New Yorker* readers are not naive about his topic--especially those who choose to read a weekly column devoted to economics.)

I love Krugman's sentence. I think it's good *because* he uses the language and syntax of comfortable speech. He exploits the way spoken syntax interrupts itself and revels in blunt, concrete low-register language. My larger project is to help *more* people write sentences like that--by helping them feel freer to call on the resources of their spoken language.

But I'm engaged in that project *because* I think we still have a very long way to go. When financial planners, doctors, lawyers, engineers, social workers, or members of city councils are writing memos, reports, and grant proposals--even letters to clients--I don't think many of them feel they are supposed to write sentences like Krugman's--or many of Maureen Dowd's or Tom Friedman's--or indeed the chatty sentences that William Safire sometimes uses to argue for linguistic conservatism. Few citizens writing a report feel they should write language like Krugman uses when he talks about green paper with dead presidents on it.

So, odd as it sounds, I'm arguing that these sentences written in prestige magazines and newspapers by prominent writers like Krugman, Dowd, Friedman, and Safire are *not*--or not yet--an accurate picture of what counts as proper writing. Not at least *in the minds of most people who don't already define themselves as writers*. After all, why should they feel they can enjoy using speech-inflected language like Krugman does, when they have been so consistently warned against it?

For school is the doorway to careful or important writing, and school is where the nonspeech standards are taught and enforced. Most writing teachers don't feel they've "taught

writing"--nor do most biologists feel they've "insisted on good writing" in their biology course (as we hope they will do)--*unless* they insist on correct edited proper English. Most people don't feel they have "learned to write" unless they have mastered this somewhat formal restricted dialect needed for school and college essays. When people on the job make a bad grammatical mistake or write something badly tangled or unclear, someone is likely to say, "What did they teach you in school, anyway"

Consider this advice from Joseph Williams' *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*--a hugely influential book that's gone through more than a dozen editions and widely used in business. Here's his problem sentence: *There is no need for our further study of this problem.* And his solution: *We need not study this problem further.* (42) This is a good clean sentence (though slightly timid and lacking any rhythm). What's important to note, however, is how it runs away from spoken language. What's wrong with *We don't have to study this problem any more?* That would be more natural--and perfectly correct. No violations and the register is not "low." It's just plain and direct, and it respects speech. Who would ever utter *We need not study this problem further.* My claim is that this kind of advice leads people--even people who speak the prestige version of normal spoken English--to feel they can't use their own natural inborn language for writing.

Deborah Brandt in her classic study of *Literacy in American Lives* found that

"[A]cross the generations, school-based writing was widely associated with pain, belittlement, and perplexity. (164)

Many people took pride in calling themselves an 'avid reader' or 'quite a reader' or 'always reading.' Yet there was a reticence among the people I spoke with--including a well-established, published poet--to regard themselves as writers, despite avid energy in their pursuit of writing. (159-60)

*Objection again.*

*The internet has changed all this. Look at all the bloggers who write almost every day.*

And again I reply Yes. Things are changing. Most of those bloggers have probably come to feel at home writing. But a huge proportion of people do *not* feel comfortable writing: even privileged people who grew up with the mainstream version of spoken English that's closest to proper writing--and who were successful in school and college. Indeed it's many of the skilled and well educated people who worry most. Consider these words from Linda Christiansen, an English teacher and English language coordinator in the schools:

For years I've played word cop on myself. I stop what I'm saying to think "Objective or subjective case? Do I need I or me here? Hmmm. There's a lay coming up. What word can I substitute for it? Recline?"

And I've studied this stuff. After all I've been an English teacher for almost 20 years. . . . The problem is that every time I pause, I stop the momentum of my thinking. I'm no longer pursuing content, no longer engaged in trying to persuade or entertain or clarify. Instead I'm pulling Warriner's or Mrs. Delaney out of my head and trying to figure out how to say something." (142)

The fact that correct literate writing calls on language and syntax that's different from people's spoken language often harms the quality of writing even by many mainstream speakers who are well schooled. Because they are so often nervous about using the right grammar and language, they often stop and check the spelling or worry, for instance, about whether to write ##### or #####. And it's not just correct spelling and grammar they usually feel is needed--but also language that's "better." To put my argument bluntly, the gap between people's spoken language and syntax and the language needed for serious writing alienates most people from writing.

### *Objection.*

*Of course most people aren't comfortable writing, but that's not because of the language that's called for; it's because serious writing simply asks for more care and precision. Writing asks us to struggle for better thinking, more effective organization, and clearer sentences than we need when we speak comfortably.*

True enough. But if that were the only problem with writing, people would have the following feeling: *Writing is a struggle; sometimes almost agony. But still I feel at home with the language and syntax I have to use when I'm engaging in this struggle.* This is actually how I feel--finally--because I've learned to use my spoken language for all early and middle drafts, and even much revising. Some of you feel it. But I'll bet that many of you do not. It's very hard to feel at home in writing if you have to use a language and syntax that's different from the rich intricate spoken language you *are* at home with--the language that comes to your mouth without trying. We've always known this was true for speakers of nonmainstream versions of English--especially stigmatized versions. But I'm insisting it's true for speakers of mainstream standard English. We lose out on some good writing from lots of people who don't write.

### **Propriety**

The demand for correct writing is one of deepest and most pervasive ways that a culture tries to instill "propriety." (Bordieu and Foucault like to explore this dimension of "civilization.") What's interesting--and what strikes deeper into the psyche--is when people feel that propriety requires them to control how they *speak*--sometimes even in casual conversation with family or friends: to curb eruptions of the tongue, to curb bodily vociferousness and spontaneity. I've been arguing that our culture of literacy can alienate people from writing because they cannot use the rich, intricate, spoken language that they know mostly deeply in their bones. What about when a culture of propriety says we cannot use the language in our bones even for *speaking*?

