



*Working Papers in*  
**Urban Language &  
Literacies**

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**Paper 26**

**Research and shifting perspectives  
on language education:  
A personal account**

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2004

This paper originally appeared in C. Leung (ed) 2002 *Language & Additional/Second Language Issues for School Education* (Watford: NALDIC)

## Research and Shifting Perspectives on Language Education

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### Teaching and research

Most of my research has involved substantial amounts of fieldwork, but beyond discovering new facts or developing innovative methods or technologies, I have tried to use my empirical data to interrogate ideas about language education that are often taken-for-granted among academics, policy-makers and educators. So one of my goals in what follows will be to try to specify some of these ‘interrogations’. In fact, my impression is that a lot of teachers take up research because they become seriously worried by discrepancies between (a) what they’re told in policy texts, teaching handbooks and INSET courses - the prevailing discourses about language learning and teaching - and (b) what they see, hear and experience in their own schools and classrooms. These discrepancies - or what Hymes calls “contrastive insights” (1980:90) - often draw teachers towards research (i) because research offers a space to look more closely at the issues of concern, and (ii) because it offers the prospect of developing a different and often more authoritative voice with which to question the prevailing orthodoxies. Of course, once you actually start doing research, there’s no guarantee that at the end of your study, you’ll still think and feel the same about the issue that originally motivated you, but it’s quite likely that *en route*, you’ll identify other significant issues, and overall you’ll end up in a much stronger position to argue the case. Certainly, this has tended to be my own experience, and I would like to begin this chapter with some autobiography.

### An initial problem

Before I started research, I was employed as a teacher of English as a second language (ESL/EAL) in the south Midlands in the late 1970s. At one of the institutions where I worked, I was put in charge of a group of 9-year olds of Indian and Pakistani descent who had been born and educated in England. They were being completely withdrawn from mainstream schools and placed in a language centre alongside pupils who had just arrived from overseas. In fact, these youngsters spoke extremely fluent English: their most obvious difficulties were in reading, and if they had been white, they would have certainly been given extra help in their ordinary schools. But because their parents came originally from the Indian subcontinent, it was assumed that instruction in an ESL centre would be most appropriate for them.

In other parts of the country, the error of this kind of practice was already being discussed,<sup>1</sup> and I had no doubts that a mistake had been made. But I was also aware that educational rationales were circulating which could make this kind of segregation acceptable. In particular, it was frequently proposed by researchers and educationalists that South Asian pupils were very likely to have rather subtle flaws in their English, that their fluency was frequently ‘superficial’ and ‘deceptive’, and that specialist language teaching was needed well beyond the initial stages.<sup>2</sup>

At around the same time, highly influential applied sociolinguistic work was being produced in Britain arguing that the language of pupils of African-Caribbean descent was systematic, and that teachers should treat it with respect rather than regard it as just ‘broken English’ (e.g. Edwards 1979; Sutcliffe 1982). The same case was being made for white speakers of non-standard English (Trudgill 1975) and it seemed obvious that a similar argument could be extended to Asian pupils. What was being called ESL and deceptive fluency could in fact be a (new) non-standard Asian dialect of English: if this was the case, then it would be just as easy to question specialist ESL withdrawal for Asian pupils as it would be to challenge special ‘remedial’ teaching for white Anglo and African-

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<sup>1</sup> In fact the education authority where I was working closed these units a few years later. But even in the late 1980s, there still appeared to be a view that reading difficulties among children of Asian extraction could be best handled through help with ESL (DES 1988:8).

Caribbean speakers of non-standard English. So I set out to look for a new dialect of Asian English.

