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Improving education by bringing nonstandard linguistic varieties to the fore: the case of African American Vernacular English

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Abstract

While a descriptivist view on linguistic variation is generally assumed by linguists, the opposite (i.e. prescriptivist) assumption unfortunately pervades society: a specific variety (the so-called standard variety) is taken to be 'correct', whereas the remaining ones are considered to be 'incorrect' or 'bad language'.

This prejudice is deeply rooted in the educational field. Although school is an essential institution, it nevertheless contributes to the perpetuation of dominant ideologies, which are imposed on students as the only existing ones. This fully applies to language, since school reproduces the dominant linguistic uses and values. As a result, educational practices rely solely on standard English as the language of instruction (even when the vast majority of children fail to identify with it), while the student's native dialects are systematically ignored. This has led to a continual discrimination of nonstandard varieties of English in education, many of which already suffered social exclusion for diverse reasons.

In this line of thought, Stubbs (1983) has argued that linguists are often reluctant to become involved in educational debates. The aim of this project is to modestly help fill the gap Stubbs was aware of. Therefore, an attempt will be made to give evidence to support the need to improve education by introducing linguistic variation in schools. For such an objective to be attained, a way will be suggested in which this could be endeavoured in the particular case of African American Vernacular English, the clearest example of an undervalued variety of English.

Language is central to education, not only as a specific subject in the curriculum (English language), but also as the means through which the overall curriculum is taught. In consequence, this project will make the point that the use of native dialects in the access to the standard variety should be allowed (and enforced) in schools in order to avoid a number of undesirable consequences.

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Introduction

The disciplines in which human knowledge has traditionally been organised have historically had an unequal amount of power to get their message across in society. Even today it would seem that the natural sciences concentrate most of that power of influence, an assertion supported by the fact that it is in these fields where popular belief can be said to be more up to date —even if it still is, of course, far behind the great breakthroughs of contemporary and recent research.

When confronted with this fact, one may be tempted to adduce too naïve a reason to account for it: because people have a especially direct and immediate relationship with the object of Medicine, for instance, the scientific findings of this field will find an easier and quicker way into the general mentality. However, as soon as we analogise and apply the same argument to Linguistics, a paradox appears: given the depth of the link between language and personal (and collective) identity and the crucial role it plays in social affairs, a perceived disconnection to the object of the discipline cannot possibly explain its current social status. A common illustration of this contradiction (often used by Linguistics teachers in the classroom) is the obvious fact that, while nobody with an elementary education would deny the basic arrangement of the Solar System being what it is, many would —and indeed do— feel entitled to state truths and deliver all sorts of judgements about language, with complete disregard for the earliest and most elementary findings of Linguistics.

The fact that common attitudes of this kind are possible is the result of a socially dangerous side-effect of the uneven distribution of power among the various fields of knowledge: the prestige accorded to specialists is also not the same. While physicists, for instance, seem to be widely respected and almost never contradicted by common people not educated in the field, linguists see their empirically validated ideas about language challenged in everyday conversations even by the most uninformed of their acquaintances. At a general level, the logical result of this situation is that disciplines without educated members able to exert social influence will be unable to spread their

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new ideas, progressively generating a gap between scholarly knowledge and its social representation.

This has, at least in some degree, happened in Linguistics, and the aim of this essay will be to explore how it has affected one of the issues in the discussion of which the distance between scholars and society is wider and more visible: the phenomenon of language variation. We will, on the one hand, explain the characteristics and fundamentals of this particular gap, and, on the other hand, have a look at some of the serious social consequences it has had (and still has) in the way speakers are discriminated in society for both linguistic and non-linguistic reasons. This second part will focus on the impact this discrimination has had on educational policies and on the way language and particularly nonstandard linguistic varieties have been treated in educational institutions, with special reference to the case of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), which will be used for illustration.

The wide gap between experts' and society's understanding of linguistic variation is rooted in a prescriptivist view of language use which, supported by members of the various social sciences and humanities, has had a great deal of success among the general public, giving rise to all sorts of non-linguistic notions and prejudiced attitudes against every form of language change. As a result, language uses which depart from what prescriptivist institutions dictate as correct and standard are systematically regarded as unacceptable and used as powerful social weapons to discriminate speakers —often those already discriminated for race, class, gender or other non-linguistic reasons. Prescriptivist institutions, among which school occupies a prominent position, continue to disseminate and perpetuate this ideology of correctness (invariably associated with the standard variety), preventing descriptivist views of language from penetrating public opinion.

Far from ignoring this situation, linguists have long been aware of its enormous repercussion on people's lives, even though they have not yet succeeded in eradicating such toxic attitudes towards language from society and its institutions. Bauer and Trudgill (1998) believe this failure may be partly due to linguists' inability to communicate their ideas outside specialised forums, thus restricting the access of the general public to a growing body of research which especially over the last decades has sought to prove that linguistic prescriptivism lacks both scientific rigor and empirical grounds. Today, the widespread use of the internet provides a powerful resource which will need to be exploited in order to communicate this criticism and effect a real change in the general attitude towards language variation.

The issue of the stigmatisation of nonstandard linguistic varieties is a very complex one, and it is not only related to non-linguistic notions of correctness but also to the process of standardisation itself. The total exclusion of nonstandard varieties from the institutions inevitably plays a role in the determination of their social status, as does the ideological constructions surrounding the standard variety, mostly based on non-linguistic criteria. Therefore, it is necessary to question whether this linguistic distribution is the only way to harmonise the necessity of a standard with the respect

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for other varieties, and whether there is a way to introduce the latter in the institutions —particularly in schools— which may contribute to promote a scientific, linguistic understanding of them in society.

In order to analyse the beneficial aspects of inclusive and innovative policies of this kind, and to give an idea of the magnitude the clash between linguistic knowledge and the public opinion can reach, we will focus on the case of African American Vernacular English and discuss the Oakland Unified School District decision in 1996 to introduce it in the classroom as a language of instruction. Through this example, we will illustrate the general prejudice against nonstandard linguistic varieties and prove that prescriptivist attitudes are linguistically ungrounded and can be extremely harmful to the people they discriminate against. Finally, we will argue in favour of integrative language policies in education and point out their many advantages and enormous potential to create a more egalitarian society.

Part I: Understanding variation

1 Variation and standardisation: related processes

As we anticipated in the introduction, any discussion of the phenomenon of language variation requires a careful look at the process of standardisation. As an ongoing historical process which superimposes a selected dialect over the rest (Milroy and Milroy, 1985:9), standardisation requires attention primarily because of the crucial role it plays in shaping the social perception of linguistic variation. Understanding what the standard variety is —and, perhaps most importantly, what it is not— is a necessary step towards an evaluation of the social and political consequences its presence has for other linguistic varieties.

Approaches to the study of standard varieties may be said to have traditionally fallen into two groups, the first focusing on the more purely linguistic aspects of the standard as a dialect, and the second dealing primarily with its impact beyond the linguistic level, often in relation to notions of ideology, myth and social power. Since language itself is a multidimensional phenomenon, it is to be expected that several levels of reality will need to be explored in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of its operations. In consequence, we will attempt to characterise Standard English in relation to both the linguistic and the socio-political dimensions, paying special attention to the place that is accorded to nonstandard varieties within this order.

But before we enter into this characterisation, it will be useful to present first an overview of the general mechanics of standardisation as a historical and political process so that we can situate standard and nonstandard varieties in their appropriate context.

1.1 Standardisation as an ongoing socio-political process

To generally characterise standardisation, we may say that it is an institutional response to the socio-political implications of the natural and inevitable presence of variation in language. As a process it is in no way inherent to language or to the existence of linguistic variation, and it will not come about automatically but only by deliberate and carefully planned linguistic planification and political intervention (Romaine, 1994:88). Therefore, we have a response to a socio-political reality that is also in itself socio-political.

Being a socio-political process, standardisation also has a historical dimension as an ongoing intervention which 'can never be regarded as complete' (Romaine, 1994:88; also on this point Milroy and Milroy, 1985:22). Once attained, the status of the standard language needs to be maintained, so that a whole institutional apparatus needs to be created in order to perpetuate the linguistic order of things. As a result, carrying the process through its initial stages may in itself take several centuries, and the intervention continues on, projecting itself out into the future of the language. Thus, the institutions (both ideological and physical) which support the standard are 'constructed and re-constructed on an on-going basis by those who have a vested interest in the concept' (Lippi-Green, 2012:56).

Most authors agree that standardisation can be seen as progressing along a series of stages which have been observed to succeed each other quite regularly over the history of standardised languages. An example description of this process of implementation is provided by Milroy and Milroy (1985:27): a variety of the language is first *selected* to become the standard, *accepted* by powerful members of society and *diffused* by various means (including education, the media, and the discrimination of speakers of other varieties); once these initial steps have been completed, the standard now needs to be *maintained* through an *elaboration* of its functions, its acquisition of *prestige* and its *codification*. The authors add *prescription* here as an extra element following codification, although as we will see it shouldn't necessarily be a part of the process of standardisation —and the same is valid for the element of discrimination for the purposes of diffusion.

The motivations for standardisation, as well as its goals, are also purely socio-political. One of the main motivations behind it is the widely accepted contention that not selecting a standard would eventually lead to the language breaking up into dialects which would in time become mutually incomprehensible, causing the political fragmentation of the nation. However, this statement is sometimes seen as problematic in the sense that it presupposes that a greater degree of geographical neutrality in language will invariably lead to better communication, when in fact this conclusion is uncertain and there definitely is no such neutrality in the selection of standard varieties (Lippi-Green, 2012:60 on this last point). The very fundamental goal of standardisation

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(i.e. defining a standard) entails intolerance of variation, a basic linguistic reality (Joseph, 2006:44[1]; Milroy, 1998:95; Milroy and Milroy, 1985:22), under the pretext of maximising communicative efficiency and minimising misunderstandings (Milroy and Milroy, 1985:23). The final aim of the process is to give rise to a standard with a publicly recognised fixed form and an unusual degree of stability (Trudgill, 2002:159).

Furthermore, in the languages that undergo standardisation 'the standard variety is selected through purely social processes' (Preston, 1998:140). Such a statement is an important one in this discussion, since it already follows from it that the standard is not selected on linguistic grounds, because (as we will argue later) in that respect it is not fundamentally different from other varieties of the language.

This overall predominance of the socio-political over the linguistic dimension in most matters related to standardisation has led some authors to consider the process as a fundamentally ideological one, and to focus on its social consequences rather than on its linguistic characterisation alone. Thus, Romaine (1994:87) sees the process as 'one of the main agents of [social] inequality', and places the emphasis on the sociolinguistic repercussions of the implementation of a standard, which inevitably affects the social and institutional status of other varieties.

The following section will go back to these non-linguistic aspects of standardisation while also aiming at a multidimensional characterisation of the standard variety (in this case Standard English) in both linguistic and socio-political terms.

1.2 The characterisation of standard and nonstandard varieties

1.2.1 Ideology, myth and metaphor in the standard

As we have already mentioned, the institutions supporting the selected variety through the process of standardisation are not only physical but ideological as well. For the standard variety to attain its social status, it is necessary to surround it with myths, metaphors about language and other ideological constructions that will elevate it over other varieties in the minds of the speakers. And this is so because metaphors and myths 'play a role in the way in which we reason socially', creating 'mental frameworks that structure people's reasoning about social issues' (Battistella, 2005:154). Thus, in standardisation 'the dominant viewpoint advocates assimilation to an idealised standard' that is associated with notions of social good (Battistella, 2005:148).