Every English teacher who strikes up a conversation with a stranger on a bus or plane knows about the widespread fear of an uncontrolled tongue. I call it "propriety anxiety." Once we say we teach English, they say "I'd better watch my tongue." This anxiety is easier to understand once we notice that you often can't win if you want to speak correctly. If you stumble into an uncertainty about a usage and look up the rule in a handbook, the answer is usually a rule for *writing*. "Grammar rules" are predominantly rules for writing. But then once certain nonspeech conventions get accepted for writing, somehow things get turned around and propriety conventions tell us that good speech should be like good writing. (No matter

how fluently Hillary Clinton came up with *the issue with which I am most deeply involved*, we can be sure there was an impulse for propriety at work--consciously or not. She was *avoiding* normal and acceptable spoken language.

Here's another reason why the desire to speak properly inevitably breeds language anxiety. The grammar of English is in an ambiguous hybrid condition. Back in the good old days (say, 1000 AD), when people spoke *true, real* (Old) English, they used a language like German or Latin where word *endings* or inflections did most of the grammatical work--not word *order*. But in our present fallen hybrid English, word *order* does most of the work. Most of our verb inflections are gone--e.g, *goeth, goest*. All we have left is *s* for third person singular--*he goes*. (Poor little *s* has a lot on its shoulders, for we also use it to indicate plurals--and possession too.)

And yet some inflections are left and are meant to take control of sentence grammar. For example, we still use endings to distinguish *who* and *whom*. But decisions about which one to use are often ambiguous.

- ⇒ Should we go with pure word order? If so, *who* naturally goes before the verb, and we say *The candidate who he voted for*. This is idiomatic, mainstream spoken English. It's the grammar of mainstream prestige groups in comfortable conversation.
- ⇒ Or should we decide on the basis of with word endings (inflections) and ignore word order? If so, we say *The candidate whom he voted for*. This is the grammar demanded by handbooks and required for serious writing. But it's pretty stilted and unidiomatic for speech. Except that some people will call you uneducated or stupid for not using it.

Like I said: you can't win.

Because the genius of English grammar is now largely word order, we tend to put *me* after verbs--not *I*. Still we have the "true grammar" rule (based on word endings or inflections) that says put *I* after all forms of the verb *to be*. So even though it's absurd to say "Woe is I" (the title of an entertaining book about correct grammar), nevertheless that is the correct form. If you say *It's me*, "cultured" people will give you a hard time. Spoken English is always under pressure from propriety and written English.

Yet (and this is the kicker), *prestige* folks will look down on you for being "too correct." If you really care about propriety, you probably know that you are in danger of ridicule for getting things "too right." Consider this delicious passage from Fowler's long entry on split infinitives (in his monumental *Modern English Usage*):

1. Those who neither know nor care [whether they split infinitives] are the vast majority, & are a happy folk, to be envied by most of the minority classes; "to really understand" comes readier to their lips & pens than "really to understand", they see no reason why they should not say it (small blame to them, seeing that reasons are not their critics' strong point), & they do say it, to the discomfort of some among us, but not to their own.

2. To the second class, those who do not know but do care, who would as soon be caught putting their knives in their mouths as splitting an infinitive but have hazy notions of what constitutes that deplorable breach of etiquette, this article is chiefly

addressed. These people betray by their practice that their aversion to the split infinitive springs not from instinctive good taste, but from tame acceptance of the misinterpreted opinions of others; for they will subject their sentences to the queerest distortions, all to escape imaginary split infinitives. (558)

The key, says Fowler, is “instinctive good taste.” Ideally we get that from “good breeding”—that is, being born into the right family and class. But in truth, many of those with the best taste didn’t have “good breeding” and worked hard and consciously to develop their taste—and in this case, their ear. Fowler is playing the classic game of class here: scorning any “middle class” efforts to appear proper—yet writing a book addressed precisely to middle class people who are striving for proper literacy.

Lynn Bloom has explored the deeply middle class ethos that pervade the culture of composition and how teachers of writing instill *propriety*. Among the eleven middle class values that she sees saturating college composition (and her description could fit high school teachers of English too), she points to respectability, decorum/propriety, moderation/temperance, cleanliness, and delayed gratification. Despite any of our protestations to the contrary, English teachers *are* indeed the tongue guards of our culture.

Consider this convention on the internet that’s intriguing because most enforcers don’t think of themselves as guardians of middle class propriety. According to this convention, YOU MUSTN’T WRITE IN ALL CAPS. People call it “*shouting*.” Most people who make snide comments about shouting are “insiders” on the net and think of themselves as progressives, but I see this as a case of the school marm in the new Wild West managing to silence the unshaven cowboys when they come into town. The metaphor of “shouting” says it all. Most rules of proper literacy are rules against making a loud noise. Keep it down; keep the lid on it; don’t make a fuss. What’s wrong with noise in writing?

**Footnote.** When I am in buses, trains, and subway cars in the U.S., I sometimes think I can *hear* this middle class, proper, “literate” pressure not to “raise your voice.” I think I notice that non-middle class speakers, speakers who have not mastered literacy, or speakers of a primarily oral version of English are more likely to use more vociferous intonation in their speaking voices. I take it as a deeply human tendency to let our speaking show lots of emotion through the resources of intonational music. Virtually all children use *lots*—*LOTS*--of intonation. But I think I notice that speakers who seem to be middle class or cultured and to have mastered literacy--correct writing and even “correct” speech--seem to have got the idea they should show fewer ups and downs and intensities and emphases in their speaking. They seem to keep a bit of lid on their voices. I sense this diminished intonation somehow goes along with the culture of literacy in the U.S. I’m not sure whether this functions in England; it certainly does *not* function in Italy and France and many other countries where the culture of literacy invites *high* expressiveness of intonation.

Some of the most telling evidence for the power of propriety is everywhere--but negative. I’m talking about a pervasive *resistance* to propriety in written language. Consider Toys “R” Us, Kwik Kleeners, E-Z Car Wash, 7-Eleven, and Sheer Kuts. People cannot seem to resist flouting correct written language--even in neon. “Literate” people like to think that language error always stem from ignorance. *Eats Shoots and Leaves* sold hundreds of thousands of copies by giving lively voice to a mock outrage at written errors produced by mistake or error. But I say that all these neon signs are about written error born from a deep *pleasure* in wrong language. It’s this kind of micro-resistance to pervasive authority that Michel de Certeau writes about in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. (Kermit Campbell speaks of hip hop as “the mental activity of oppressed creativity.” See Olivio on hip hop. See also <unwords.com>, a huge cache of

words that don't exist but are trying to exist. Their slogan: "Change English, one word at a time.")