### Changing tack

In this initial formulation of what I planned to do, the connections between academic knowledge and educational and social influence seemed plain. But quite rapidly, the value of this direction became less clear. As originally framed, the research would involve the correction of common educational misconceptions and advocacy on behalf of Asian pupils ('look how these dialectalisms are being mistreated as mistakes: see how grammatically consistent they are'). But around this time in circles associated with the study of education (and elsewhere), the intellectual climate discouraged any view that research was unproblematically objective. Research by white on black came in for as much scrutiny as any other (see e.g. Alladina 1986), and in this context, it was no surprise that I started to wonder about the validity and implications of my setting out to define a 'British Asian English'. The designation of varieties and dialects is after all quite arbitrary - how many distinctive linguistic features are needed to warrant a special label? And even then, is it really justified to launch an 'Asian English Vernacular' onto the public stage when, let's say, it differs from white vernaculars in 20 linguistic features and resembles them in 2,200? Linguists might understand the ground rules for a short-hand labelling like this, but there is no reason why everyone else should. And in a context where a web of social factors leads to discrimination, how could I guarantee that this wouldn't just amount to the trading of new stereotypes for old?<sup>3</sup> Faced with this realisation, I drew back from the idea that my empirical research work should have direct educational relevance, and I decided to commit myself to the literature in sociolinguistics and to engage with debates that were primarily academic. I wrote some critiques of educational orthodoxy, but I didn't link these to particularly extensive analyses of language use (Rampton 1985.).

Luckily, though, there was a relatively open-ended element in my fieldwork, which left space for lines of enquiry to develop inductively from the bottom up - my research methods included interviews about language, participant observation, and recording youngsters in spontaneous recreational interaction through radio-microphones. When I started to analyse these, I discovered a set of language practices, anecdotes and attitudes which all converged on my earlier concern with the (mis-)classification of Asian youngsters as ESL learners. This wasn't a case of observing imperfections in the speech of the Asian kids I was studying - their English was highly proficient. Instead it involved comments about the ESL Centre where I had worked, remarks on the proficiency of a range of people in the neighbourhood, and a host of stylised speech performances in which speakers put on broad Indian English accents and/or pretended that they didn't know much English. There isn't space here to describe the intricacy and variety of these views and activities - they could be hostile, probing, or a mark of friendship, and they could be racist, turn racism on its head, or have very little to do with 'race' (see Rampton 1991 & 1996 for overviews, and 1995 for a detailed account). But in terms of my own ideas about research and education, the important points were that

- a) I had tuned into an on-going local debate among adolescents about the idea of Asian English itself,
- b) this debate offered perspectives on EAL that differed from the ones articulated in official educational arenas, and that educationalists needed to listen to <sup>4</sup>
- c) it gave a new relevance and direction to my work, so that instead of wanting to write a linguistic description that might or might not help to 'rehabilitate' a stigmatised

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<sup>3</sup> It has often been argued that language is legitimate where it is grammatically systematic (e.g. Labov 1969), but there is no necessary connection between legitimacy and system: I doubt that anyone would want to argue, for example, that crime is acceptable in cases where it's organised. Explanation and justification aren't the same.

<sup>4</sup> In comparison with the way adolescents performed or debated it, the official discussions of ESL/EAL were very narrow in their lack of historical perspective, and parochial in their exclusive emphasis on

speech variety, I committed myself to trying to understand the everyday politics of language, ethnicity and educational classification.

'Asian English', then, wasn't just a relatively indelible ethno-linguistic 'trait' which linguistic analysis might (or might not) persuade educationalists to respect. It was an influential cultural representation, a resonant cultural symbol, which my informants thought about, talked about and sometimes performed in their everyday activities, embracing it on some occasions, resisting it on others, depending on who they were, who they were with, and what they were doing, where. In fact, it wasn't just Asian English that was being used in ways that nobody seemed aware of either in official educational debates or in the sociolinguistic literature. It also emerged that in the course of their everyday interaction, there was Caribbean Creole being used by Asian and Anglo kids,<sup>5</sup> that bits of Panjabi were being used by kids of Anglo and African-Caribbean descent,<sup>6</sup> and that in multi-ethnic adolescent peer groups, knowledge of other people's ethnic languages could be an important symbol of local neighbourhood community belonging. Educational policy makers might assume that a language like Panjabi could "only be of relevance to mother tongue speakers of languages other than English, i.e. to pupils from certain ethnic minority groups" (DES 1985:405-6), and in the official imagination, the only hope of overcoming white people's "negative perceptions of the 'strangeness' of ethnic minority groups" (ibid.) might lie in a revised school curriculum. But evidently, young people weren't quite as passive or as inward-looking as they were supposed to be.

