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**Dialect and school in the European countries: Great Britain.**

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### 1. British English Dialects: An Overview

Old English dialects are traditionally divided into Northumbrian, Mercian, West Saxon and Kentish, spoken in what were once the more important kingdoms of England. As Leith (1983) points out, these ancient divisions continue to underpin the regional varieties of English, nine centuries or more after the demise of the kingdoms. Centuries of population movement and dialect contact, however, have made it impossible to draw a clear division today between distinct dialects of British English. Scots is a special case: until the early eighteenth century it was used as a national standard in Scotland, and it still has a literary tradition.

The regional and social distribution of British English dialects is described in Trudgill (1979, 1983a) and in Cheshire and Trudgill (1989). The main points will be briefly repeated here, since any consideration of dialect and the school has to take into account the fact that social and regional variation is interconnected in British English to an extent that is perhaps unknown in other European countries.

The grammar and vocabulary of what is generally considered to be standard English have evolved historically from the East Midland variety of English spoken during the fourteenth century by a prosperous and influential merchant class, based in London (Leith, 1983). Today, 'educated' people throughout Great Britain (or more accurately, perhaps, speakers who consider themselves to be educated) typically use uniform standard English grammatical features and vocabulary in their spoken English. A small number of regional linguistic differences can be heard (see Hughes and Trudgill, 1987), but on the whole the grammar and vocabulary of educated spoken English is remarkably uniform throughout the country.

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The standard pronunciation of British English, R.P., originated in the British public school system (i.e. in the large, fee-paying, mainly boarding, boys' schools), and has also evolved from a predominantly East Midland variety of English. Both the prestige and the form of R.P. is changing (see Gimson, 1984), but it is still the case that speakers with Received Pronunciation do not reveal their geographical origins by their pronunciation, but only their socio-economic status. R.P. speakers are few in number, but they tend to hold prominent public positions and they are therefore rather noticeable. Most educated speakers in Great Britain have 'near R.P.' accents, which incorporate a small number of regional features (for details, see Trudgill, 1979, 1983a).

The majority of British English speakers have neither Received Pronunciation nor near-Received Pronunciation, and they typically use some nonstandard grammatical and lexical features. Some of these are relatively localised, such as the 'double modal' forms heard in parts of Scotland, Ireland, Northern England and the Northern Midlands, in utterances such as *I'll not can stay* (Edwards, Trudgill and Weltens, 1984). Other non-standard grammatical features have a very wide regional distribution; multiple negation, for example, (as in *I can't see nothing*) is thought to occur throughout the British Isles (ibid.). An even larger proportion of speakers have some regional phonetic or phonological features in their speech. As Trudgill (1979, 1983a) points out, the farther one travels from the south-east of England, the greater tend to become the differences between standard English and R.P., on the one hand, and broad regional dialects, on the other; and these differences are greatest in the more isolated parts of rural England and in the Lowlands of Scotland. Even here, however, regional variation cannot be separated from social variation. Table 1, from Macaulay (1977), shows that speakers from different socioeconomic groups in Glasgow all used the distinctive regional realization of post-tonic potential /t/, which is a glottal stop. Speakers in the lower socioeconomic groups in Macaulay's study, however, (groups IIa, IIb and III) used the Glaswegian pronunciation progressively more frequently than speakers in the higher socioeconomic group (group

Table 1: Percentage indices for the use of glottal stops before a pause or a following vowel, by adult speakers from different social classes

| I    | IIa  | IIb  | III  |
|------|------|------|------|
| 35.9 | 54.4 | 84.4 | 91.6 |

Social class categories based on the Registrar-General's classification of occupations, as follows:

- I: professional and managerial
- IIa: white-collar, intermediate non-manual
- IIb: skilled manual
- III: semi-skilled and unskilled manual

Source: Macaulay (1977: 18, 46)

I). Similar quantitative patterns of social variation have been shown to exist in other parts of Britain and for other phonological variables, as well as for some morphological features (see Petyt, 1985, for the West Riding of Yorkshire; and Trudgill, 1974, for Norwich). For most speakers in Britain, therefore, it seems that speaking dialect or standard English is a matter of degree.

Given the correlation between using regional dialect features and socioeconomic status, it seems reasonable to assume that a mismatch between the language of the home and the language of the school puts working class children at a disadvantage relative to their standard English speaking peers (and also, perhaps, relative to children from intermediate socioeconomic classes, who use dialect features less frequently). However, it would be naive in the extreme to see dialect as other than just one of a whole complex of linguistic, social, attitudinal and other factors that contribute to the underachievement of large numbers of working class pupils.