Among these notions, some of the most commonly identified in relation to the standard variety are 'social mobility[2], political unity and common values' (Battistella,

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[1] Joseph goes further and explains that the notion of 'national language' implies denial not only of multilectalism but of multilingualism too.

[2] It is interesting to note that, as Milroy and Milroy have observed (1985:2), social mobility is often blocked to speakers with nonstandard linguistic usages without any official admission.

2005:148); another important set has to do with the historical notion of progress and promotes a view of the standard as 'a tool for social efficiency and economic advancement' —something to which nonstandard varieties are implicitly understood to be an obstacle[3]. As Crowley has pointed out (2003:77), the standard acts socially as 'an authoritative focal point, as a marker and constructor of authority' around which different entities can be unified. The author also explains that, once the standard ceases to be a mere symbol of external authority and 'becomes an authority *in itself*', its power as an agent of uniformity grows and it can now 'be used in processes of evaluation and comparison' as 'a specific and communally accepted code' (Crowley, 2003:78).

In this last sense, standardisation and prescription come very close to each other as related phenomena (Milroy and Milroy, 1985:2). It should not be forgotten that linguistic prescription, as an ideology of 'correctness' imposed from above, is arbitrary (Milroy and Milroy, 1985:1), however relevant the role it plays in the reality of language use may be. The social consideration of the standard variety is indeed very deeply affected by prescriptivist ideology: speakers widely believe that the use of the standard variety is the only 'correct' way to use the language, and that anything departing from it is 'bad language' and a sign of personal 'carelessness' or even 'bad manners'. This identification of the standard with 'a set of abstract norms to which actual usage may conform to a greater or lesser extent' (Milroy and Milroy, 1985:23) is the primary operation of prescriptivist ideology, which shouldn't, however, in our opinion, be confused with standardisation itself, to which it is merely superposed. The selection and implementation of a variety as standard shouldn't necessarily mean that a prescriptivist ideological construct should be attached to it. We believe with Pullum (2006:4) that the selection of a dialect as standard has nothing to do in principle with the formulation of prescriptive rules for it.

As a dialect, the standard is not only —and perhaps not primarily— a construct or an idea in the mind, but a linguistic reality as well. However, some authors have chosen to focus on the way the standard works as an abstraction (Milroy and Milroy, 1985:23) or as a myth (Lippi-Green, 2012:44) in society, seeking to explain how it is used to justify and perpetuate an unfair order of things and to motivate a social behaviour which would otherwise contradict reason. Interesting and revealing as these perspectives are, a comprehensive understanding of the standard also requires attention to is existence as a linguistic entity. Therefore, and as a complement to this discussion, the next section will focus on the linguistic description of the standard in order to clarify what nonstandard varieties are and are not, and will show how wide the gap is between the public's understanding of dialects and linguists' conception of them.

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[3] As the reader may have anticipated, the fact that the standard dialect is invariably associated with values of social good also means that nonstandard varieties will be ideologically interpreted as a threat to these values (Battistella, 2005:150).

1.2.2 Standard English and the linguistic understanding of dialects

It is often the case that attempts to define what a standard variety is consist in negative characterisations (i.e. definitions of what it is not) rather than actual linguistic descriptions. Thus, it is not unusual to find a standard variety defined by opposition to the nonstandard varieties of the same language, the standard's features being simply those which are not specifically nonstandard. It would appear that, among specialists as among the general public, awareness[4] of linguistic variation might sometimes take the form of an increased perception of nonstandard linguistic features and a certain tendency to regard the standard as the 'unmarked' way of speaking of which a description is not particularly urgent or necessary. However, upon closer inspection it becomes clear that both negative and positive characterisations of the standard variety are necessary to understand the phenomenon of linguistic variation. It is only by comparing and contrasting dialects scientifically that we can reach valuable and valid conclusions about their common linguistic nature, and at the same time gain insight into their differences and how these must be understood.

First of all, it is important to understand that from a linguistic point of view the standard does not constitute a language in itself but is only a variety of a language. Saying that a language has been standardised only means that one of its varieties (and not all of them) has undergone this process (Trudgill, 2002:160). Thus, the variety that we may call Standard English (henceforth SE) is but one dialect of the English language. As a consequence of the doctrine of arbitrariness, then, SE as a dialect cannot be shown to be any more complex, logic, systematic, expressive or better than any other variety of English on linguistic grounds (Milroy and Milroy 1985:12; Preston, 1998:140). Although all dialects will appear to 'lack something' when compared to other dialects, each of them combines a unique[5] set of features in a particular way which leaves no 'gaps' in actual usage, making every dialect equally effective in terms of real communication[6] (Milroy and Milroy, 1985:14).

Another very common misconception is the identification of the standard with an accent: while the term accent[7] refers only to the linguistic level of phonology (including

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[4] According to Joseph (2006:44), awareness of variation is constant among speakers, even if it takes the form of value judgements.

[5] What is unique is the complete set of features, though individual features may be shared among dialects. However, patterns and levels of usage of the same feature may vary from one dialect to another (Schilling-Estes, 2006:325).

[6] And the same stands for the comparisons between varieties of different languages, of course.

[7] On a socio-political dimension, however, the notion of accent only makes sense if it is defined comparatively: here accentedness is an abstract notion, and it refers to people's judgement of others' speech as 'accented' (and of their own as 'non-accented'), a perception which —however unrelated to communicative competence— affects comprehensibility (Lippi-Green, 2012:45). As Preston points out (1998:143), differences are heard not on the basis of

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segmental and suprasegmental features), a dialect covers all linguistic levels. It is a particular characteristic of the standard variety that its definition is independent from accent, so that identifications of SE with, say, RP (a standardised accent of English known as Received Pronunciation) are to be avoided[8] (Trudgill, 2002:160). Such identifications, however, may still be found in the literature (Schilling-Estes, 2006:314), probably as part of a well-intentioned attempt to simplify matters for students.

The next incorrect statement that needs to be avoided is the identification of SE with a (formal) style[9] of English. Although it is true that SE tends to dominate over other dialects in those social contexts in which a formal style is required, this does not mean that it is not possible to use a formal style within other dialects of the language. The standard/nonstandard and formal/informal parameters are mutually independent, so that 'stylistic switching occurs *within* dialects and not *between* them' (Trudgill, 2002:163). This is to say that speakers of all varieties of English have a full range of styles available to them, distributed along a continuum which goes from very informal to very formal, and they will choose among these possibilities in accordance to the context. Since in English lexical choice is the main[10] indicator of stylistic variation, this also means that speakers can swear and use slang within SE, as within any nonstandard variety (Trudgill, 2002:162).

The question of slang in particular deserves more attention than the issue may initially appear to require: some nonstandard varieties of English, notably African American Vernacular English (henceforth AAVE), have repeatedly been accused of consisting simply of slang, as several authors have documented (Pullum, 1999:40, among others). But as it happens, the very definition of slang makes this claim untenable: slang does not constitute a variety of a language, but is simply an array of lexical items situated at the informal end of the stylistic continuum whose use is often regionally restricted and associated to a particular subculture (Pullum, 1999:40; Trudgill, 2002:162). Therefore, since slang 'has no grammar of its own' and is 'by definition parasitic' on a larger linguistic system, no dialect can be said to consist of slang at all (Pullum, 1999:40). The same argument is valid for registers, understood as 'varieties of a language determined by topic, subject matter or activity', which are also fundamentally a matter of lexis (Trudgill, 2002:163). Again, social convention dictates

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objective languistic differences, but on the basis of the listener's evaluation of 'correctness' (here equivalent to 'non-accentedness').

[8] As Trudgill aptly explains, 'while all RP speakers also speak SE, the reverse is not the case', since RP is just 'a standardised accent of English and not Standard English itself'.

[9] Labov may be understood as doing this when he wonders whether middle-class verbal habits (identifiable in this context with SE) are not in fact 'an elaborated style, rather than a superior code or system' (1972:192). However, he later states that 'all too often, "standard English" is represented by a style that is simultaneously over-particular and vague', so it is not certain that he is indeed suggesting a complete identification between SE and a particular style.

[10] Grammar and phonology are also, although to a much lesser degree, sensitive to stylistic variation (Trudgill, 2002:162).

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that SE will be used preferentially over other dialects whenever scientific or other technical registers are required, but this does not imply that the parameters are not in themselves theoretically independent (Trudgill, 2002:164).

As to the relation between SE and written language in general, it is widely accepted that in order for standardisation to take place, the language to undergo it must first have a written form (Romaine, 1994:90). The reason behind this is that writing 'effaces many of the levels at which variation in spoken language is manifested', and also because at a socio-political level writing has played 'a crucial role in the historical recognition of languages' (Joseph, 2006:46). This is true to the point that some authors assert that 'the politics of language, especially of 'correct' or 'standard' language, are bound up with writing' (Joseph, 2006:46), an acknowledgement of the fact that prescriptivist authorities have always tended to focus on written language rather than on speech (Milroy and Milroy, 1985:22) —probably due to the perceived superiority of the former due to its connection to formal education. However, Milroy and Milroy's contention that 'it is difficult to point to a fixed and invariant kind of English that can properly be called standard unless we consider only the written form to be relevant' (1985:22) is in our opinion inaccurate, since it appears to equate SE to the stylistic rules that are prescribed for the written use of the language. We agree with Trudgill (2002:166) that SE is not only used in writing but is also spoken, its speakers tending to concentrate in the upper classes. From a socio-political perspective, it may be true that nonstandard varieties are understood as being primarily spoken and therefore presented as the opposite of a posited written, literary standard (Crowley, 2003:83), but from a linguistic perspective we consider it a mistake to deny that SE today has a spoken aspect —and actual speakers.

What really characterises SE —and generally any standard dialect—, then, is not that it is the only variety used in writing (which it is not, predominant as its presence may be in this sphere), but some quite uncommon features which clearly set it apart from other varieties of English. Firstly, 'no other variety has the resources or the prestige of the standard' (Romaine, 1994:90), since it is 'the most important dialect from a social, intellectual and cultural point of view' (Trudgill, 2002:165). Secondly, it is sharply delimitated from other varieties of the language, with no continuum linking it to nonstandard dialects; the reason behind this, Trudgill explains (2002:166), is that codification 'results in a situation in which a feature is either standard or it is not', as we anticipated at the beginning of this section. Thirdly, SE is no longer a geographical dialect but a purely social dialect, even if 'it is true that, in the English-speaking world as a whole, it comes in a number of different forms' (e.g. American Standard English, English Standard English, etc.) (Trudgill, 2002:166). Lastly, since its vocabulary is available to all other varieties of the language[11] and, as we have said, its

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[11] Although the lexicon of SE is not geographically restricted, nonstandard varieties sometimes have their own idiosyncratic vocabulary. As a result, we cannot strictly speak of a 'SE vocabulary' but we can say that there is indeed such a thing as nonstandard vocabulary (Trudgill, 2002:169).

characterisation is independent from phonology, we must conclude that the fundamental difference which sets SE apart from nonstandard varieties is its *grammar* (Trudgill, 2002:167).

The following section will explain what we mean by *grammar* and show that it bears no relation to prescriptive rules about language use. An explicit relation of some of the most salient grammatical features of SE will later be provided in Part II, when we will discuss them in relation to AAVE. But first, we will now have a look at the complex way in which prescription affects variation and explain one of its most serious consequences: the misrepresentation of nonstandard varieties.