But there's an insidious double bind when it comes to propriety in writing: *really good* writing needs those eruptions of energy, vociferousness, and even spontaneity. It's what makes writing alive and forceful. Yet those eruptions have to conform to the standards of correctness and propriety (even if *The New Yorker* gives a little more leeway). That's why good writing is so hard: you have to get back into your writing what you had to learn to take out of it in order to pass through the initial doorway to literacy. People who have learned to be perfectly competent at writing correctly--many of them writing a great deal--often fail to get into their literate writing the verbal power and sophistication they can use in their speech.

**Footnote.** I claim a certain personal authority on these issues of literacy and propriety because I find competing reactions in myself. On the one hand, as a child, I played with children of college professors and was intimidated by the culture at their finger tips--hearing how they staged Shakespeare with puppets in their home. As an English major at an elite private college, I strove to develop good taste. I developed a radar for what is culturally "right" and "better." And I have to confess that I *love* passages like that from Fowler. There's something wonderful about being that sure of yourself and that witty.

But on the other hand, I've grown to love "wrongness" for its own sake. I certainly had a first hand taste of linguistic snobbery and chauvinism when I studied at Oxford in the uptight pre-Beatles era when my tutor remarked that I spoke "like a colonial" and said (when I read aloud a passage from Dryden), "Maybe that's why you don't understand poetry, Elbow, you don't know what it sounds like." You could say that all this fighting against proper literacy is nothing but reacting to my failure in my attempts to be uncomplicatedly "in" as a cultured intellectual.

I get a taste of my competing reactions even when I answer the phone. When someone asks for Peter Elbow I've come to say *This is he*. But now feel how that locution is under strain from propriety and not really idiomatic mainstream speech. (My wife laughs at the idea that I might ever seek propriety.) It strikes me now that it makes more sense to say something like *That's me*.

By the way, the differences between England and the U.S. are complicated when it comes to propriety in language. On the one hand, England is socially riven by much greater dialectal differences (which involve not just accent but grammar too); and the stigmatization can be more cutting--though things are changing fast there. But on the other hand, the U.S. still shows its colonial roots: people in the colonies often work harder to prove their fidelity to motherland standards. Noah Webster may have rebelled been in trying to establish an "American English," but his real goal was to establish a *standard* language for the new country, and he was merciless about "wrong" American language (see Lepore).

U.S. bookstores are awash in handbooks for correct language, but John Boe writes tellingly of going into the greatest English bookstore and asking for a grammar book.

"Do you mean ESL?" he asked.

"No, I want English grammar for the English."

The clerk was baffled and finally said he might have one: *Chambers Guide to Grammar and Usage*. Boe writes interestingly about differences in conventions across the Atlantic. We get a glimpse of these complex differences if we consider the clausal distinction between *that* and *which*. It turns out that Fowler and his brother consciously invented this distinction in the early twentieth century. But then the English gave it up while proper U.S. teachers and editors still insist on it.

## Must it Be? A Longer View

I've been trying to show a gap: the language needed for serious important writing that matters is different from the language that all people know best--their own spoken language.

I've been arguing that this gap leads most people to feel alienated from writing--not just speakers of stigmatized versions of English but even speakers of mainstream English.

It might seem as though this gap is inevitable. Even the authoritative linguists, Wolfram, Adger, and Christian speak of the "inevitability of dialect diversity and language standardization" (115-16). In the same passage, they quote Fasold with approval:

Whether we like it or not, some type of language standardization seems inevitable. This conclusion comes not just from examining the situation in the United States or in English-speaking areas, but from surveying language situations throughout the world (Fasold 1984).

These are recent, progressive linguists. Another one, Janson, says that without a standard, schooling is impossible. Without *some* standard for writing--for publication and for schooling--we'd have chaos. We'd have Babel if *everyone's* spoken language were deemed perfectly fine for serious important writing. A teacher with students who spoke eight different dialects of English would have to accept final drafts written in those eight dialects--many of them dialects she didn't know very well. This is what McWhorter is warning us against. The Wild West. The death of good writing, the degeneration of the English language. It seems as though human nature itself resists linguistic chaos and seeks some order and standardization--especially when it comes to writing. But those linguists should have said that standardization in writing is common--not inevitable.

For we've had Babel in the past and it didn't kill writing or language or civilization. And we're on the way to having it in the future and it won't kill us this time either. Written language isn't always different from spoken language. A single standard for written language that differs from spoken dialects is not built in to the universe or the nature of language; it's something that has sometimes emerged; usually it's been imposed. In different countries and different eras, there have always been different distances between the spoken and written language.

**Footnote.** You might call me perverse for complaining about our present situation since the dialects for speaking and writing English are comparatively close. *Take your soapbox to China!* The distance between speaking and writing (*diglossia*) is huge in China because there's (almost) no resemblance at all between spoken words and written characters. Mao tried to introduce the Roman alphabet and thus make writing much easier to learn. Interestingly, the Red Guard prevented him from carrying his plan through because it seemed too much like "kowtowing" to the West. Even in Spain and France, there is a wider gap between the language of speech and serious writing than there is now in England and the U.S. The French have an entire verb tense used only in writing. But I'm unrepentant--especially since our spoken and written languages seem close only if you leave out nonmainstream versions of spoken English.

## Looking Backwards at the History of English

- In the early West Saxon period in England:

there were no attempts at creating a common standard for the written language. On the contrary, each writer employed his own dialect, so there are texts in Kentish, in West Saxon, in Northumbrian, and so on. . . . Even though the writers of Britain probably all knew the strictly standardized written Latin language, they did not try to create anything similar.



This is quite similar to the situation in Greece before the Macedonian conquest, and to some extent also to that of Italy before Dante. Where there is no political unity, the idea of a common standard for a written language is not very close at hand. (Janson 145).