There has, in any case, been very little research into the relationship between dialect and education in Great Britain. Furthermore, traditional dialect studies have focused almost exclusively on rural accents of English, so that relatively little is known about the grammatical features of British English dialects, particularly urban dialects (for a survey of research carried out on British dialect grammar up to 1984, see Edwards, Trudgill and Weltens, 1984). It is impossible, therefore, to isolate any particular region of the country as having more acute dialect-related problems than another. Recent population movements often result in several different regional dialects being spoken within a single school; the teachers who took part in Rosen and Burgess' 1980 Survey, for example, claimed that as many as twenty different regional British dialects were spoken by the pupils who took part in their London Survey.

It would be difficult, in many urban centres, to clearly distinguish those linguistic features that were traditionally associated with regional dialects of English from features that were associated with ethnic varieties. For example, a range of varieties of English is now spoken by the Afro-Caribbean community in Great Britain, stretching from broad creole, or Patois, to British Standard English. Many younger speakers speak a regional, nonstandard British English dialect with varying degrees of Patois admixture (see Sutcliffe, 1982, 1984; Sebba, 1984; Edwards, 1984, 1986), and recent research shows that Patois features are also used by white adolescent speakers in London (Hewitt, 1982). Both white and black children sometimes use Patois in school as what Halliday (1978) terms an 'anti-language' (Hewitt, *ibid.*). The contact varieties of English spoken by the children of linguistic minorities in Great Britain, such as Polish, Italian or Panjabi speakers, has yet to be investigated (see, however, Agnihotri, 1979; Romaine, 1983), as has the effect of these varieties on the indigenous regional and social varieties of English spoken by their classmates. Traditional rural dialects are declining in Britain, along with the traditional communities in which they were spoken, but new urban vernaculars are developing which are likely to have very important implications for education. These implications, however, have yet to be investigated.

Milroy (1984) discusses some examples of differences between standard and nonstandard grammar that appear to cause problems in comprehension (see also Trudgill 1981). Milroy points out that although it tends to be assumed that given sufficient goodwill

between speaker and addressee, communication will be possible, we do not, in fact, know much about cross-dialectal communication. Intelligibility between different dialects and between dialect and standard English awaits investigation, like many aspects of social dialectology in Britain.

## 2. School Difficulties of Dialect Speakers

A small amount of research has focused on the specific difficulties that dialect speakers may encounter at school in their writing. Cheshire (1982a, 1984) reports on a small-scale study carried out in the town of Reading, in Berkshire, which compared the frequency with which eight children aged between 11 and 14 used dialect features in their informal conversational spoken English and in their school written work. The children used fewer dialect features in their school written work than in their spoken English, which suggested that they were aware of the linguistic adjustments that they needed to make in order to conform to the requirements of the school, though this awareness was not necessarily at a conscious level. The study also suggested, however, that the children were confused about the nature of the adjustments that they needed to make. Many of the verb forms that they used in their school written work were neither the regional forms that they used in their spoken English, nor the forms required in standard English, but appeared instead to be hypercorrect forms.

Williams (forthcoming) is currently carrying out a larger scale investigation in Reading of the extent to which dialect features are used in children's school written work, and of the way in which teachers respond to them. Some preliminary results, involving twenty children aged between nine and ten, are reported in Williams (1989). All the dialect speaking children used some dialect forms in their school writing, though there was considerable variation in the specific forms that different children used. Williams points out that this undoubtedly reflects the many different factors that come into play when a child is learning to write, such as individual verbal skills, the ability to control the mechanics of writing, the ability to style shift, the nature of the writing task, the relationship with the audience (in this case, the teacher) and the influence of reading. Interestingly, Williams' study showed that the standard-speaking children also used features that appeared to be dialect forms, though the number of dialect features involved was smaller, and they occurred with a lower frequency; furthermore, the apparent dialect forms coincided, in most cases, with developmental features of children's English (such as the over-generalisation of the *-ed* suffix to 'irregular' past tense verb forms). Williams' study is important because it points to the combined effect of dialect influence and acquisitional tendencies on children's writing, as well as to the additional effect of other factors on children's school writing, as mentioned above. It shows clearly that it is naive to assume that dialect alone causes problems in learning to write.

Williams (*op. cit.*) also found that both dialect speakers and standard speakers used features associated with informal colloquial spoken English in their writing. It is important, therefore, to see the use of dialect as just one aspect of the close relationship that exists in children's early writing between spoken and written language; as Williams says,

on the evidence of their written work, the dialect speaking children in her study were more advanced in their language development than the standard speaking children, since the past tense verb forms that they used closely resembled the adult forms used in the local community, whereas the forms used by the standard speaking children did not. It seems that the linguistic ability of dialect speaking children may well pass unnoticed by their teachers, for many of the teachers who were interviewed as part of Williams' study were not sure what constituted local dialect in Reading.