2 Variation and prescription

So far, we have merely stated that prescriptivist ideology has played a fundamental role in the construction of a social order in which nonstandard varieties are displaced from many social spheres and disregarded as 'debased' forms of language. We will now go back to the issue and clarify how this ideology operates and why it so often taints the social understanding of standard (and nonstandard) varieties. In order to do this, we will gather some of the best arguments in the literature to show that prescriptivism is grounded on a thoroughly mistaken conception of language and lacks all scientific support.

2.1 The fallacies of linguistic prescriptivism

To start with, let us say that modern Linguistics defines itself as a descriptive field (Milroy and Milroy, 1985:11). This means that it is the linguist's job to attempt a description of how speakers actually use language in social reality, and not to regulate that use by prescribing (i.e. dictating) rules about what speakers ought to do with language. Thus, while description entails observation of an empirical reality and a rational effort to understand its workings, prescription is always 'one jump ahead' of observation, and is simply concerned with the way reality should be, not with the way it actually is. Therefore, a fundamental difference between these two methodologies is that description does not in itself entail any intervention on reality, while prescription is fundamentally interventionist by definition, its ultimate aim being to alter the present state of affairs. In this sense, prescription always implies an important degree of dissatisfaction with the way things are or may eventually come to be, while description remains neutral towards the reality it attempts to explain. This basic distinction is crucial to our discussion, and it should be kept in mind.

In linguistic practice, these two different ways of proceeding have important implications for the way language —and especially language use— is understood. While Linguistics, in accordance with its descriptive nature, excludes value judgements from the analysis of linguistic phenomena, prescription has its very origin in a negative evaluation or denial of them (language change as corruption, variation as a threat, etc.). It is easy to see the difference in scientificity between the two: while description

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will consist in the elaboration of 'explicit and potentially falsifiable formulations' of 'the principles that constitute a language' (Pullum, 2006:1), prescription will ignore the nature of these principles and simply attempt to regulate language use according to a set of arbitrary dictates. Therefore, while description does not require authority, prescription is fundamentally dependent on it, since arbitrary dictates cannot be imposed as the norm without exercising a great deal of power from 'above'. Prescriptivist institutions assume they will be granted authority simply 'because they demand it, and because it has always been granted' (Lippi-Green, 2012:59).

In terms of the distinction explained by Pullum (2006:1) between *constitutive* and *regulative*[12], the fundamental principles of language which Linguistics as a descriptive field attempts to give formulations of are *constitutive*: they constitute the basis on which a sentence in the given language may be said to be *grammatical* or *correct* in a strict sense (i.e. well formed in the language). These *correctness conditions*, as the author calls them, 'constitute the language, in the sense that not respecting them amounts to not using it at all but doing something else instead'. In the same terms, the arbitrary usage guidelines dictated by prescriptivist authorities are *regulative*, in the sense that 'it is possible to use [the language] in ways that comply [with them] or in ways that don't' (Pullum, 2006:1). This means, for instance, that a person using SE will always necessarily respect its correctness conditions (because they are not subject to violation[13]), but will not necessarily comply with regulative prescriptive rules about how SE should be used according to the criteria of some authority.

Different varieties of the same language always have 'at least slightly different correctness conditions' (Pullum, 2006:2). This means that what is grammatical, correct or well formed in one dialect may not be so in another. What is important to understand here is that it is not possible to claim the ungrammaticality of a sentence in a particular dialect on the grounds of the correctness conditions of another. Unfortunately, this is done constantly: very often, sentences in nonstandard varieties of English are claimed to be ungrammatical on the basis that they violate the constitutive principles of SE — principles which, of course, they never had any reason to comply with.

Not only has this happened continually over the history of languages, but a much worse situation has not been any less common: regulative prescriptive rules designed for SE are often believed to constitute the correctness conditions of the whole English language, so that any standard or nonstandard linguistic use which does not comply with them will be immediately rejected as 'incorrect' and 'ungrammatical', when in fact real grammar and correctness were never considered in the argument. Constructions which are often described as 'bad grammar' according to this rationale

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[12] A distinction which, he notes, was made familiar by Searle some 45 years ago.

[13] As Milroy explains (1998:99), speakers never violate constitutive rules when they use language because knowledge of them is mostly unconscious and works as a 'mental grammar'.

may include linguistic uses of both 'educated' and low-status speakers as well as forms associated with informal speech in general (Milroy, 1998:101).

How is it possible that constitutive and regulative rules may be so wildly confused by both prescriptivist authorities and the general public? How can constitutive grammar be mistaken for linguistic 'etiquette'? Well, as to prescriptivist institutions, we have already explained that the ideological constructs which support the standard are perpetuated by those who profit from them, so it is clear that naïve explanations are not to be sought here. As to the general public, however, it is easy to imagine this confusion as a consequence of the codification of SE in books with a prescriptive purpose which are often mistaken for descriptive grammars and believed to actually 'contain' the language. As a result, unfortunately, prescriptive rules 'form the backbone of what the general public understands and believes about English grammar' (Pullum, 2006:14). Aside from the strong and constant influence prescriptivist authorities certainly exert on public opinion, in this case an explanation may be found within the very process of standardisation.

Going back to our initial point, the problem of course is that prescriptive ideology promotes a view of language which denies its basic realities (variation, change, actual use, etc.) and instead assumes the independent existence of a set of regulative rules (prescribed for the standard) as 'the language'. As Pullum points out, this disconnection of regulative rules from actual language use provides an external basis for an evaluation of 'correctness' which is then claimed to be 'objective' (2006:6).

Among the ideological constructs selected to function as this justificatory basis, a list[14] of some of the most common is presented by the author, and then each of them refuted individually. Most of these external criteria —asceticism, authoritarianism, classicism, etc.— are 'distinctively 19th-century'. They mostly include mythicised notions of language as a 'delicate organism or fragile artefact' (Battistella, 2005:150) which will in time deteriorate if left in the hands of speakers, unless it is taken care of by the self-instituted 'guardians of usage'. The underlying view is that normal people 'are not smart enough, not aware enough, to be in charge of their own language' (Lippi-Green, 2012:60), which is why an external authority is needed to impose order. For prescriptivists, 'bad language' —too often identified with nonstandard usage— arises from speakers' perversity, silliness, laziness, irrationality, cognitive deficiency or inability to learn the rules of 'correctness' they have dictated (Milroy and Milroy, 1985:25; Pullum, 2006:7). Language change and variation are seen as linguistic and social catastrophes leading to the decay of civilisation and to a departure from everything that was once beautiful, orderly and regularly patterned. What is forgotten by the supporters of this 'golden age' myth, of course, is that the linguistic realities they deny are consubstantial to language and have therefore always been there —which means that a 'glorious past' of absolute linguistic stability never really existed.

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[14] The full list includes nostalgia, classicism, authoritarianism, aestheticism, coherentism, logicism, commonsensism, functionalism and asceticism (Pullum, 2006:7).

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Unscientific and ridiculous as these ideas are from a linguistic point of view, their acceptance in society is very widespread. The next section will explore some of the consequences the social importance of prescriptive ideology has for the representation of nonstandard varieties in the social imaginary, and the political problem this poses for their speakers.

2.2 The misrepresentation of nonstandard varieties

We have just seen that prescriptive rules 'construed as having a descriptive intent' are 'hopelessly silly' (Pullum, 2006:3), because they are in no way equivalent to the constitutive correctness conditions of either SE or any of the nonstandard varieties of English. They are only stylistic recommendations for a particular dialect, and therefore necessarily fail in predicting language use correctly. As Milroy puts it (1998:96), 'prescription does not work because it is not based on a principled analysis of the structure of English but is a response to cultural and political pressures'. And yet, these regulative rules are often believed to constitute English itself.

However, it is also common that even a linguist's formulation of the correctness conditions of SE may be mistaken for a recommendation on how to use the English language in general. 'Because the advantages of learning to use SE are (for some purposes) fairly clear', Pullum explains (2006:6), 'one can see where this error comes from'. 'But it is an error', of course. However necessary or commendable the use of SE may be for some aspects of social life (which are mainly institutional), it cannot be understood as the only variety of English with regular patterns. Unfortunately, since nonstandard varieties are often judged with respect to SE's correctness conditions, they are believed to 'violate the basic patterns of language' (Wolfram, 1998:108).

This grammaticality myth surrounding SE has led the public opinion to forget that 'linguistic integrity stands apart from its social assessment' (Wolfram, 1998:109), and that the selection of a variety as the prestige dialect has nothing to do with its correctness conditions, since neither these nor regulative rules say anything at all about the place a dialect should be accorded in society (Pullum, 2006:5). This means that, although SE is clearly the prestige dialect in Anglophone society, there is nothing in its grammar that makes it more appropriate than other varieties for this function. 'Grammar in and of itself does not establish social distinctions or justify morally tinged condemnation of nonstandard dialects' (Pullum, 1999:57).

However, as a result of these misconceptions about SE, there is the widespread belief that some varieties of English are more 'standard' than others, as if their 'correctness' (here meaning 'propriety') could be ranged in a continuum according to their distance from SE. As Preston aptly warns (1998:140), the intensity of this belief is not to be taken lightly, for it is often a strongly expressed preference. In general, it is clear that nonstandard linguistic forms are often perceived to be debased forms of their SE counterparts (Milroy and Milroy, 1985:8).

It is important to remember that 'whatever is identified as the 'good' or 'correct' form of the language empowers those who have it as part of their linguistic repertoire,

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and disempowers those who don't' (Joseph, 2006:44). Since prescriptivist authorities only legislate for the standard variety, the idea that is conveyed is that SE is 'the real language' or 'the language as it should be' (Romaine, 1994:90), which of course affects the status of nonstandard dialects in a very significant way. Once again, it becomes apparent that cultural politics are at the heart of language definition and analysis (Joseph, 2006:25).

As the reader may have noticed, the section of the population commonly identified as 'the educated' —and invariably classified as speaking SE— is never properly delimitated or defined: we never get to know who 'the educated' really are, or what 'educated' actually means (Lippi-Green, 2012:57). However, what we do know is that the uneducated are clearly said to be those who speak a nonstandard variety of English. It is remarkable that the self-invested guardians of usage who so often proclaim themselves the solemn defendants of logic cannot recognise such a flagrant *contrarium* fallacy: even if all SE speakers were in fact educated, this would not automatically make nonstandard speakers uneducated. The fact that SE has been and still is the variety of English used in educational institutions does not mean that those who do not speak it are intellectually inferior in any way, or that it is impossible to speak SE without having received a formal education; it means simply that those people who are connected with educational institutions will have a higher chance of being in contact with this variety.

In short, the fact that speakers do not follow the regulative rules prescribed for SE does not mean that they do not know its constitutive rules or those of the nonstandard dialect they speak: it does not mean that they do not know how to use the language. Even within SE 'it is not true that there is a single rule and some people have failed to learn it' (Pullum, 1999:43), because 'languages have many rules and regularities of sentence structure, and speakers select from among the possibilities in ways that are highly complex' (Pullum, 1999:53). Thus, even within a given dialect there may be more than one possibility for the syntactic construction of a sentence, and this does not mean that any of the speakers of that dialect is doing anything wrong. Variation is not a question of ignorance, but a natural linguistic reality which needs to be acknowledged.