But by about 1000, King Alfred had made West Saxon the standard for writing. After this, various contemporary and previously written texts were copied over into it. This was a way to create uniformity--“enforce standards”--and it gave later readers an impression of greater linguistic homogeneity than actually existed (see also Crystal 55).

- But then England lost this standard form of written English. From the Middle English period up through the Renaissance, writers often wrote in the dialect they spoke. You could see (hear!) from their text the region of England or Scotland they lived in. But many modern and nineteenth century editors changed spellings in Middle English texts to conform to an alleged “standard”--which again reinforced the illusory sense that there was a standard (Wright 3).

- Consider the birth of Early Modern English in London in the fourteen and fifteen hundreds. The common story is that when London became economically and politically dominant in England, London’s English became dominant. But that’s not quite right. The language that emerged as standard--even for speaking--did not in fact match *anyone’s* actual speech. It was an idealization and it borrowed spoken features from different regional dialects--and written features that differed from any speech. Here’s the linguistic historian Jonathan Hope:

[T]he linguistic data does not support the notion that Standard English evolved from a single dialect--as most historians of the language accept. Standard English features can be traced to an inconveniently wide range of dialects. (50)

He goes on to ridicule previous linguists who tried to fit the linguistic facts to this common story:

Thus Pyles and Algeo [write]: ‘It is not surprising that a type of speech--that of London--essentially East Midlandish in its characteristics, though showing Northern and to a lesser extent Southern influences, should in time have become a standard for all of England’ (193:141). It is tempting to ask what dialects are *not* present in this Londonish-East Midlandish-Northernish-Southernish ‘single’ ancestor. (50)

In short, a standard got itself established according to which *everyone’s* speech was wrong. Here’s another historical linguist sounding the same theme:

[S]tandard ‘varieties’ appear as idealizations that exist at a high level of abstraction. . . . they do not conform exactly to the usage of any particular speaker. Indeed the most palpable manifestation of the standard is not in the speech community at all, but in the writing system. (Milroy 11)

For an interesting example, Hope points out that double negatives somehow got ruled nonstandard--wrong--even though everyone in London used double negatives. All the children I’ve ever known use double-negatives, and I think I’ve read linguists saying that virtually all spoken languages use double negatives.

- Despite these standard-setting developments in Early Modern English, it isn't till the eighteenth century that we get the most powerful, pervasive, and conscious imposition of standardization. This was the age when dictionaries were born. And with them, for the first time in English history, came a powerful ideology of *prescriptivism*. Prescriptivism is

not in itself a linguistic process . . . [It's] 'language-external': a cultural, ideological phenomenon which plays itself out in language . . . . Prescriptivism . . . has been highly successful as a social ideology while failing to account for linguistic data (Hope 51 and 54).

Humans have perennially had a tendency to laugh or look askance at people who speak differently. (The Greeks called nonGreeks "barbarians" because their talked sounded to them like "bar-bar-bar-bar.") But people don't so often think that the people who use alien dialects or languages are *morally bad*. But the eighteenth century saw the rise of a tendency that still continues: to use metaphors not just of uncleanness but of corruptness and immorality for wrong language.

**Footnote.** Well before Samuel Johnson wrote his dictionary with the intention "to fix the English language," Ben Johnson wrote: "Wheresoever manners and fashions are corrupted, language is. It imitates the public riot" (quoted in Kermode). See Richard Boyd for research on nineteenth century handbooks that talk about "Grammatical Monstrosities" and "Contemptible Miscreants." Milder versions of this kind of metaphor still turn up--even in our composition journals. [example? Probably some nice examples in EATS, SHOOTS, AND LEAVES])

Till the eighteenth century, there was no consistency in spelling and very little consistency in written grammar (even Alfred's Anglo-Saxon wasn't perfectly standard). Shakespeare didn't conform to a single standard of grammar; and he signed his own name with something like eleven different spellings.

The eighteenth century was the period when those who cared about language wanted to make English not just regular but noble and good--and that meant that it should be like book Latin. Don't split infinitives because they are not split in Latin. (Never mind that Latin infinitives cannot be split since they are single words.) The eighteenth century was when a *d* appeared in *admiral* to make it sound like *admirabilis*--but till then it had been a fairly common Arabic word *amiral* (*amir* + *al*). The English language and literature were not held back because of the absence of this new standardization.

- Eighteenth century Scotland saw the first rhetorical studies in English. Till then, rhetoric was all about Greek and Latin speaking and writing. Eighteenth century Scottish rhetoricians laid down guidelines for the proper use of English, and these took firm hold throughout England and the U.S. Thomas Miller says it's important to note that the native Scottish language of these influential rhetoricians was ridiculed and scorned by mainstream English people as forcefully as some people ridicule and scorn Black English. Miller argues that the linguistic and cultural *insecurity* of these learned Scots scholars created the driving energy for establishing guidelines for an aggressively proper standard form of the language (Miller, chapters three and four).

- Until late in the nineteenth century, there was no single standard for elite spoken English in England. Even prominent figures like prime ministers Gladstone and Peele spoke in their strong regional accents; so too Thomas Arnold, headmaster of Rugby school; and Thomas Hardy. But with the Education Act of 1870, elite schools were open to the general

public (if they could get admitted and pay), and this led to the promulgation of an elite “proper” spoken English: anyone from any part of England who wanted highly respected social standing had to learn to speak it. This accent has sometimes been called “Public School English” since that’s where children could learn it--and more widely termed “Received Pronunciation” (RP). “BBC English”--with an official BBC Board to decide on correct pronunciation--represented a slight watering down of RP.

### Some Examples from Outside England

Again my theme: written language isn’t always different from spoken language; sometimes differences emerges, often they are imposed.

- “[Written] Aramaic was originally cast in oral form to be addressed to audiences who did not read (Horowitz and Samuels 17-18).”