Cheshire (1982a) notes some spelling mistakes in children's school writing that appear to be related to regional pronunciation. It has not been determined, however, whether children who speak English with a particular regional pronunciation are more likely to make spelling mistakes than children with a different regional pronunciation, or than children who are speakers of R.P. The point has been made that since English spelling does not always bear a close relationship to pronunciation, all children face equivalent problems in learning to relate written words to their spoken equivalents, though the words involved may vary from region to region (Trudgill, 1975). The relationship between spelling and spoken language is in any case not yet fully understood (see, for discussion, Stubbs, 1980).

The research of both Williams and Cheshire was carried out in the town of Reading, in Berkshire, where the local variety of English is a southern variety which is not very different from standard English and which does not seem to be perceived as a dialect by teachers, pupils or parents. As far as I know, no research on the educational implications of dialect has been carried out in other parts of the country where the linguistic differences between the local dialect and standard English are greater. It would be interesting and useful to examine children's use of dialect at school in areas where a local variety of English is more 'focussed' than it is in Reading (see LePage, 1978; Milroy, 1982 for discussion of linguistic focussing); where, in other words, speakers perceive the local variety as in some sense a distinct entity. In some parts of Great Britain, speakers give names to the local variety of English (for example, Scouse is spoken in Liverpool, Geordie in Newcastle, and Cockney in London); and in some regions there are thriving dialect societies which support the local variety. It is possible that children in some of these localities are well aware that they have one variety of English for school and another for home; Trudgill (1979, 1983a), for example, suggests that this is the case in parts of Scotland. It would be worth investigating whether a conscious awareness of dialect and standard on the part of teachers, pupils and parents has any effect on the acquisition of standard English forms in school by dialect speakers.

Cheshire (1982b) found that children used fewer dialect features in their conversations with teachers than in their conversations in adventure playgrounds with their friends. This decrease in the use of dialect forms – accompanied, of course, by a corresponding increase in the use of standard English forms – occurred as part of the normal sociolinguistic processes of style shifting and speech accommodation, and it illustrates the way in which children's attitudes to their teacher and to the school are reflected in their use of dialect. Those children who liked their teacher and who had established a good relationship with him accommodated to his speech by increasing the proportion of standard forms that they used; whereas those children who disliked both their teacher and the

school increased the proportion of dialect forms in their speech when they were talking to him. The adjustments were quantitative, involving the relative proportions of dialect forms and their corresponding standard English forms.

This type of quantitative accommodation, of course, is likely to be unconscious and to go unrecognised by teachers and pupils alike. It illustrates, however, the conflicting pressures which dialect speakers face at school, where they continually adjust their speech in order to linguistically assert their allegiance either to the teacher or to their family and their friends. Sociolinguistic research has shown that the use of dialect features is supported by speakers' social networks and by their peer group loyalties (see Milroy, 1980; Cheshire, 1982b); speakers who are closely integrated into a local peer group, therefore, may be more reluctant than others to adjust their language to meet the requirements of the school, especially in oral work in class, when the peer group is present. Peer group pressures are likely to be felt most strongly during adolescence; indeed, during adolescence children from homes where standard English and R.P. or near-R.P. are spoken may increase the proportion of regional nonstandard forms in their speech, sometimes to the consternation of their parents, who do not realize that this is likely to be a temporary phenomenon (see Cheshire, *in press*).

### 3. Attitudes towards Dialect and Standard English

Linguists have pointed out that attitudes towards regional accents and dialects constitute the main problems concerning dialect and school, rather than the nature of the linguistic differences between dialect and standard English (see, for discussion, Trudgill, 1975). A number of matched guise experiments have been carried out to elicit attitudes to regional accents. The results of these experiments have been widely reported but, again, it is worth briefly repeating them, since they are very relevant to the issue of dialect and the school. For example, a series of matched-guise experiments have shown that accents that are associated with rural areas of Britain tend to be perceived by British speakers as more attractive than accents that are spoken in heavily urbanised areas. These aesthetic judgements are not based on any inherent qualities of the accents, but seem to be based on a nostalgic attachment to rural life, for non-British judges who do not share the social connotations evaluate the accents differently (see Giles and Powesland, 1975; Trudgill, 1983b). The point has often been made that evaluations of this type can cause problems in schools, since teachers may feel that it is in their pupils' best interests to help them to change an accent which they view as 'ugly'. Many speakers who have regional English accents suffer from linguistic insecurity about their speech (see, for discussion, Macaulay, 1977), and it is possible that this insecurity inhibits children with a regional accent from contributing to oral work at school.