The misrepresentation of the nonstandard varieties of English has been a constant element for centuries and still persists in contemporary society. The politically conservative attitudes linked to prescriptivism have prevented a scientific view of language variation from penetrating the public mind, favouring the dominant position of a dialect (SE) associated with those who have tangible power in society. Despite these circumstances, nonstandard varieties are still spoken, which means that 'people do not put into effect absolute [prescriptive] views that particular usages are right or wrong', but instead adapt their use of the language to the social context (Milroy and Milroy, 1985:19).

Part II of this essay will explore how these issues affect the life of nonstandard speakers in educational institutions and have a look at the way in which classroom

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dynamics and educational success are affected by dialect choice. The case of AAVE will be used for illustration, and attention will be paid to the interesting ways in which this dialect differs from SE, both from a linguistic and a socio-political perspective. A preliminary outline of the main distinctive features of AAVE can be found in Appendix I, followed with a brief description of the grammar of SE for contrastive purposes (Appendix II). We recommend the reader have a look at these before continuing on to Part II.

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Part II: Variation in education

1 Education as linguistic interaction

Including a section on education in an essay about variation implies considering the activity of the classroom as a fundamentally linguistic one, or at least as one which bears an important relation to the use of language in a particular institutional context. But 'the relations between language and education are complex, and it is important not to oversimplify them' (Stubbs, 1983:15-16), so this initial assumption needs to be justified, and a number of questions answered. The first and perhaps most important of these questions deals with whether the language used in the classroom is relevant for the process of learning, and therefore for the students' development and success. As we will see, not only is language relevant, but there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that its role in education is central[15]. We will now explain why and have a look at the many ways in which this affects students and their life at school.

1.1 The role of language in classroom dynamics

As we discussed in Part I, stereotypes and unscientific conceptions of language are very widespread in all social contexts, and education is yet another sphere in which 'facts of language are displaced by myths' (Thornton, 1986:13). At school, children's perception of language —and of related issues such as language variation or language change— is shaped in two main ways: directly, through formal language instruction (e.g. English, Language Arts, etc.), and indirectly, through the general linguistic interaction between teachers and students around which all lessons are built. It would

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[15] According to Thornton (1986:1), close observation of classroom practice has lead a number of education professionals to recognise that 'educational failure is primarily linguistic failure'.

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be a serious mistake to assume that the former way is more important than the latter, since it is mostly through indirect instruction that students are presented with the real norm of what is and is not accepted in everyday linguistic interaction at school. Direct language instruction may reinforce it or make it explicit, but since a lot of what goes on in the classroom consists in verbal exchanges between students and the teacher, this interaction constitutes the main space for language evaluation and its transmission.

But in order to explain what is meant by 'indirect' it is necessary to have a look at classroom dynamics in detail. During the course of any lesson, the teacher, as the maximum figure of authority, regulates verbal interaction by allowing certain types of contributions and censoring others, so that students learn when to speak and how to do it if their contribution is to be accepted as meaningful and valid. Learning these implicit rules and conforming to them is therefore crucial for students to make progress and participate actively in classroom activity.

Far from being a particularity of school settings, this way of learning the rules of linguistic interaction is not at all exclusive to the educational sphere: Hymes's concept of *communicative competence* makes it clear that using language successfully in real-life settings requires the capacity to adapt to the context in complex ways which go beyond the grammatically correct use of a particular language variety. For every context there is a set of socially defined expectations which regulate what is appropriate, polite or out of place to say at a particular moment, and speakers need to know and accept these conventions if they are to make themselves understood and judged correctly by others. If language has to be acquired through direct socialisation it is precisely because there is no other way to learn these implicit rules: children need to be in contact with real language in use in order to know what is and is not appropriate for a particular time and social situation. In other words, they have to be able to 'read the (class)room' correctly if they are to interact meaningfully with other students and with the teacher at school.

In terms of particular language use in the classroom, what this means is that students have to carefully select the style, tone, content, narrative structure, etc. of their contributions if these are to be valued by the teacher and the class in general. Anything that departs from what the implicit code of appropriateness dictates may create a communicative misunderstanding or even a conflict, depending on how out of place the student's contribution is perceived to be in the specific context. As we have said, this will not only be a matter of grammar but will also include the definition of particular conversation styles and other pragmatic features as more suitable than others. In fact, the crucial factor determining appropriateness has not been mentioned yet: perhaps the most important decision students are forced to make in the classroom is related to dialect choice, with schools and teachers often exerting an overt —and covert— pressure in favour of SE. The next section will discuss this issue and the place accorded to nonstandard varieties and their speakers in the frame of this 'tacit language policy' of the classroom (Corson, 1997:99).

1.2   Dialect choice in the classroom

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One of our points in the characterisation of SE offered in Part I was that, although it cannot simply be identified with written English in general, its association with writing is very strong and its use is clearly predominant in this sphere —examples of use of other varieties in writing are very scarce. This fact is closely related to the use of SE for academic and scientific purposes as well as in formal education, which has resulted in the ideological construction that it is the language of the 'educated', as we have also mentioned before. Indeed, most schools and teachers advocate the use of SE in the classroom —and outside of it, in many cases—, confident that proficiency in this variety will give students access to a wider range of opportunities in life, allowing them to participate more fully in society, both as individuals and citizens. As a consequence, textbooks and other materials are almost always written in SE, and lessons are conducted using this variety as the language of instruction.

Sensible as these and other practical considerations about SE may be, the fact remains that the use of this dialect in education institutions is far from being neutral in its practical consequences. The selection of a single variety for classroom use (be it SE or any other, for that matter) invariably favours a set of students, namely those who have it as their native language or are already familiar with it when they enter school, and inevitably places the rest at a disadvantage[16]. Since there is a 'preference for the acquisition and display of knowledge through [the standard variety]' in the classroom (Heller, 2008:201-202), children whose native dialect differs from SE in its grammatical and pragmatic features may be expected to encounter a number of difficulties in adapting to and fitting into this environment. Since the implied rules of appropriateness which regulate participation in classroom activity will undoubtedly favour SE over other dialects, the more a child's native variety differs from SE, the wider the gap will be between his or her contributions and the ones expected and accepted by teachers, and the least integrated and understood the child will feel within the group. As a result, children who do not speak SE will have to conform to a code of linguistic acceptability which is, at best, partly foreign to them: in order to participate fully in classroom interaction, they will need to replace the discourse forms, narrative strategies and conversation techniques favoured in their variety by those expected in SE, which will mean a significant extra effort on their part that will in most cases go unrewarded. On top of that, it is highly possible that they will be encouraged or required to actually speak SE, a recommendation which —as we will see later— will often go hand in hand with a constant devaluation of the nonstandard variety they have learned at home.

In short, it is clear that the systematic use of SE in the classroom may create an important linguistic barrier for some students: they will be immersed in a linguistic environment which is not their own, and given the same opportunities as their SE-

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[16] In this sense, and as far as language is concerned, 'it is observable and demonstrable that some children come to school better equipped to take advantage of schooling than others' (Thornton, 1986:59) and that 'familiarity with SE is the crucial factor' (Hazen, 2008:9).

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speaking classmates even when their situation is not nearly the same[17]. Not only will they feel they are being treated unfairly by the school and the teachers, but they will constantly be given to understand that they are falling behind the rest of the class in their linguistic development, and that this is their own fault (not the school's). In such an unwelcoming environment, it is to be expected that the majority of these students will feel excluded by the linguistic code of the classroom and will either have serious difficulties assimilating into it or resist it altogether, refusing to participate actively in classroom activities. Thus, the effects of the language barrier may be long-term and shape the way in which these children understand and relate to education.

This preliminary presentation of the implications of dialect choice in schools should be enough to show at once that the issue is in fact connected to academic success in ways that are highly relevant. Although the selection of SE as the dialect of instruction may often be presented as neutral[18] by school representatives and teachers, it should be obvious by now that it produces unavoidable social inequalities in the classroom to which schools must respond. The next section will look at the socio-political aspect of this situation and draw attention to its consequences beyond the linguistic sphere.

1.3 The cultural politics of school

As Joseph puts it, 'if language and politics were a country, education would be its capital' (2006:46). This means that school plays a paramount role in the production and reproduction of a particular language ideology with important political implications for its speakers. The fact that not all dialects are given the same consideration in education institutions affects their use in other social spheres and also means that they become associated to different functions and values. By reproducing these associations, education creates the necessary conditions for a certain linguistic logic to operate in society.

The assignment of different functions to dialects creates a situation in which the use of a certain variety may come to be *expected* in a particular social context. This elaboration of function gives rise to the perception that such a variety is in fact more *appropriate* than others for certain social situations, the implication being that the use of any other would be inappropriate, rude, bad manners, etc. It is crucial to bear in mind that the notion of appropriateness is in no way neutral in its moral implications: it

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[17] As Corson explains, 'while the cultural or linguistic capital valued in education is not equally available to people from different backgrounds, education everywhere still operates as if everyone had equal access to it', so that 'non-possession of SE is no excuse for not using it' (1997:102). As a consequence, 'students from the dominant culture who enter [school] with major social advantages receive as much —and at times even more— than students from subordinate cultures who arrive with far fewer social advantages' (Darder, 1997:339).

[18] The reality of classroom dynamics proves that 'educational language choices are never neutral' (Heller, 2008:208) and that, more generally, 'any [education] system that [is] set up makes a political statement' (Thornton, 1986:70).

is a direct condemnation of the varieties excluded from a particular social situation, and of their speakers too, therefore. Thus presented, the notion may bear some resemblance to that of 'correctness' in its prescriptive sense, and in fact the underlying logic is the same[19]: there is no inherent linguistic reason why a dialect should be considered fit or unfit for use in a particular context or contexts; only superimposed social rules can regulate usage in this way.

An example of social regulation of this kind is the implicit language policy of the classroom we have been discussing. The place accorded to SE and the exclusion of nonstandard varieties from schools respond to a cultural logic of appropriateness which associates SE with institutional environments and an idea of progress which is very closely linked to education. Indeed, social and individual progress and success are often seen in connection with education (Lippi-Green, 2012:78), and students are often taught to think of school as the means to attain these goals. As a result, SE as the language of instruction also acquires an important socio-political dimension as the means through which a person can improve their social position. In Anglophone society, where subjective perception of intra-linguistic variation is relevantly linked to social class distinctions[20], it is to be expected that SE will hold a special appeal to lower-middle class speakers who will see in this dialect a reflection of that 'something better' to which they would like to belong (Corson, 2001:83). The treatment school makes of SE is of course important in creating this identification, and it is for this reason that the education system has historically been 'the mechanism through which the shift to the [standard variety] could be effected' (Joseph, 2006:49). By implicitly promoting assimilation to the dominant culture through its definitions of success, school 'reproduces the sociocultural arrangements that create the situation in the first place' (Corson, 1997:102) and perpetuates the correlation between socioeconomic background and potential for success (Thornton, 1986:5).