- Around 800 AD, Charlemagne found a remarkable way to impose a standard for writing. He didn’t like the variation among all the different versions of spoken Latin in his broad kingdom. He wanted something tidier and more unified. So he sought the best authority on Latin he could find. It turns out that the best and most learned authority on Latin was Alcuin in England. One reason he was such an authority was that he knew Latin only from books; it wasn’t his native language; he hadn’t grown up speaking a vernacular version of it like most Europeans. His Latin was classical Roman Latin preserved in manuscripts. So Charlemagne, ruling a huge empire (the Pope gave him the title “Emperor”), brought from England a “high register archaic form” of Latin (Roger Wright 6), and imposed it on churchmen and scholars. When priests gave sermons in this new form of Latin, it was difficult and sometimes impossible for parishioners to understand.

This marked the beginning in European history of a huge gulf between spoken vernaculars serious writing. Interestingly, with Alcuin’s importation of book Latin, the people’s Latin lost its right to be called “Latin,” and scholars later came to call it “Romance.”

**Footnote.** Wright argues that since we don’t call English a “dead language,” then we shouldn’t call Latin a dead language either. For our present day European languages of Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese are late late vernacular versions of Latin--and they are closer to classical Latin than present day English is to Old English--or modern Greek to ancient Greek. Wright

[T]he idea that Latin has not survived as a spoken language is merely wrong: it *has* survived as a spoken language but it has changed its name. . . . [A] living evolving language whose speakers cover over a quarter of the world’s land surface can hardly be called dead. (6).

See also Janson on this story.

It’s interesting to notice that from the twelfth century renaissance onwards, serious writing throughout all of Europe had to dance to the tune of a book Latin brought in from the edge of the known universe--England. This is the same process whereby proper English usage in the eighteenth century was determined by people from the edge of the universe for cultivated Englishmen--the wilderness of Scotland. It turns out that the most fiercely imposed standards often come from the margins.

- In Spain in the 1400s, people spoke a variety of different languages and dialects. A grammarian named Nebrija didn’t like this linguistic untidiness. He said to Queen Isabella, in effect (and in 1492 it turns out): “If you want to establish empire, and if you want to be

remembered in history, you need a single standard language and dialect. Fortunately I have a grammar for the Castilian language that you speak and that most others speak in this region. Of course I've had to clean it up a bit, because what people actually speak has some bad grammar." As a grammarian of Greek and Latin, he could tell when grammar was bad. (He mistakenly thought Greek and Latin were settled unified languages.) Using Nebrija's grammar, schools began to teach children "correct" Castilian.

Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders argue that this had never happened before in human history, and so Isabella was understandably skeptical of his plan:

The queen praised the humanist for having provided the Castilian tongue with what had been reserved to the languages of Scripture, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. But . . . she was unable to see any practical use for such an undertaking. . . . In her royal view of linguistics, every subject of her many kingdoms was so made by nature that during his lifetime he would reach perfect dominion over his own tongue *on his own*. . . . (69)

(Note how her view coincides with that of modern linguistics.) "Isabella's initial rejection of Nebrija's proposal underscores its originality (69)." But, like Columbus, Nebrija won her over. He was a good rhetorician (his proposal can still be read). Thanks to the power of grammar linked to royalty, we now take for granted something that (Illich argues) had never before been assumed: children cannot speak their *native language* properly unless they go to school and get help from professionals.

### What Do These Stories Tell Us?

I'm trying to show that linguistic divergence, multiplicity and lack of a single standard is *normal*. But of course most of these stories also tell of *convergence*, or the *lopping off* of multiplicity, or the *imposition* of a standard--so that's normal too. If we stand back and look at the history of human language use--small scale and large scale history--we see a continual tug of war between divergence and standardization. Consider the root process by which languages continue: babies and toddlers learn the language around them. But babies and toddlers always get things "wrong": they use the wrong word, the wrong meaning for a word, the wrong syntax, or the wrong pronunciation [example]. But their mistakes are continually corrected toward what's right--namely the standard--for that family or group. Divergence is kept in check.

But the job of correcting mistakes is never done. It turns out that no child ever gets it *exactly* right. Perhaps the most basic principal of all about language is what linguists call the "idiolect": no human speaks exactly the same language as any other human. Every speaker of, say, English, speaks a version where the grammar, syntax, and lexicon is *slightly* different from everyone else's. To put it bluntly, there is no such thing as "English" or even "Northeastern middle class" English, or even "English as spoken in your family. All these "languages" are fictions, abstractions, generalizations--pictures of an "average" language that doesn't match any human person's actual language.

Of course idiolectal differences are small because people commonly nudge children and other people to "talk right" (and write right). It's convenient so say that different people talk "the same" language and to refer to discrete languages like "English" or "French" as singular entities. Languages more or less hang together. But let's not forget that these singular

languages are really fictional averagings of *plural* languages. That is, we don't just have Midwestern, Appalachian, and African American Englishes--or "World Englishes": it's really *Englishes* all the way down.

The idiolectal tug of war between infants and their families enacts a general process that continues after babies grow up. Individuals are a force for divergence and groups are a force for conservation or conservatism to keep individuals in check. And of course the same dialectic tension exists between small groups and large groups. And let's not forget that it's a true tug of war, because *sometimes* the individual or the small group overcomes the larger group. That is, when an individual or a small group uses language "wrong," they are usually pushed back in line: corrected, ignored, or not understood. But if the "wrongness" is sufficiently effective or attractive in that context--or if the speaker has special prestige--the wrongness can catch on: the large group changes its standard. Someone had to have been the first person to use *cool* to mean "good"--or to use "villain" in a pejorative sense (when it used to be a neutral term for a man). The usages caught on. No doubt "cool" started out as a *metaphor*, for every new metaphor is a word used with a "wrong" sense: *cool* did *not* mean "good." And some Roman must said, "I have a scruple about . . ."--when he didn't have a pebble in his sandal (*scruple* means "pebble" in Latin). In the context, his listener understood that he was saying that something was nagging him in his mind like a pebble in his sandal.