Experimental studies have further shown that not only is R.P. evaluated as having more aesthetic merit than other British accents of English but also that R.P. speakers are judged as being more competent (in terms of intelligence, industriousness and self-confidence) than speakers who have a regional pronunciation (see Giles, 1971a, 1971b). These opinions were held even by people who themselves have a regional accent. Of

particular importance in the educational context is an experiment performed by Edwards (1978), in which both middle-class and working-class judges rated a child with R.P. as better on a range of attributes relating to intellectual competence, and also as better behaved, more helpful and as having greater academic potential than children with nonstandard accents. On the other hand, it has also been found that speakers who have regional accents are rated more highly than R.P. speakers on more personal attributes; they have been judged, for example, as more trustworthy and kind hearted than R.P. speakers (Bourhis, Giles and Lambert, 1975) and as more likeable and sincere (Elyan et al., 1978).

Experiments such as these illustrate the dual norms that exist concerning R.P., on the one hand, and regional accents of English, on the other hand. Many of these experiments, however, were carried out a decade or more ago; and it would be interesting to see whether recent changes in the prestige of R.P. and the increasing use of regional accents in the BBC and in public life generally have resulted in a change of attitudes to regional accents. One recent study, however, suggests that the prestige of R.P. is still firmly entrenched in London schools. Collins (1988) found that even school teachers who had been teaching in an Equal Opportunities school for fifteen years and who professed to have liberal attitudes towards regional accents gave the highest ratings to the R.P. guise in a matched guise experiment. Trainee teachers who participated in this study also gave the highest ratings to R.P.

Negative attitudes towards dialect may be compounded by ignorance about what constitutes dialect. Features that are relatively localised may be recognised as dialect; features that are very widespread, on the other hand, are more likely to be seen as 'bad grammar' or as 'incorrect English'. Dialect forms that are widespread are often not perceived as dialect, although their historical pedigree may be just as genuine and just as interesting as forms heard in rural areas, where dialect is expected and acknowledged (see Cheshire, forthcoming); and teachers who do not appreciate the fact that forms such as *we was going* or *she don't know* are systematic features of a local dialect are unlikely to be able to motivate dialect speaking children to use the corresponding standard English forms.

#### 4. Educational Policy

Despite the lack of research in Great Britain into the educational implications of dialect and education, educational policy concerning dialect has changed over the last few decades. A number of government reports have acknowledged the danger that negative attitudes towards nonstandard English may be translated into negative attitudes towards speakers of nonstandard English; and these reports have stressed the importance of valuing in the school the language and culture of the child's home (see Bullock, 1975; D.E.S., 1986; Swann, 1985). The Kingman Report (1988) recommends that R.P. should be the standard for foreign students of English in Britain, but that it should not be used as the model of English pronunciation in British schools, since speakers 'may be rightly proud of their regional pronunciation, which identifies where they come from' (§2.33). These are fine words, and represent some welcome progress in official attitudes towards

variation in English. The 1921 Newbolt Report, for instance, not only confused R.P. and standard English but also equated 'standard English pronunciation' with 'correctness' and 'clearness' (see, for discussion, Edwards, 1984). Nevertheless, the fine words of the Kingman report need to be seen within the context of conflicting social attitudes to regional accents, as we saw above.

The Kingman report also reinforces the recommendations of Bullock (1975) that rather than being required to abandon their home dialect, children should be helped to add the standard language to their linguistic repertoire (op. cit., §2.5). Again, these are fine words, but in the present educational context it has to be admitted that the aim is far from realistic. The burden of teaching standard English to dialect speakers is placed firmly on the shoulders of schoolteachers; but typically teachers have little or no training in linguistics or dialectology and, given the paucity of our knowledge about the linguistic features of British dialects, there is little material available for them to consult (see Edwards and Cheshire, 1989). Furthermore, government reports consistently overlook the attitudinal dimension to dialect and standard English, as well as the way in which the use of dialect is supported by the norm-enforcing mechanisms of speakers' social networks (see Milroy, 1980). Even more importantly, they overlook the way in which linguistic variation in English relates to the power structures within British society and the way in which the British education system reinforces these structures – a relationship which is perhaps more apparent to dialect-speaking children than it is to the writers of government reports.