At school as well as in other social spheres, the pressure towards assimilation is partly based on a more general pressure to 'trim and shape our identities to the context we are in' (Corson, 2001:18). However, notions of social power and authority also play a very important role in the process of sociocultural reproduction. Power is mostly exerted in the classroom through verbal channels, and constitutes 'a network of relations always in tension and ever-present in discursive activity' (Corson, 2001:16-17). The struggle for voice, which is intimately linked to language (Darder, 1997:336), is a central part of this tension, which is why the exclusion of nonstandard varieties from the classroom is so significant: a student's learning chances depend on his or her

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[19] The construction of appropriateness allows SE to maintain its privileged position of prestige by 'confusing sociolinguistic reality with ideology' in the same way prescriptive correctness does (Corson, 1997:105). As Lippi-Green argues (2012:81), '[if] we do not challenge the construction of 'appropriacy', then we [will] have opened a back door to exclusion on the basis of another 'correctness' logic'.

[20] Several authors agree in considering that 'in Britain, possibly more than in any other country, the development of the standard has been inextricably linked to class stratification and social prejudice' (Williams, 2008:237).

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opportunities to develop linguistically (Thornton, 1986:76), so that not allowing children to use their dialect at school means not allowing them to speak at all, and effectively 'cutting them off from the educational process' (Thornton, 1986:9).

Authority in the classroom is also articulated as 'a dialectal terrain of legitimation and struggle' in language (Giroux, 1988b as quoted by Darder, 1997:337). The variety the teacher speaks and his or her evaluation of the students' varieties is therefore crucial for the development of classroom interaction. This does not only mean that the variety spoken by the teacher may become associated with values of authority and prestige transferred from the teacher's position itself[21], but also that the way in which he or she manages the students' interventions by correcting or silencing them can have implications at a different level. As Lippi-Green has noted (2012:80), minor everyday corrections 'can mushroom into broad exclusionary practices that go beyond issues of spelling to the silencing of discourse, to the detriment of everybody'. In fact, 'the authoritarian nature of a conservative view of teacher authority is often hidden beneath the guise of traditional notions of respect' (Darder, 1997:338), so that, in classroom practice, respect to the appropriateness of the use of SE may be called on in order to justify the unacceptability of nonstandard varieties. This may give rise to a 'separate but equal' doctrine or faux egalitarianism in which official school discourse promulgates that nonstandard varieties deserve respect but effectively restricts their use to the home environment by excluding them from education (Lippi-Green, 2012:82). It is important to understand that this kind of covert authority in language issues functions in such a way that education policies never appear to be openly discriminatory: pressure towards assimilation to SE is said to be exerted for the students' own good (Lippi-Green, 2012:87).

In short, it is clear that the cultural logic of school interprets students' competence in their home nonstandard varieties as incompetence (Heller, 2008:203), and sees in this a reflection of their potential for achievement (Corson, 1997:99). Instead of giving those who start school at disadvantage a chance to develop, by denying them an opportunity school functions as a means of social selection that reproduces social inequalities (Heller, 2008:201). The next section will focus on the case of AAVE and relate these issues to the acquisition of literacy by speakers of nonstandard varieties, and will also examine teaching practice and language assessment procedures more closely to show how constructions like language deficit and linguistic inferiority can overlap with racial prejudice.

2 AAVE in education

So far we have seen how the exclusion of nonstandard varieties from education can give rise to discriminatory practices in the classroom. We will now go one step

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[21] The direction of the transfer here would be opposite to that of symbolic revalorisation, a process in which the values assigned to a dialect are transferred to its speakers (Williams, 2008:241).

further and show that different kinds of discrimination can overlap in the attitudes people express towards language, allowing racist and classist ideas to circulate freely in society disguised as neutral intellectual commentary (Milroy, 1998:99). As we will see, this fact turns linguistic prescriptivism into the last open door to de facto exclusion of speakers of nonstandard dialects from the institutions, a serious threat to any attempt to create an egalitarian society.

The case of AAVE is a very good illustration of these ideological operations, especially because its treatment in society at large evidences a clear coexistence of linguistic, racial and class prejudice, showing how the perpetuation of unfair power relations requires a constant renovation of the myths about the inferiority of a particular section of the population (Wolfram, 1998:105). We will start by discussing these myths in relation to educational failure rates among African American children in the US, and then go on to criticise the methods used to measure these rates and their underlying assumptions. The section will also offer some extra considerations on teaching practice and will briefly analyse some of the methodologies and resources that have been used to make reading and writing in SE more accessible to speakers of nonstandard varieties. Finally, Part II will close on a brief account of the Oakland Unified School District case in order to emphasise the role of public attitudes in the implementation and success of new educational policies.

2.1 The myth of linguistic inferiority

As Wolfram has aptly warned (1998:104), 'when different cultural groups are drastically unequal in their power relationships —and especially when one group has been dehumanised in comparison with the other— the environment for cultivating myths about these differences is fertile'. Despite the efforts of the scientific community to debunk such myths by proving their lack of foundation, once the belief in the inferiority of a social group is ingrained in the general mentality, 'new reasonings simply replace old ones' and the myth is perpetuated under a new form, but with the same underlying logic (Wolfram, 1998:104ff). In the case of AAVE, genetically based myths about the inferiority of the African American population have almost died out completely as openly racist statements are no longer publicly acceptable in contemporary society[22], but the belief in the intellectual inferiority of the group has persisted on the basis of alternative explanations. Since 'for a myth to be nurtured in an increasingly educated society it [must] be rooted in 'objective fact' and have a common-sense appeal', environmental explanations have largely replaced genetic ones in providing support for these beliefs (Wolfram, 1998:106).

Perhaps one of the most widespread and persistent myths about African Americans, often supported by environmental explanations, is that of *linguistic inferiority*, *language deficit* or *verbal deprivation*. According to this narrative, the

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[22] 'Discrimination on linguistic grounds', however, '*is* publicly acceptable' (Milroy and Milroy, 1985:3).

language of the African American population, identified with AAVE without exception, is inferior to that of the dominant group (i.e. SE) in a number of ways, and is therefore interpreted as inadequate and inappropriate for a wide range of functions and uses. It is important to notice how ideology operates here in an unusual direction: while normally it is the social status of speakers what gives rise to the negative evaluation of their dialect (Milroy, 1998:99), here the logic is inverted so that language itself becomes a *reason* for the social subordination of a group.

A superficial look at the basic premises of this myth reveals a number of important inaccuracies that must be pointed out and addressed at once. First of all, it is not true that *all* African Americans speak AAVE: a person's racial classification does not automatically determine the dialect they speak; only the dialect spoken in their socialised community defines this (Wolfram, 1998:105). Therefore, African Americans can and will have SE as their native dialect provided they have been raised in a SE-speaking environment, just like Anglo Americans can and will speak AAVE natively if they have grown up in an AAVE-speaking home or community —and the same is valid for any other dialect and social group combination, of course. It is a sociolinguistic reality, however, that a large portion of the African American population in the US speaks AAVE[23], and that many aspects of the history and development of this dialect are directly linked to this fact[24], as is its social evaluation. But it should be clear that this is merely a social reality, and that there is nothing inherent about it: 'ethnicity-based patterns of variation have nothing to do with biology' (Schilling-Estes, 2006:329). As Pullum explains (1999:55), 'AAVE should not be thought of as the language of Black people in America' since 'many African Americans neither speak it nor know much about it'; using this or any other dialect competently and meaningfully requires 'an up-to-date active acquaintance with its correctness conditions' (Pullum, 2006:4).

Another relevant misconception underlying the linguistic inferiority myth consists in regarding the grammatical features that set AAVE apart from SE as 'evidence' that AAVE lacks structure and does not constitute a linguistic system in the sense SE does. It is obvious that we are faced here with the same prescriptive attitudes towards variation we already commented on in Part I, only the focus is now on the alleged 'illogicality' or 'lack of systematicity' of highly stigmatised features such as multiply marked negation or copula absence[25] (see Appendix I for more information). A common view among AAVE critics seems to be that its speakers randomly omit or add

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[23] According to Lippi-Green (2012:186), 'various authors have put the number of AAVE speakers between 80 and 90 percent of the African American population (Baugh 1983; Rickford 2000)'. As of 2007, African Americans made up 13 per cent of the total US population, which is equivalent to some 39 million people out of a total of over 300 million (data from the US Census Bureau provided by Lippi-Green, 2012:186).

[24] For an account of how ethnic identity and other factors have influenced the historical development of AAVE, see Wolfram (2004:319ff) and Wolfram and Thomas (2002).

[25] However, 'it is merely an accident that dialects of English with [these features] have a low-prestige class background' in sociolinguistic reality (Pullum, 1999:49).

elements to their sequences without adhering to any formal grammar[26], despite the overwhelming linguistic evidence that the use of these devices is regulated by intricate rules which are no different in essence or complexity from those of other dialects and languages (Pullum, 1999:45ff) —and this is true even though a greater number and intricateness of rules would not in any case prove the superiority of a dialect (Milroy and Milroy, 1985:15). Moreover, it is a basic linguistic fact that 'specialised language uses have nothing to do with basic language capability' (Wolfram, 1998:111), since 'the assumption that surface forms are significant in cognitive development is simply not supported by the best empirical evidence' (Baugh, 1988:70). Therefore, arguing anything about speakers' general competence for language processing on the basis of such forms is simply not acceptable in linguistic terms.

In addition to these inaccuracies, it is also very common for the discourse of this myth to betray a flagrant ignorance of the process of language acquisition and development. This is especially obvious in the construction of the various environmental explanations supporting the narrative of linguistic inferiority for which social and educational psychologists have often been to blame (Wolfram, 1998:107; Labov, 1972:179). Parental initiative and active intervention in the process of language acquisition have been argued to play a crucial role in determining a child's linguistic ability in the pre-school period (Wolfram, 1998:107). As a result, less proactive styles of parenting have been presented as the reason why some children —and particularly AAVE speakers— allegedly start school 'speaking no language at all'. According to this rationale, since children learn to speak through direct parental intervention, those who grow up in 'linguistically impoverished' family environments will end up verbally impaired as a result of not having engaged in sufficient interaction with their parents. In a clear overlapping of social[27], racial and gender prejudice, working class AAVE-speaking homes, and especially those in which a woman is a single parent[28], have been identified as inadequate settings for language acquisition, with the subsequent consequences for their children[29]. Thus, scientific evidence explaining how language is acquired has been completely ignored in order to fabricate a reason to account for the

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[26] Again, 'the received view of AAVE appears to be that it is glaringly in contravention of prescriptive rules: it is bad Standard English, sullied and impaired by ignorant mistakes' (Pullum, 2006:3).

[27] Since there is a socioeconomic boundary operating with respect to AAVE usage (Rickford, 1999:335) and social dialects usually receive a more negative evaluation than regional dialects (Schilling-Estes, 2006:326), class prejudice is certainly to be expected here.

[28] Labov's original sociolinguistic classification distinguishes *lower class* families, 'with no father present to provide steady economic support', from *working class* families, in which 'the father [holds] a semi-skilled or unskilled job' (Labov, 1972:181). Since we understand that an element of sexism is already present in this classification, we have used *working class* above as a general label on the grounds that educational failure is in fact common to both family types (Labov, 1972:182).

[29] It is important to note that, in the vast majority of cases, no direct empirical observation is carried out before the linguistic unsuitability of an environment is claimed (Labov, 1972:183).

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problems some African American children encounter upon entering school —which, as we have seen, may very well be caused by other more complex factors. Empirically tested knowledge of the acquisition process tells us that a child's parents are not an indispensable part of his or her necessary environment for language development: as long as the child has people around to interact with, there is no need for any direct intervention or language 'teaching' for the child to develop normally. All children with a normal brain and a social environment with which they can interact meaningfully in a variety of ways will learn to speak naturally, even if their parents do not choose to play a proactive role in their raising. Working-class African American AAVE-speaking homes provide as many opportunities as a child needs to observe and participate in language exchanges, and to claim the opposite is absurd (Wolfram, 1998:108).