#### Positioning the research in wider debate

Overall, adolescent language use often seemed to be destabilising traditional ethnic categories, and to be looking beyond ethnic inheritance to friendship and neighbourhood co-residence as entitlements to the use of minority ethnic languages. Creole, Panjabi and Asian English were still important symbols in majority-minority politics, and they certainly weren't open for use by anyone. But it was clear that essentialist assumptions about Panjabi being only for Panjabis and Creole being only for African-Caribbeans fell short of the realities, and the linguistic evidence seemed to bear out what Stuart Hall was arguing about the emergence of 'new ethnicities':

"we are beginning to see constructions of... a new conception of ethnicity: a new cultural politics which engages rather than suppresses difference and which depends, in part, on the cultural construction of new ethnic identities... What is involved is the splitting of the notion of ethnicity between, on the one hand the dominant notion which connects it to nation and 'race' and on the other hand what I think is the beginning of a positive conception of the ethnicity of the margins, of the periphery... this is not an ethnicity which is doomed to survive, as Englishness was, only by... displacing and forgetting other ethnicities. This is precisely the politics of ethnicity predicated on difference and diversity" (1988:29. Original emphasis)

This shift in the meaning of ethnicity has been widely neglected in educational policy and debate, but it has substantial implications for language education that I have tried to address these in a number of papers co-authored with Harris and Leung (Leung et al 1997; Harris et al 2002; Rampton et al 1999; Rampton et al (forthcoming)). At the same time, Hall's account also synchronises with the range of very general changes in the intellectual and cultural climate that we associate with 'late/post-modernity'. These changes invite us to reassess some of the basic concepts and assumptions that we use to think about language, and in recent years, this re-evaluation has probably formed a larger part of my work than analysis specifically focused on language learning and teaching.

The central elements in this new *Zeitgeist* have been discussed in a wide variety of arenas, and taking the debates about linguistic and cultural diversity as its context, Table 1 contrasts them with the analyses offered in 'deficit', 'difference' and 'domination' perspectives. In Column I, the *deficit* position stresses the inadequacies of subordinate (out)groups and the importance of their being socialised into dominant (in)group norms.

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<sup>5</sup> Roger Hewitt 1982 provides an early account of this. See also Hewitt 1986.

In Column II, *difference* is the key word and emphasis is given to the integrity and autonomy of the subordinate group's language and culture, and to the need for institutions to be hospitable to diversity. In Column III, the focus shifts to larger structures of *domination*, and the need for institutions to combat the institutional processes and ideologies that reproduce the oppression of subordinate groups is stressed. There is obviously a good deal of conflict between these interpretations of the basic character of diversity; different perspectives have gained ascendancy at different times in different places; and in the debates about race and ethnicity in British education, they are fairly easily recognised as assimilation, multiculturalism and antiracism (Brandt 1986).<sup>7</sup> At the same time, they all tend to assume that cultures and communities are rather homogeneous/ monolithic, and that the identities and interests of different groups, of minority and majority, are quite easily defined.

#### INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

This 'essentialism' contrasts sharply with research oriented to late-modernity, where instead of trying to define the core features of any social group or institution, the focus turns to the ways that people, knowledge, texts and objects move ('flow') across social and geographical space, to the production and policing of boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, and to experiences of indeterminacy and ambivalence. When diversity and inequality becomes the issue (as in Table 1), it is often accepted that larger social, economic and political systems play a major part in structuring relations of domination, but at the same time, the complexity of social experience makes it very hard to predict their impact on particular groups and individuals. Instead, the emphasis is on looking closely at how people make sense of difference and inequality in their local situations, and at how they interpret them in the context of a range of social relationships (gender, class, region, generation etc). This perspective is wary of seeing culture *either* as an elite canon, *or* as a set of static ethnic essences, *or* as a simple reflection of economic and political processes; it takes the view that the reality of people's circumstances is actively shaped by the ways in which they interpret and respond to them; and in line with this, it lays a good deal of emphasis on the cultural politics of imagery and representation. In terms of debates within the UK, this fourth perspective can be seen in debates about pluralism in the UK (and elsewhere) in a book like Donald & Rattansi's *'Race' Culture and Difference*,<sup>8</sup> and some of its key features are listed in Column IV.