Wrongness is powerful. It leads not just to small changes but, eventually, to large ones--major divergences. How else could different languages come to exist? Time and space are crucial conditions for major change. *Time*. After fifty or a hundred years, people even in the same village usually talk a somewhat different language. The dynamics are many and interesting, but more often than not, again, young people are a force for change, and elders (and teachers) a force for conservation. *Space* too brings divergence. When people from this village move over to the next valley--or country or continent--their language tends to diverge from the language they left behind. Interestingly, however, time can trump space: the home language may change faster than the "colonial" version. When I studied at Oxford in the '50s and I used to say "I guess," people made fun of me for using an odd colonialism that was new to them. My annoyance was assuaged when I found it in Chaucer. Time and space, between them, give rise to different dialects and even different languages.

So with all this branching and diverging and the birth of more dialects and languages (despite the best efforts of parents and teachers to make people talk right), how do we so often get standardization: the lopping off of divergent dialects and languages? The stories from history give at least one clear answer: overt force and authority.

Sometimes the force is wielded by individuals. People in charge have an easier time running things if they are standardized. People in authority have understandable hungers for order, and with their authority, they can impose it. Charlemagne imposed a single new version of Latin upon all of Europe. Sometimes the force comes from a group (though the group is often spearheaded by individuals). When one tribe or country overruns another, it often wipes out the conquered language--even when it doesn't wipe out the people. Historically, nationalism may have been the biggest force of linguicide. When divergent groups are somehow gotten to think of themselves as a single nation, they usually kill off lots of local languages. A number of thriving languages--many of them with rich literatures (such as that of the Albigensians)--were lost during the "formation" of France. Nationalism often fuels

campaigns for linguistic “purity.” The “English Only” campaign seems to derive from a potent mixture of nationalism and insecurity--fear of the “alien.” Perhaps current hegemony of English around the globe is killing more languages than local nationalisms have managed in the past.

**Footnote** Webster wanted an “American English,” but he celebrated it as the most “pure [form of English] in the world”--closer to Chaucer and the uncorrupted English that existed before 1066. It’s odd for speakers of English to argue for purity in language since English is probably the most impure bastardized language there’s ever been. It’s slept with every language it’s encountered, even casually. The strength of English comes from how many babies it’s had with how many partners. Because English slept with Norse at widely separated intervals of time, we have *canal*, *kennel*, and *channel*--all born at different times of the same father word. John Trimbur shows the much neglected story of how the U.S., since the Revolution, has pushed out other languages to make English into a *de facto* required exclusive language--and how the composition profession is complicit in that process. (See his published essay and his newly shared one.)

In the tug of war between divergence and imposed standardization, is there a point of equilibrium? Most people in our culture assume that we *need* convergence and single standards. “Without a standard, no one would understand each other! Everything would grind to a halt.” But when it comes to the different versions of English that are used in the U.S., misunderstanding is not so common. When people misunderstand each other’s English, it’s more often a case of psychological interference that comes from disapproval by people whose language is dominant--and resentment by people whose language is called “bad.” When stigmatization is not in force, humans take language variation in their stride. Usually they understand each other. (Note the recent research showing that it’s actually easy to understand writing when it’s wildly misspelled.)

In truly multilingual communities not too dominated by stigmatization, people tend to learn a good deal of each others’ languages. As Mary Louise Pratt (among others) argues, bi-lingualism and multi-lingualism are the rule, not the exception in human communities. George Steiner points out that almost every culture has a “Babel myth”: a story of the gods *punishing* humans by giving them divergent languages. But he argues that the inevitability of language divergence and difference is actually one of the greatest human blessings.

So my simple point here is that a single standard for writing that differs from actual speech (and a single standard for spoken language) is not something inevitable and built into the way humans use language. It’s absence is perfectly natural. When single standards happen, they are usually imposed.

### **Looking Forward: A Vision**

It’s not just in the past that writing was sometimes close to speech and didn’t hanker after a single standard. It’s in our future too--and starting to emerge in our present. As McWhorter complains, we don’t just get *New Yorker* and *New York Times* writers using language heavily inflected by speech. We get lots of published books, magazines, and newspapers with writing in various dialects and versions of spoken English--along with code-switching and code-meshing: Black English, Chicano English, Spanglish, Caribbean versions of English, Hawai’ian versions of English, and Australian indigenous-inflected versions of English. On top of all this, there is a range of different World Englishes around the globe. Most speakers of English in the world are in Africa and Asia and don’t have English as their first language. There is a growing movement in these places to prefer teachers of English who are *not* from the English metropole “homelands,” but rather speakers whose version of World English is most useful to them with

Africans and Asians. But of course these World Englishes are spoken and written in the metropole homeland too. Microsoft Word will spell check your text for something like a dozen varieties of English. Most of these written and published versions of English are close to or born of pressure from spoken languages.

I'm not saying that all mainstream readers happily read work written in nonmainstream versions of English; some don't even know how much is out there. But lots of mainstream readers read books like *The Color Purple* and *Push*, and as publishers know, mainstream readers are not the only readers.

It is above all on line and on the world wide web that we see the absence of any institutionally sanctioned single standard for written English. The web is the linguistic Wild West. Anyone can write anything. There are no publishers, editors, copy editors, and teachers to enforce a standard.

*No standard.* What does that mean? It doesn't mean no judging, no criteria, no quality. (People confuse "no standard" with "no standards.") On the web we see plenty of blabbing--"garbage" if you want. But we see plenty of good writing and plenty of judging by readers of what to read. Where there is judging there are, by definition, criteria (conscious or not).

With no one imposing any standard for correct writing--and no institutional power or teacher power--we get a *naked rhetorical open space*. In this Wild West, the only power is *rhetorically based*: the power that emerges from the confrontation between writers and readers. In a rhetorically open space, writers get to write whatever they want; but readers get to ignore whatever *they* want. There may be no single standard for correct language, but that doesn't mean readers will read anything.

It was just this kind of open space for naked rhetorically-based power that I was trying to set up in 1973 with *Writing Without Teachers*. I was troubled by the unilateral power of teachers to impose on students their unilateral criteria for what's good and bad writing--and it seemed to me that institutional criteria were deeply flawed. I wanted a space where writers confront readers across a space without institutionally sanctioned criteria--only a naked empiricism: careful accounts by readers of what the written words caused to happen in their minds. The writer's job is to write; the reader's job is to give what I called "movies of the reader's mind."