In short, we can say that explanations supporting the myth that AAVE speakers are naturally inferior to SE speakers are constantly updated so that low educational success rates among African Americans are never blamed on school institutions. But once linguistic knowledge is brought to the table and the lack of logic behind these conceptions exposed, the rates themselves still need to be accounted for. In consequence, the next section will question the neutrality of these statistical data by analysing language assessment procedures, standardised tests, and the way these methods of measuring language ability tend to favour SE speakers over speakers of nonstandard dialects.

2.2 Language assessment and SE systematic bias

Traditionally, discourses claiming the linguistic underdevelopment of AAVE children at any stage of the educational process have been supported by two kinds of 'experimental' data: personal interviews with children and standardised test results. Statistics collected using these methods report unacceptably high rates of educational failure among African American students; an alarming example can be taken from the Oakland Unified School District, where by the time of the 1996 controversy[30] 71 per cent of all children who had been designated as special education candidates were of African American origin (Corson, 2001:80; Baugh, 2000:x). Similar rates also report that, in general, 'the longer African American students stay at school, the more they fall behind' (Steele, 1992:68 as quoted by Rickford, 1999:332).

As Milroy and Milroy have said (1985:4), 'language testing and assessment are often based on rather simplistic notions of the nature of language and its use': dialect differences are underestimated, spoken and written norms confused, distinctions between planned and unplanned discourse ignored, etc. (Baugh, 1988:67ff). Moreover, since 'formal education is built on the cornerstone of literacy[31]' (Lippi-Green, 2012:78),

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[30] More information about the Oakland case will be provided in section 2.4.

[31] It is also sometimes forgotten that literacy in itself is not innate and that its distribution responds to purely socioeconomic factors (Baugh, 1988:69). Access to it, therefore, depends on opportunity.

reading and writing are often the only skills measured by tests, the implicit assumption being that oral skills in general are not as important[32]. Even in face-to-face interviews, a linear 'literary' narrative style is often demanded of students, even when such artificiality in language use would not naturally be expected in the context.

On the whole, test situations of all types are 'laden with values about language use' which have a direct impact on how different individual performances are evaluated (Wolfram, 1998:110). Too often, results of standardised tests and other assessment procedures simply demonstrate the existence of dialect differences (Wolfram, 1998:106) and evidence a gap between middle- and lower-class linguistic behaviour (Chambers and Trudgill, 1998:58). Linguistic uses and verbal habits which are characteristic of middle-class SE speakers —verbosity[33], explicitness, particular conversational and narrative styles— are systematically favoured in interviews and graded tests, leading to the evaluation of their nonstandard counterparts as deficient. Even some features which would appear to be dysfunctional or undesirable in the school situation, such as vague language, repetitions and empty elaboration, are sometimes preferred to a straightforward style such as AAVE's in which ideas are expressed clearly and in fewer words (Labov, 1972:192ff). This bias implies the misidentification of SE 'as the cause of middle-class achievement in school' and the wrong assumption that knowledge of this variety is necessary for learning (Labov, 1972:205-6).

As to interview situations, it is also worth mentioning a couple of things about the role power and intimidation play in determining a child's verbal behaviour. The 'appearance of nonverbalness' so often reported among African American children is nothing more than a form of defensive behaviour that results from placing them in an asymmetrical situation and trying to elicit responses from them by asking poorly designed questions (Labov, 1972:185ff). Not only can the mere presence of the interviewer be threatening, but the alien institutional setting of the school may in itself be inhibiting enough for a child to remain silent or display only a monosyllabic behaviour during the interview. It is clear that no testing procedure of this kind will provide the observer with a realistic idea of a child's full linguistic ability: the result will be a product of the particular sociolinguistic situation and will say nothing of what the child can actually do with language in a comfortable familiar setting. This proves the 'need to study children within the cultural context in which they [have been] developed' (Labov, 1972:201) using 'ethnographic methods' and 'participant observation in

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[32] The underlying presupposition seems to be that logical discourse is 'inherently seated in writing as opposed to speech' (Baugh, 1988:71).

[33] As to the value of verbosity, Labov explains that there is a 'long-conditioned reaction' to this type of speech which results in a very positive evaluation of those who display the feature, with middle class speakers often ranking them very high in 'job suitability' and 'potential friend' scales (1972:198-9). He later adds that verbosity is 'most easily taught and most easily learned, so that words take the place of thought, and nothing can be found behind them' (1972:202).

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naturalistic settings' (Corson, 1997:108), and also shows that 'the social situation is the most powerful determinant of verbal behaviour' (Labov, 1972:191).

The problems of standardised tests are of a rather different nature. Graded assessment implies a belief in the measurability of linguistic performance and 'contains the promise that objective decisions can be made on the quality of the pupils' work, so that defined grade boundaries can be established' (Thornton, 1986:23). The method also requires an arbitrary selection of both the competences to be tested and the criteria according to which they are assessed, something which reveals its lack of a solid linguistic foundation[34]. The competences tested are invariably related to literacy skills in SE, which represents a problem for children who are not speakers of this dialect. During the process of literacy acquisition, these children will have to learn to read and write *at the same time* that they learn SE as a new dialect, and the difficulties of this double task will be likely to show on test results.

In the assessment of writing, obstacles for nonstandard speakers can arise as a consequence of dialect differences in the construction of narrative discourse. Thus, while school traditionally values tightly structured narratives with linear sequencing and a topic-centred style, other varieties like AAVE favour a topic-associating style which is far removed from typical SE literary narratives (Rickford, 1999:286). Since the use of AAVE is predominantly oral, discourse coherence is naturally more dependent on interaction with the audience and on prosodic devices (Corson, 2001:88), a difference which is likely to cause problems for children learning to write in SE. Moreover, 'difficulty in writing has been shown to have task-specific characteristics', so that assessing a child's performance on the basis of a single task is not the right way to test his or her composition skills (Thornton, 1986:27). The use of high status SE vocabulary (in writing as in speech) is also used consistently throughout education as a marker of proficiency —and as a tool for discrimination (Corson, 2001:22).

In the assessment of reading, problems can stem from the differences in sound-symbol relationships between dialects, which are too often interpreted as decoding errors (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, 1998:298). Access to background cultural information is also an important factor determining reading comprehension (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, 1998:300), and standardised tests tend to favour information available to SE speakers and members of mainstream culture. More generally, 'the gap between written and spoken language [is] wider for vernacular dialect speakers' (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes,1998:299), and this can be reflected in reading test scores.

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[34] What is remarkable according to Thornton (1986:18) is the alarming lack of scientific discussion and pilot studies which has preceded the implementation of a system of graded language assessment in countries like Britain. He adds that 'it is a tragedy of large proportions that the idea of a common exam should have become linked to the notion of graded assessment' (1986:55).

As a conclusion, we can say that even if no single explanation can account for the black-white gap in educational achievement[35] (Hazen, 2008:8), it is possible to identify a number of factors which are at the core of this problem. Attitudes towards AAVE and its speakers inside and outside the classroom, ignorance of its linguistic structure and of its differences from SE, and the use of biased standardised tests to rate students' performance are perhaps among the most important. Socioeconomic conditions and lack of funding and facilities in schools are also part of the problem (Rickford, 1999:334), and we must yet add teaching malpractice as a relevant contributing factor. The next section will deal with this last issue and present some of the innovative ways in which teaching methods have been updated by educators with a critical perspective on language variation.

2.3 Teaching methodologies from critical pedagogy

We have already mentioned that teachers' comments and corrections in the classroom can intimidate children who speak nonstandard dialects to the point of silencing them: if they are made to feel that their language is wrong or inadequate for the school environment, they will ultimately choose to remain silent for fear of offending the norms (Corson, 1997:105). If teachers do not recognise the systematicity and well-formedness of students' native dialects and treat them 'as an obstacle to the goal of learning the 'valuable' language' (Joseph, 2006:51), these children will 'lose [all] motivation to learn what they cannot identify with' (Corson, 2001:92). Since student achievement has been shown to correlate closely with teacher expectations (Rickford, 1999:334), educators who see in their prejudiced views of AAVE a reflection of African American students' potential for success will get the worst results.

In view of these facts, it is obvious that teachers who want to avoid undesirable consequences will need to distance their classroom practice from traditional pedagogical methods in a number of important ways. As a first step, 'knowledge of linguistics can help [educators] to understand students' language backgrounds and plan effective lessons that bridge the gap between nonstandard and standard forms' (Battistella, 2005:154). Teachers should also 'take the time to learn about the communities in which their students live' (Darder, 1997:341), since 'children are integrated in groups of their own' (Labov, 1972:208) and their environment is larger and more complex than the school itself. As a second step, 'both students and teachers need to become much more critically aware of language varieties, especially of their role in activating prejudices and stereotypes' (Corson, 1997:104). AAVE speakers need to be made aware that their nonstandard uses will be judged unfavourably in many social settings (Corson, 2001:90), and the prescriptive logics of 'correctness' and

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[35] The linguistic particularities of AAVE cannot in themselves explain the record of educational failure among African American children (Corson, 2001:85). 'Writing failure, like reading failure, is a complex issue that goes beyond surface differences in dialect forms' (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, 1998:306).

'appropriateness' must be explained to them: 'attitudes should be part of the curriculum' (Hazen, 2008:9).

Furthermore, for a *dialect awareness program*[36] of this kind to be effective, the approach to language teaching needs to be radically different too. 'Using language successfully at school and later in public life involves a way of thinking about language which has to be taught explicitly' (Romaine, 1994:91), and therefore teachers must introduce students to a critical 'language of theory' (Darder, 1997:334) that allows them to 'make explicit for themselves the knowledge of language that, as language users, they already possess' (Thornton, 1986:48). The ultimate aim should be to increase the overall metalinguistic competence of students so that they are faced with fewer obstacles as they make progress towards proficiency in SE.

A critical, radical approach to literacy is obviously called for if this goal is to be attained. The following are some of the recommendations authors have made as to its possibilities of implementation:

• Passive competence in SE must not be taken for granted, as 'it is by no means as uniform or absolute as it might appear' (Milroy and Milroy, 1985:24) and many children arrive in schools with no previous contact with this dialect (Corson, 1997:99).

• Reading mistakes must be identified and distinguished from differences in pronunciation resulting from code-switching or direct transfer from the child's vernacular dialect (Rickford, 1999:338).

• Contrastive analysis between SE and AAVE must be carried out and attention drawn to the differences between the two varieties (Rickford, 1999:339). Priority must be given to stigmatised and sharply stratified features (Hazen, 2008:4).

• When assessing pieces of writing, teachers should focus on content, organisation and rhetorics rather than on superficial transfer errors (Smitherman, 1986:213ff as quoted by Rickford, 1999:286).

• A process of drafting and end-of-term selection of written works can be a better assessment method that a one-time, single-task exam (Thornton, 1986:63).

• In writing as in any other activity, the nature of mistakes must be clearly explained if the child is to avoid them in the future (Thornton, 1986:34; also Williams, 2008:245). 'Sensitive and helpful responses to writing' are more necessary than marking (Thornton, 1986:29).