To summarise this perspective, 'discourse' is identified as the overarching theme in Column IV, and indeed over the last 20 years or so, 'discourse' has become a major theme in the humanities and social sciences. Often, the word refers to very general collections of ideas, perspectives and practices (so that, for example, one might speak of the 'discourse of medicine', 'new management discourse' etc), and when it is used in this way, 'discourse' often seems an abstract, sometimes even rather pretentious, notion, leading to suspicion that 'post-modernity' is simply a matter of cultural and academic fashion, far removed from the gritty realities of everyday life. But from the sketch of adolescents renegotiating their ethno-linguistic affiliations that I've already presented, it should be clear that, far from falling under the spell of esoteric cultural theory, it was the data from my radio-mic recordings of routine interaction that drew me to the relevance of a late-modern, 'discourse' perspective. The fact was that, with their inbuilt assumptions about fixed identities and relatively stable boundaries, established sociolinguistic terms like 'native speaker', 'non-native speaker' and 'speech community' just couldn't do justice to the kinds of process that I was listening to on my tapes. My data cried out for a reassessment of stock analytic terms, and I was lucky to find theoretical support for this in the literature on late/post-modernity.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In discussions about the global spread of English, they are broadly in line with the views expressed in Quirk (1985), Kachru (1982) and Phillipson (1992) respectively.

<sup>8</sup> In debates about English as an international language, it is also central in Pennycook 1994.

<sup>9</sup> Reassessments of 'native speaker' and 'speech community' can be found in Rampton 1990, Rampton

Key aspects of my research methodology

In fact, the methods that I have used in my research have themselves played a substantial role in this perspectival repositioning. My basic analytic technique is to transcribe selected sequences of interaction in quite a lot of detail, to spend a great deal of time taking a close and slow look at the moment-by-moment unfolding of each episode, and then to build up a set of more general claims drawn from the analysis of each one. When you do this, you soon realise that even though the participants may have Anglo, Pakistani or African Caribbean backgrounds, these aren't the only identities that are significant in the interaction, and indeed in any given strip of action you're investigating, they might not be significant at all. Within the classroom, the institutional identities of pupil, teacher, pupil, star-student, teacher's pet, problem-case etc etc may all become relevant at different times. And beyond that, within particular *activities*, what counts is who's telling the joke and who's listening, who's found the information and who's writing it down etc etc.<sup>10</sup> What you realise very quickly is that basically, you are focusing on *people interacting together in social activities*. Certainly, some of these activities may be biased in favour of one type of person rather than another, but the participants may or may not show an awareness of this in their conduct, and if they do, their diagnosis of the advantages and disadvantages associated with particular identities may be rather different from yours as an analyst. The outcome is a collage of human beings doing social life - and sometimes doing politics - in the course of their everyday affairs, and ethnicity, gender and other identities move unpredictably in and out of focus according both to the circumstances and to your analytic vantage point. When the project is completed, the reader of the research is presented with a range of transcripts in which they can see specific individuals chatting to their friends about food, family, friends, school, homework and so forth. It is in the context of this wide range of ordinary activity that issues of ethnic (or other kinds of) identity move in and out of salience, and I think that this close contextualisation is quite a good way of avoiding the fetishisation of ethnicity (or gender, or age) that one sometimes finds in other modes of research presentation.