The web is giving us a glimpse of a world without a single standard for correct writing where the line between "spoken language" and "written language" is often fuzzy. In this way, I think it's giving us a glimpse of a new and better model for how writing ought to work. Up till now in our culture of literacy and its single standard for correct serious writing, potential writers get this message:

First you have to learn to write the right language. Once you master this, then we'll find out if you can write anything good.

In a world without a single standard, the message will be more like this:

Write what you want to write--and you can use any kind of language--including your spoken language. It's fine and easy to put it out where readers can find it. If you want any of them to read what you write, you may have to learn to be a much better writer than you are. Though people read the damndest things on the web. If they read, they

may reply. Whether or not they read or reply, you get to write what you want or need to write--and you are learning to be a writer and getting better at it.

### What Will This Future Be Like?

Am I forecasting that our current version of correct written English will disappear. Yes and no. I suspect that the antipathy between serious important writing and spoken language will soon disappear. More teachers and professionals and members of the general public will finally “get” what many good professional writers have been doing for a long time--and a certain number of good academic writers too: exploiting heavy doses of comfortable, speech-inflected writing to make their writing clearer, stronger, and livelier.

The antipathy between proper literacy and spoken language goes deep, and it’s gradual dissipation will have important repercussions. But the antipathy between proper literacy and *stigmatized* versions of spoken language will take considerably longer to dissipate--especially those languages stigmatized by racism. In other words, we’re moving fast towards an era where we won’t have to tell speakers of mainstream English to avoid the language of speech for serious writing. But it’ll take longer before we can say this to people who speak Black or Hispanic or other version of English stigmatized by race or class. For it will take a good many years before students and others can prosper in school and employment and for certain kinds of publication without knowing the grammar of mainstream or white spoken English for some of their writing.

Since it’s *spoken* mainstream English they need, it will be much more plural and variable than “correct writing.” Let me requote the linguists on the multiplicity of mainstream spoken English:

If native speakers from Michigan, New England, and Arkansas avoid the use of socially stigmatized grammatical structures such as “double negatives” (e.g., *They didn’t do nothing*), different verb agreement patterns (e.g., *They’s okay*), and different irregular verb forms (e.g. *She done it*), there is a good chance they will be considered standard English speakers . . . . [I]f a person’s speech is free of structures that can be identified as nonstandard, then it is considered standard. (x,,x12)

For example, writing with some of the styles and rhythms of Black English is no problem for mainstream readers--as long as the no-no constructions are avoided. Geneva Smitherman and her team researched multiple years of NAEP exams and showed that student writing with what she called “Black expressive discourse style” correlated with *higher* scores--as long as it avoided “BEV [Black English Vernacular] syntax” (94).

So even after the fear of speech is gone, there will be a need for a certain period of time to teach certain students how to avoid those stigmatized surface features of grammar if they are writing for a certain proportion of teachers, employers, publications, letters to some editors, and readers. For a while, writers will know that if they want conservative mainstream readers, they can’t allow many stigmatized features. But lots of good writers will attract mainstream readers with stigmatized language in fiction and poetry, and (more slowly) in some nonfiction. Even some academic writers will gain respect in the same way. (Geneva Smitherman wrote some parts of her *College English* columns in African American English.) For a more striking example, the Jamaican poet, Louise Bennett, chooses to write in a version of



English that's easy for local readers but very hard for mainstream U.S. and British readers. But she cares enough about her local readers and about the nobility of her language (just as Dante did) to insist on it--and she writes well enough to make many mainstream readers put in the extra effort.

I'm hopeful about this lingering racial tangle in literacy for two reasons:

(1) The teaching will be easier. At present, correct, edited, standard written English feels like a complete dialect one must learn--and it feels like the one and only right form for important writing. This is not going so well. It will be much easier when students aren't trying to learn a whole dialect but simply to avoid a relatively small number of stigmatized features.

(2) And in fact we're making progress against racism in this country. Our mainstream white culture has sunk its teeth into its racism and most everyone acknowledges that we can't turn back. It's getting clearer that the very concept of "white" has nothing but a negative meaning: it means nothing but *being different from people we disapprove of*. Less than a century ago in the U.S. and England, people from Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece--and Ireland!--were routinely stigmatized as "nonwhite."

*And teachers?* What will they (we) do in a world where there is no longer a single standard for correct written English--where it's legitimate to write in any version of spoken English? The situation will be dire. We'll have to learn to tell the difference between *right* and *good*--between right writing and good writing. We'll have to learn to concentrate wholly on whether the substance is good--and not whether the surface conforms to the conventions of the dialect we call correct, edited "standard" written English.

Consider the main substantive criteria that most teachers use in evaluating the range of student writing called "essayist"--where students are asked to "make a point" and "support it" and use "good writing": are the ideas good? is the reasoning persuasive and more or less valid? is the organization effective? are the sentences clear and strong? Note that all these goals can be achieved in *any* version of English. Teachers will learn to focus their attention on these substantive criteria and teach them and give students feedback on how well they meet them--before working on surface features. (Of course many teachers of writing are already good at this--but too many are not.)

But of course surface features will have to be faced too. After all, the surface of writing is what readers see first--at least if there's something about it they don't like. Even when readers will accept *any* version of English (including currently stigmatized features), students will still need to work on copy editing.

When I try to explain my larger train of thinking to others, I can tell that *spelling* is often the first thing that comes into their minds. In our culture there is a huge psychic investment in spelling, and that makes it difficult for many people to think rationally about it (Gunther Kress is useful here). Many people get upset--even angry--at deviations from "correct" standard spelling. If I try to suggest a literacy where multiple spellings are acceptable, I find people throwing up their hands and envisioning mere anarchic chaos. They have trouble seeing the difference between "*wrong* spelling" (which will no longer be a meaningful concept) and *random, careless, variable* spelling that needlessly distracts or annoys readers. For writing to work well, the spelling should give a good picture of the version of English that the writer wants readers to experience. And typos are always a problem.