• Reading materials should be closer to the students' lives and incorporate materials written in the vernacular; a move away from textbooks is required (Corson, 2001:94).

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[36] The term is used by Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1998:297).

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• Experimental evidence supports the usefulness of separating the task of learning to read from that of learning a second dialect (SE). *Dialect readers,* which introduce reading in the vernacular and then gradually switch to the standard, can in fact help to teach AAVE speakers to read (Rickford, 1999:307ff).

• Using second language teaching techniques to introduce AAVE speakers to SE can sometimes be useful even though the two are varieties of the same language (Rickford, 1999:286).

• AAVE speakers must be encouraged to teach the rest of the class about their variety, so that the whole group can benefit from the extra linguistic knowledge at the same time that value is added to the dialect (Corson, 2001:90).

As an additional consideration, it seems reasonable that 'whatever nonstandard varieties get valued in a school should be decided by informed locals' (Corson, 2001:68), which means that parents should be more involved in school community activities and decisions. The absence of formal educational policies for the treatment of nonstandard dialects is alarming[37], and schools should actively help parents understand that studying variation does not pose a threat to their children's knowledge of SE. Rather, these policies are a viable alternative to the traditional 'immersion' strategies which have so far proven to be so ineffective in helping AAVE speakers learn SE.

The position educators and other school members often find themselves in is not an easy one[38], but their actions and attitudes are crucial in changing the current rates of educational failure among AAVE-speaking children. Preventing the perpetuation of an unfair language ideology depends on their capacity to change the attitudes of the young towards dialects and variation. The next section will deal briefly with the relevance of publicly expressed attitudes for the implementation of dialect awareness programs by presenting a short account of the Oakland Unified School District 1996 case.

2.4 The Oakland case: why attitudes matter

In December 1996, the board of the Oakland Unified School District (San Francisco Bay, California) announced that they had decided to introduce a significant change in their language policy in order to remedy the serious situation of educational failure among African American children in their schools[39]. They would replace the

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[37] And 'where they do exist, their net effect is usually to strengthen the position of the standard variety in formal education' (Corson, 1997:99).

[38] It should be remembered that schoolteachers are often limited by 'the professional roles they fill as active members of an institution' (Corson, 2001:19).

[39] As we mentioned in section 2.2, educational failure rates in Oakland showed that 'African American children, who made up slightly more than half the student population, accounted for 71 per cent of the special-education pupils and only 37 per cent of those in programs for the gifted' (Baugh, 2000:x).

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traditional approach to language that had so miserably failed by one which would take into consideration the home dialect of the students: AAVE would be used in the classroom as a language of instruction, and 'teachers would be trained to look at it objectively and appreciate its merits' (Pullum, 1999:39). The linguistic status of the dialect would be fully recognised, and students made aware of it structuredness and well-formedness, so that in finding their home language valued by the school they would participate more fully in its activities.

As we can see, the changes proposed by the board were but modest steps in the right direction: they refused to go on with a strategy that had not helped their students in the past (Corson, 2001:80). They acknowledged that the children needed to learn SE, and that in helping them to accomplish this it was necessary to bridge the gap between their dialect and the standard. It is important to understand that the place accorded to AAVE in the classroom in the frame of this new policy was that of a *language of instruction*, not a school subject in itself; the board's intention was simply to improve the children's proficiency in SE through a different, linguistically informed approach to language teaching. They acknowledged that 'AAVE was distinct in some respects from SE' and meant to 'be responsive to the educational implications' (Pullum, 1999:40).

Once the public learned of the board's resolution, a worldwide frenzy broke out and the issue received international media coverage. Soon enough, newspapers were filled with articles expressing all kinds of negative attitudes towards AAVE and criticising the board's decision. Racist jokes and ridiculisations of AAVE quickly followed, to the dismay of American linguists, who were appalled by the ignorance betrayed by these offensive attacks on the dialect. The real issues of educational policy that had motivated the board's resolution were completely overlooked, and all that ensued was a pointless debate over whether AAVE was a dialect or a separate language of its own[40] (Pullum, 1999:43,55).

The reason behind this disproportionate reaction was the fact that AAVE as a political issue is very different from other languages and varieties (Pullum, 1999:39). Had the board's decision been about introducing bilingual education for French speakers, for instance, it is likely that no such frenzy would have ensued. Common negative attitudes towards AAVE were the source of this outbreak of hate-filled comments and opinions, and their result was the decision of some members of the Oakland school community to backtrack on their initial support to the new policy. The fact that the implementation of such sensible changes in education was even momentarily arrested by publicly expressed attitudes shows their importance as a social factor and their enormous power to shape social reality.

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[40] As we saw in Part I, *dialect* and *language* are merely classificatory labels, and they do not say anything about the linguistic nature of the entity they refer to. However, there is a wide consensus among linguists to consider AAVE and SE as dialects of the same language, since this is the general perception of their speakers and the two varieties share the majority of their features.

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Despite the fact that the Linguistic Society of America's 1997 vote in favour of the Oakland board decision was unanimous, and despite the efforts of many brilliant and renowned linguists to readdress the situation by publishing their informed positions on the issue[41], once prejudice was in the air parents in the Oakland community started to fear that if AAVE was introduced in the classroom the result would be the 'ghettoization of their children' (Pullum, 1999:57). Even the school board itself revised its statement following the attacks and backed down on some if its references to imparting instruction in AAVE[42], although, fortunately, their conviction that the new policy was necessary did not change (Pullum, 1999:57).

A number of important lessons can be learned from the Oakland case. The first is the urgent need for a linguistic understanding of language to penetrate education institutions and society at large: it is the duty of linguists to spread their knowledge outside academic forums, and to generate social debates around issues like the attitudes towards variation (Labov, 1972:214). A second lesson deals with the importance of acknowledging the relevance of attitudes in all social spheres and their enormous power to influence political decisions. A third and last one, among the very many that could be mentioned, is the need to become aware of the role played by the media in the shaping of public opinion, an ideological operation that has been described as a *manufacturing of consent*[43].

We have shown that there are ways to prove that AAVE as a dialect deserves respect and consideration, and that the fallacies and ideological constructions surrounding SE can be exposed and discarded. The unjustifiably low prestige of Linguistics as a field in our society has nothing to do with the scientific quality of its findings: just like it is nonsense to say that the Earth is flat, it should be considered ridiculous to proclaim that some dialects are superior to others on linguistic grounds. Scientifically supported knowledge about language should be available to all members of society, and it is the shared duty of educators, linguists, parents and institutions to make it available to them.

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[41] Rickford mentions the interesting anecdote that 'in keeping with Chomsky's insistence that "the responsibility of intellectuals is to tell the truth and expose lies", several linguists (I know of Geoffrey Pullum, Salikoko Mufwene, and the film-maker Gene Searchinger besides myself) submitted Op-Ed articles on the Ebonics issue to major national newspapers [...] [and] our submissions were all declined' (1999:342). We invite the reader to consider whether this refusal from the media to publish the articles would have been the same had these specialists not been linguists but physicists, biologists, etc.

[42] Some of the important changes the board introduced in the revised version of the resolution can be found in Baugh (2002:43ff), together with additional details of the events that followed the massive media coverage of the so-called 'Ebonics issue'.

[43] The term is generally used in reference to Herman and Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988).

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Conclusions

This essay has attempted to prove that 'an enforced standard which suppresses distinctions, styles and perspectives of many speakers is unlikely to foster a true consensus' in the classroom as well as in society (Battistella, 2005:153). The prescriptive ideological assumptions which are currently superposed to the linguistic nature of SE promote an understanding of variation that systematically devalues nonstandard dialects, placing their speakers in a position of subordination in a wide range of social contexts. The identification of the prestigious position of SE with its inherent superiority constitutes a fallacy which has nonetheless underlaid educational policies and public attitudes towards language for centuries. Challenging the validity of these assumptions and refusing to build educational policies on their basis is a radical critical act, but it is necessary if a truly meritocratic school system is ever to become a reality.

Just as 'a variety of languages and cultures can unite around a common flag' without this representing a danger to the unity of the nation (Battistella, 2005:153), allowing nonstandard varieties some presence and official recognition in schools is neither an encouragement of separatism nor a threat to the existence of a standard variety for particular social uses. In fact, 'what is problematic is fixation on a single variety in a world in which effective communication requires navigation among different backgrounds, classes, ethnicities and styles' (Battistella, 2005:151). Being in contact with more than one dialect benefits speakers of both standard and nonstandard varieties, providing them with a useful tool for a better understanding of social and political realities.

The accomplishment of higher levels of educational success should not entail the denial of cultural pluralism (Baugh, 1988:72), and we have seen that there are a number of ways in which obstacles can be removed from the educational development of speakers of nonstandard varieties. Dialect awareness programs, assisted by new teaching strategies from critical pedagogy, involve the use of alternative materials and

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assessment methods that pay attention to linguistic variation and avoid the traditional systematic bias in favour of SE. Second language teaching techniques and contrastive analysis are also brought to the table as useful tools in the task of introducing SE to students to whom this dialect is unfamiliar. A deep change in classroom dynamics complements this critical approach to literacy, and implies a necessary shift 'from coercive to collaborative relations of power' between students and teachers (Corson, 2001:19).

Since the articulation of judgements about language is part of the function of language itself (Ghomeshi, 2010:93), attitudes should also be accorded a central place in the curriculum, and the analogous logics of prescriptive 'correctness' and 'appropriateness' duly explained to students, so that they understand where the negative evaluation of nonstandard dialects comes from and acquire the knowledge to face it and challenge it. Drawing parallels to other similar sociolinguistic situations around the world can be a useful strategy in this process, allowing students to isolate objective linguistic reality from community-specific prejudice while rendering them able to put the stigmatised features of their nonstandard dialect into perspective. By making students understand that different language features receive different evaluations depending on the socio-political reality of each community, they will be made to see that there is nothing inherently wrong about the way they speak.

As to institutional responses to educational failure rates, the case of AAVE in education shows that introducing reduced curriculums and classroom materials designed for children with severe language impairments is definitely not the right way to deal with dialect differences and language barriers in education. The solution does not consist in targeting speakers of nonstandard dialects as special education candidates, but in analysing their difficulties so that responding to them in a useful and informed way is possible. That teachers are in possession of the necessary knowledge to understand and deal with these problems is vital, and therefore introducing Linguistics as part of their training is an urgent necessity: misinformation and folklore in the understanding of language must not be tolerated in education (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, 1998:310).

The Oakland case evidenced that misrepresentation and stereotyping of African Americans and AAVE are still dangerously common in US society, and it is the duty of linguists and educators to address this issue when it affects dialect readers and other classroom materials which attempt to portray different aspects of African American culture. Social class and racial prejudice must be eradicated from education if they are to be wiped out from society at large. Discriminatory practices should not be allowed to hide behind a cloak of professionalism (Joseph, 2006:52; also Labov, 1972:210ff).

With regard to the institutional nature of educational policies, it is important to understand that 'any liberatory pedagogy cannot represent a recipe for classroom practice', and that the importance of particular school conditions should never be underestimated (Darder, 1997:331). New methods need piloting and testing so that their degree of suitability and adaptability to different classroom situations can be

known to the scientific community, and their quality improved if necessary. Therefore, more empirical evidence on the results of the implementation of dialect awareness programs is needed, and new studies should provide data as to how these methodologies contribute to particular aspects of the linguistic development of nonstandard speakers in education.