Indeed, it isn't only my methods of analysis that have encouraged this kind of non-essentialist perspective, in which identity is interpreted as being more a matter of flexible, situated activity than as a fixed trait that is always relevant to every situation. A loosely comparable 'decentring' has also been produced by the way I have collected my data. As already mentioned, tape-recording adolescents through radio-microphones has been a major technique in my data-collection, and this produces a very vivid picture of the very different experiences that individuals draw from a single event like a lesson. In academic and professional discussions, the participants in a lesson are often simply described as 'pupils' and 'teachers'; it is the teacher's talk that comes out most clearly on the recordings; and what the teacher says and does is regarded as the main influence on what happens in a lesson. In contrast, if you pin a radio-mic on an adolescent at the start of the school-day and follow them through their lessons, it becomes very clear that in the first instance, pupils relate to each other as individuals with different personalities, tastes, interests and so forth. In fact, one of the main problems any teacher faces is to get the collection of disparate individuals assembled in their classroom to actually behave like a 'class of pupils', but rather than recognising this problem, official representations of classroom interaction often simply erase it in their transcripts when they reduce all the human individuality to the label 'Teacher', 'Pupil 1', 'Pupil 2', 'Pupils' etc:

Teacher: "....."  
Pupil 1: "....."  
Teacher: "....."  
Pupils: "....."

Indeed, when the analysis of a lesson focuses primarily on the teacher, unsolicited talk among the students is often regarded as a distracting interruption. In contrast, when you listen to radio-mic recordings of pupils, it is obvious that youngsters are often committed to talking about themes and issues that either began at the start of the day or have carried

over from the day before, and so the question arises: who's distracting who? Are the kids disrupting the lessons, or the lessons interrupting the kids? Equally, who is being rude to whom when a teacher tells a pupil to stop talking in the lesson? Pupils frequently carry on nevertheless, and you can hear on the radio-mics that it is often basic considerations of interpersonal politeness that compel kids to finish off talking to their neighbour in the proper/decent manner.

### Research and teaching?

Admittedly, with these last points, the gap between research and teaching looks quite wide, and for anyone engaged in teaching day-to-day, it might look as though there is a certain amoral aestheticism in the attention I give to the pupils' off-task activity, that there is an out-of-touch academic luxuriance in the way I'm privileging the 'is' above the 'ought', and that if I find that there seem to be systematic ways in which lessons don't work, then I should use this knowledge to help improve them. Certainly, there is a risk that the longer term consequences of particular kinds of activity get forgotten in close-up micro-analysis of the kind I've outlined, and I would never argue that mine was the only kind of research worth doing - after all, one of the first things reactionary governments try to do is to doctor the statistics. And there's also a very strong case for collaborating with colleagues who are more intensively involved with schools and teachers.<sup>11</sup> Even so, classrooms are very complex environments and they are highly sensitive to ongoing social change. It requires quite a lot of time to work out what's going on in a lesson if you treat it as multi-perspectival event, and it takes time to access, and to contribute towards, the insights about language, culture and society available the humanities and social sciences. So there are circumstances where it's important not to skimp on analysis in a rush to intervention, and if analysts always take short-cuts, then it's increasingly likely that schools and classrooms will be caricatured or forgotten in more general analyses and discussions of social and cultural change. In fact within the academy at large, there is already something of a tendency to treat education as an intellectual backwater, as an essentially practical matter that's actually best left to the professionals. For sure, teachers do play a central role, and equally, it would be foolish to claim that the advice coming from universities to schools necessarily always hits the mark. Nevertheless, universities can still provide an unusually open space for systematic, accountable analysis and critique,<sup>12</sup> and if schooling is allowed to become a merely marginal subject within them, then it is that much easier for politicians and others to treat education as open ground for the display and imposition of their prejudices. So while I admit that some of the material I produce isn't immediately relevant or accessible to anyone hard-pressed with practical pedagogic issues, there's also a vital place for work which seeks to use accountable methods and procedures to spell out the problem with dominant ideas of what's significant and what's trivial, and that tries to show how the opportunities and costs of globalisation and late modernity are really lived out in the small but insistent details of everyday life and work at school.

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<sup>11</sup> Inevitably, after a substantial period of doing primarily academic research rather than teaching, it's easier to spot the ways in which bits of educational practice present a real challenge, or connect in potentially consequential ways, to socio-linguistic theory than vice versa - seeing how sociolinguistic theory can make a genuine impact on educational practice.

<sup>12</sup> Of course there are also a number of contemporary pressures pushing for a change in their function. See Rampton 1995b for discussion in the context of applied linguistics.