Even though there is no official orthography for most nonmainstream versions of English, we see plenty of published writing in many of them such as AAVE or Hawai'ian Creole English. Different writers may use somewhat different spellings, but successful writers are usually more or less consistent and try to avoid *needless* difficulty for readers. (Interestingly, there happens to be a standard orthography for Haitian Creole--which I can't help attributing to the peculiarly French preoccupation with "rational" standardization.)

And grammar? Readers who don't object to any version of English can still be annoyed by grammar that is needlessly random and careless. But this is a tricky issue. Inconsistency in grammar--as in register--can be effective. Teachers will have to think about whether the student is using a hybridity of grammar skillfully on purpose--or even benefiting from effective accidents. I used Krugman to stand for the many good writers who jump effectively from one level or register or grammar to another. Canagarajah--with his eye on World Englishes and the international scene--explores the widespread and effective use of more hybridity and code meshing. The teacher's job will be to help students decide how much hybridity of grammar to use--and how to be skillful in using it.

So you needn't worry that I'm arguing that good writing will be easy when we invite multiple and spoken versions of English. My argument is only that it will be *easier* than it is now--and that there'll be more of it.

### Concluding Note

To conclude, let's take the long view. Consider the possibility that we've been going through a brief parochial historical interlude during which the forces of standardization in written language have been peculiarly strong. The eighteenth century brought a climactic frenzy of standardization and prescriptivism and with it an avoidance of spoken language for correct writing. The eighteenth century was just yesterday when we think of how long it took for the vernacular languages to become acceptable for writing.

And now we're entering a period of change. The standard is dissipating--and much more quickly than in Dante's era. With the internet, literacy is moving closer to various versions of spoken language. Globalism is somewhat loosening the grip of many nationalisms. It's nothing less that tragic the way English is somehow managing to wipe out so many languages. But in the process, English is getting more than ever multiple and inflected by spoken language

In most historical periods, schools have had the job of trying to hold the line against change--"degeneration." Teachers have traditionally been front line troops in the process of imposing a single standard in multilingual and multi-dialectal societies (see --- in *Literacy: A Critical Sourcebook*). Now in our culture, I don't think we teachers could stop this remarkable process of dissipation of a single standard. My suggestion, to the contrary is that we help move it along.

I'm not saying we should invite or reward careless or bad writing (except in teaching people to use freewriting as an exercise). Rather we can make space for *more* writing that's *better* by inviting more versions of English. We can empower more students to write well by opening the door to the various spoken languages they know best.

People in our culture will continue to confuse writing in different and spoken dialects with *bad* writing. But even though we cannot legislate cultural values directly, we can do so

*indirectly* by inspiring more good writing in different and spoken languages--writing that people will want to read. Think of Dante.

I don't see us so far away from a world where everyone can say, "I have something I want to write. I know it will be hard work to get my thoughts and words clear and strong. I'm sure I'll be frustrated trying to craft it till it's good--and even copy edit. But I'm looking forward to the job because I know that the *medium* I'll be using--the clay I'll be trying to shape and manipulate--is *my own language*."

## PARTIAL LIST OF WORKS CITED

- Boe, John. "From the Editor: Why Can't the Americans Write English." *Writing on the Edge* 11.2 (Spring 2000): 4-9.
- Boyd, Richard. "'Grammatical Monstrosities' and 'Contemptible Miscreants': Sacrificial Violence in the Late Nineteenth-Century Usage Handbook." *The Place of Grammar in Writing Instruction*. Eds. Susan Hunter and Ray Wallace. 1995. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann/Boynton Cook. 54-70.
- Campbell, Kermit.
- Christiansen, Linda. "Whose Standard? Teaching Standard English." *English Journal* Reprinted in *Rethinking our Classrooms*.
- Connors and Lunsford
- Crystal HISTORIES
- Fowler, H. W. *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. Oxford at the Clarendon Press, (1926) 1957.
- Haswells "Granting Authority to Multivocal Student Writing"
- Hope, Jonathan. "Rats, Bats, Sparrows, and Dogs: Biology, Linguistics and the Nature of Standard English." In Wright. 49-56.
- Illich, Ivan. "Vernacular Values." *Co-Evolution Quarterly*. 1980 [10.31.98].
- Irvine, Patricia and Elsasser, Nan. "The Ecology of Literacy: Negotiating Writing Standards in a Caribbean Setting." *The Social Construction of Written Communication*. Eds., B. Rafter and D. Rubin. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1988.
- Janson, Tore. *Speak: A Short History of Languages*. Oxford UK: Oxford UP, 2002.
- Kermode, Frank. "The Lives of Dr. Johnson" NYRB 22 June 06: 28-31.
- Lepore, Jill. *A is For American: Letters and Other Characters in the Newly United States*. NY: Vintage, 2002.
- Miller, Thomas. *The Formation of College English: Rhetoric and Belles Lettres in the British Cultural Provinces*. U of Pittsburgh P, 1997.

Milroy, Jim. "Historical Description and the Ideology of the Standard Language." in Wright. 11-28.

Olivo, Warren. "Phat Lines: Spelling Conventions in Rap Music," *Written Language and Literacy* 4(1) (2001): 67-85.

Pinker, Steven. *The Language Instinct: How the Mind creates Language*. NY: HarperCollins, 2000.

Smitherman, Geneva. "'The Blacker the Berry, the Sweeter the Juice': African American Student Writers." *The Need for Story: Cultural Diversity in the Classroom and Community*. Urbana IL: NCTE, 1994, 80-101.

Wolfram, Walt, Carolyn Adger and Donna Christian. *Dialects in Schools and Communities*. Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999.

Wolfram, Walt and Natalie Schilling-Estes. *American English: Dialects and Variation*: Malden MA: Blackwell, 1998.

Wright, Laura ed. *The Development of Standard English 1300-1800: Theories, Descriptions, Conflicts*. Cambridge UP, 2000

Wright, Roger. "Latin and English as World Languages." *English Today: The International Review of the English Language*. 80 20.4 (October 2004): 3-19.