Finally, it is teachers who are in the best position to understand their students' needs and problems, and they should be given the necessary time and conditions to help them to the best of their ability. If schools and communities join efforts to improve the chances of *all* students to develop fully in education, the linguistic ideal of equality among races and languages may finally be reflected in social terms (Baugh, 1988:65).

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Appendix I: some features of AAVE

This additional section will present a brief summary of some of the most salient grammatical features that distinguish AAVE from SE, so that readers who are not familiar with this dialect may be given a preliminary idea of how wide the gap can be between the two varieties. It should be remembered that other language components like phonology and pragmatics also set AAVE apart from SE, but we will not deal with them here. What follows is an adaptation of the detailed description of AAVE provided by Green (2002:34-93), which the reader is invited to see for more information, since it is an authoritative reference for AAVE.

1 Some general features

- **A single verb form may be used with both singular and plural subjects**, so that a form like *run* is the same for all verbal persons.

- **Emphatic *DO, WAS* and *HAVE* are also invariant** (*he DO, we WAS*).

- **The auxiliary/copula *be* does not obligatorily occur on the surface in all environments.** For the most part, it is overtly represented when it occurs with the first person singular pronoun (*I'm*) and with the third person neuter pronoun (*it's*) as well as in the past tense (***was***), although without a singular/plural distinction.

- **There is no observable distinction between the simple past and the present perfect verb forms.** There is often no separate participle verb form such as *eaten*.

- **The form *ain't* is not overtly marked for tense**: it does not have distinct past and non-past forms. It can be used in negative forms in the present perfect (*ain't run* as equivalent to *haven't run*) and in the past (*ain't run* as equivalent to *didn't run*).

2 Auxiliaries

Although the behaviour of AAVE auxiliaries is to a great extent very similar to the one found in SE, some basic differences are worth mentioning.

- **Auxiliaries can appear in a contracted, reduced or zero form: *'s* (is), *'m* (am), *'ll* or *'a* (will), *'d* (would), Ø.** The reduced form *'a* can also correspond to SE *have* (*should'a been eating*). Also note that no auxiliary precedes the verb *got.*

- ***Ain't* is not formed from any particular auxiliary + contracted *not*;** it may occur in environments in which *isn't*, *didn't* and *haven't* occur, but **it is a negator.**

- **Auxiliaries do not occur obligatorily in questions.** In these cases, intonation signals that a question is being asked. Modals and the past tense of the copula/auxiliary *be* (*was*) cannot be left out of questions, but they do not have to precede the subject (*Bruce can swim/was swimming?*).

3 Aspectual or verbal markers

Unlike tense, aspect does not situate an event in time, but rather refers to duration, completion or habitual occurrence of an action or state. In general, aspectual markers are followed by *-ing* or *-ed* verb forms, and cannot occur at the beginning of questions. Also, the same form of an aspectual marker is used regardless of subject person and number.

3.1 Aspectual *be*

Aspectual *be* denotes habitual or iterative meaning; therefore, the activity of eating in *Bruce be eating* is characterised as recurring (meaning 'Bruce is usally eating' or 'Bruce usually eats'). Unlike the auxiliary/copula be and other auxiliaries, the aspectual marker *be* cannot be left out of the sentence: it has to occur obligatory (*Bruce Ø eating). It always occurs in it uninflected form (*be,* or sometimes *bes*) and in the environment preceding a verb in the *-ing* form. However, it can also precede prepositional and adverb phrases to indicate being in a place on particular occasions. It can also precede the verbal marker *dən* (*They be **dən** gone to school*) and a verb in the passive (*It don't be **drove** hardly*), and it can occur at the end of a sentence (*That's how they **be***). The adverbs *usually, often* and *never* can precede aspectual *be* in order to specify how often the activity recurs. *Do* is the auxiliary that supports the marker in questions and negative and emphatic constructions.

3.2 Remote past *BIN*

BIN is used to refer to actions started at some point in the remote past which have continued up to the moment of utterance (*She BIN running* means 'She has been running for a long time'). It indicates that the time period referred to is longer than normal for an activity, or that a state has indeed held for a long time. Depending on the type of predicate with which BIN occurs, it can have three different meanings: BIN_{STAT}, BIN_{HAB} and BIN_{COMP}. **BIN_{STAT}** indicates that a *state* started at some point in the remote past and continues to hold up to the present moment *(They BIN bad)*; **BIN_{HAB}** is used to

mean that an activity or state began in the remote past and continues *habitually* (*Bruce BIN running*, meaning 'Bruce started running some time ago and he still runs from time to time'); ***BIN_COMP*** indicates that an activity has ended a long time ago, so that what continues up to the moment of utterance is its *resulting state* (*I BIN give them they books*, meaning 'I gave them their books a long time ago').

3.3   *Dən*

The verbal marker *dən* denotes that an event has ended (*I dən done all you told me to do*) and may also indicate recent past (*I dən lost my wallet!*, meaning 'I have just lost my wallet!') or having had some experience (*She dən been to church*, meaning 'She has been to church before'). It is pronounced with an unstressed syllable and distinguished from *done* (past participle of *do*). It precedes verbs in the *-ed* form. *Already* and *before*, as well as adverb phrases such as *for five years* and *too long*, can be used with *dən* (*I dən **already** finished that / I dən drove that car **before**). Dən* is supported by *have* and *ain't* in questions, emphatic affirmation and negatives.

3.4   *Be dən*

Be dən can be used with various meanings in AAVE. When it marks a **habitual resultant state**, it conveys that an event has usually already occurred by the time a subsequent event takes place (*She gotta be there for 9, so they be dən gone to school*, meaning 'She has to be there at 9, so they have usually already gone to school by then'). When it marks a **future resultant state**, it indicates that some activity will be completed by a future time (*I be dən forgot next week*, meaning 'I will have forgotten by next week'). Finally, when it marks a **modal resultant state**, the constructions in which it occurs resemble conditionals with an implicit —and sometimes explicit— *if*-clause and *then*-clause, the expressed meaning being that if the conditions are met, consequences will happen immediately (*If I make any kind of move, this boy be dən shot me*, meaning 'If I move, this boy will shoot me').

3.5   *BIN dən*

BIN dən is used to mark remote **past resultant state**. It appears therefore to be identical to *BIN_COMP* in meaning, and the difference between the two is not clear (*He BIN dən put that in there* as equivalent to *He BIN put that in there,* both meaning 'He put that in there a long time ago').

4 Preverbal markers

4.1   *Finna*

Finna (including variants *fixina*, *fixna*, *fitna*) indicates that an event is imminent; it will happen in the immediate future (*I don't know about you, but I'm finna leave*, meaning 'I don't know about you, but I'm getting ready/about to leave'). The marker always precedes verbs in their bare non-finite form. Aspectual *be* can also occur preceding *finna*.

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4.2 *Steady*

The marker *steady* precedes a verb form in the progressive (*-ing*) and denotes that an activity is carried out in a consistent or intense way (*They want to do their own thing, and you steady talking to them*, meaning 'They want to do their own thing, and you're continuing to talk to them'). In consequence, it must precede a verb that names an activity (not a state verb). The *steady V-ing* sequence can occur in a predicate construction in which a form of auxiliary/copula *be* does not occur on the surface (i.e. *'and you Ø steady...'*). Overt forms of *be* and aspectual *be* can precede steady.

4.3 *Come*

A major function of the marker *come* is to mark speaker indignation. The conveyed meaning is that the speaker sees the addressee as entering the conversation or the scene in a manner of which the speaker does not approve (*Don't come acting like you don't know what happened and you started the whole thing*, meaning 'Don't try to act like you don't know what happened, because you started the whole thing')

5 Negation

Multiple negators such as *don't*, *no* and *nothing* can be used in a single negative sentence in AAVE without any of these elements cancelling the others. Negation can be marked on auxiliaries and indefinite nouns such as *nobody* (*I **ain't** never seen **nobody** preach under announcements*). This feature is called **multiply marked negation**. However, according to Green (2002:78), some researchers maintain that the first negative element of the sentence does all the work of marking negation, so that the rest do not contribute any negative meaning but simply agree with it (and are therefore called *pleonastic* elements). According to this view, the feature is better defined as **negative concord.**

Closely related to the phenomenon of multiple negation is **negative inversion**, in which two sentence or clause initial elements, an auxiliary and an indefinite noun phrase, are obligatorily marked for negation (***Can't nobody** tell you it wasn't meant for you*).

6 Final considerations

As the reader may have noticed, the grammar of AAVE includes very subtle distinctions which are difficult to grasp for those who do not speak this variety. Moreover, many of these features can be easily confused with SE features with which they actually have nothing in common, either because the two are similar in form or simply because the real meaning in AAVE is not even suspected to be possible.

Appendix II will present a very brief description of some of the basic grammatical features of SE so that the reader can now draw an explicit comparison.

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Appendix II: some basic features of SE

What follows is a reproduction of Trudgill (2002:167-8) in which a basic presentation of the grammatical idiosyncrasies of SE is offered. As the author notes, it should not be forgotten that 'SE of course has most of its grammatical features in common with the other dialects'. However, when compared to nonstandard varieties, SE can be seen to have a number of distinctive features which include the following:

- **SE fails to distinguish between forms of the auxiliary verb *do* and its main verb forms.** This is true both of the present tense, where many other dialects distinguish between auxiliary *I do, he do* and main verb *I does, he does* or similar, and the past tense, where most other dialects distinguish between auxiliary *did* and main verb *done*, as in You done it, did you?

- **SE has an unusual and irregular present tense verb morphology in that only the third-person singular receives morphological marking**: *he goes* versus *I go*. Many other dialects use either zero for all persons or *-s* for all persons.

- **SE lacks multiple negation**, so that no choice is available between *I don't want none*, which is not possible, and *I don't want any*. Most nonstandard dialects of English around the world permit multiple negation.

- **SE has an irregular formation of reflexive pronouns**, with some forms based on the possessive pronouns e.g. *myself*, and others on the objective pronouns e.g. *himself*. Most nonstandard dialects have a regular system employing possessive forms throughout, for example *hisself, theirselves*.

- **SE fails to distinguish between second-person singular and plural pronouns**, having *you* in both cases. Many nonstandard dialects maintain the older English distinction between *thou* and *you*, or have developed new distinctions such as *you* versus *youse*.

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- **SE has irregular forms of the verb *to be* both in the present tense (*am, is, are*) and in the past (*was, were*).** Many nonstandard dialects have the same form for all persons, such as *I be, you be, we be, they be* and *I were, you were, he were, we were, they were.*

- **In the case of many irregular verbs, SE redundantly distinguishes between present preterite and perfect verb forms** both by the use of the auxiliary *have* and by the use of distinct preterite and past participle forms: *I have seen* versus *I saw.* Many other dialects have *I have seen* versus *I seen*.

- **SE has only a two-way contrast in its demonstrative system**, with *this* (near to the speaker) opposed to *that* (away from the speaker). Many other dialects have a three-way system involving a further distinction between, for example, *that* (near to the listener) and *yon* (away from both speaker and listener).

Although some of these features have not been mentioned for AAVE because their presentation would have exceeded the limits of this essay, Trudgill's brief characterisation of SE allows us to realise that AAVE is not an exception in its differences from the standard. Compliance to these rules *is* in fact the exception, and it is useful for AAVE speakers to realise that their dialect is not the only one which shows a different internal organisation.

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