If the recommendations of the Kingman Report are put into practice, all intending secondary school teachers, of all subjects, will attend a coherent, short course on language study as part of their pre-service training (Kingman, 1988, §6.8), and all specialist English teachers will study the linguistic form and function of the contemporary English language (§6.11). Intending primary teachers will undertake a language course in which more than fifty per cent of the time will be allotted to direct tuition of knowledge about language (§6.5); and in-service education and training courses will give priority both to the English language and to knowledge about language (§6.12). These recommendations, if implemented, would be an immense improvement on current teacher training, where even specialist English teachers often have no training in English language and no understanding of language variation. At present, dialect enters the teacher training curriculum only under the more general topic of multilingualism and multiculturalism (which in any case is not part of the curriculum in all teacher training courses). This places dialect on the educational agenda, at least, but very often the educational problems that are faced by dialect speakers are overlooked by an emphasis on the more severe linguistic problems that are faced by bilingual speakers from ethnic minority groups.

Nevertheless, some practical suggestions have been offered to teachers concerning the handling of dialect in the classroom. Richmond (1982) proposes a coherent scheme for marking children's written work, which separates dialect features from mistakes of grammaticality, punctuation, meaning or spelling and which allows teachers to focus one at a time on the different problems that a child might have in writing. Edwards (1983) contains several useful suggestions for teachers concerning reading, writing and oral work in the classroom, and gives details of some of the classroom resources that are available.

## 5. Teaching Materials

There are few teaching materials specially designed to be used with dialect speaking pupils. At present, dialect is formally introduced into the classroom mainly as part of Language Awareness Programmes, which exist in some primary schools and in some secondary schools as part of the modern languages or English curriculum (see Hawkins, 1984; Jones, 1989). One of the aims of such programmes is for teachers and pupils to see the children themselves as experts on their own language, and for children to use their knowledge to contribute to discussion of a wide range of social issues concerning language, which are important for the entire class. The history and nature of standard English may be briefly considered, and various aspects of linguistic diversity may be discussed. Bilingual children may contribute information about the alphabets and linguistic features of languages other than English, and dialect speaking English children may contribute information about the way that language is used at home.

The Survey of British Dialect Grammar, funded by the British Economic and Social Research Council between 1986–1988, aims to use collaborative classroom projects on dialect as a way of increasing our knowledge about the distribution of features of regional dialect grammar (see Edwards and Cheshire, 1989). After a series of lessons which discuss linguistic diversity in Britain, pupils complete a questionnaire on dialect as a collaborative project, indicating which of a range of dialect features occur in their region. Practical difficulties were encountered during the period of the Survey in the form of industrial action taken by teachers and the disproportionate amount of attention which they were forced to pay to the introduction of the new GCSE public examinations. This has meant that the school-based method of data collection has been less successful than had been anticipated. However, the collaboration between schools and researchers has served as a very useful focus for work on language awareness and it is planned to compile a series of booklets for schoolteachers using data obtained from the Survey, which will outline the main nonstandard linguistic features that occur in a number of regions throughout Britain. These booklets will complement some short descriptions of Southern English, Scots English, Hiberno-English and Newcastle English which should be available during the course of the next year for teachers, speech therapists and other professionals concerned with language (Milroy and Milroy, in press). The Survey is also compiling a Directory of Dialect Resources, which will include information on the availability of dialect material such as books, pamphlets, dialect literature, newspaper columns, records and cassettes, local radio broadcasts, sound archives, local events as well as details of local dialect societies. This Directory should be an invaluable resource for teachers wishing to incorporate discussion of dialect in Language Awareness programmes or in other kinds of work on language, and it is hoped that dialect will be given greater prominence within the classroom as a result.

## 6. Conclusion

Finally, it should be emphasised that it is highly unlikely that dialect alone can account for the alienation from school that is experienced by a large proportion of children in Great Britain, though the role that dialect might play in fostering this alienation cannot be overlooked. Language is intimately connected with our social identity, and the treatment of dialect in school requires great sensitivity. Educational policy is becoming more enlightened, but it continues to be sociolinguistically naive, neglecting the all-important issues of widespread public ignorance about the nature of dialect, and of social attitudes to dialect and standard. These issues are becoming increasingly important in schools, with the current emphasis on oracy in the classroom, with the introduction in 1988 of an obligatory oral component in the GCSE English examination for 16 year old pupils and with the use of standard English grammar being recommended as an attainment target for all 16 year olds (Kingman, 1988: 52). Given the relation between the use of nonstandard grammar and a child's social identity, together with the norm-enforcing mechanisms of children's social networks, it seems that the Kingman Report's attainment target is an unrealistic goal. At the very least, if policy is to be put into practice, some attempts must be made to eradicate the prejudice and ignorance about dialect and standard English which currently exists both in schools and in British society more generally. Without this, the vast majority of British school children, whose linguistic heritage has been a nonstandard variety of English, will continue to be disadvantaged in their school careers.

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