

## **Dialect Awareness, Cultural Literacy, and the Public Interest**

Although the disparity between sociolinguistic knowledge and popular beliefs about language diversity is well documented, little proactive attention has been given to changing public misconceptions. There is no established tradition for promoting an understanding of and appreciation for language diversity on formal or informal levels of education. How can programs about linguistic diversity be presented when prevailing public language ideology is largely fueled by the principle of linguistic subordination (Lippi-Green 1997) and interpreted educationally in terms of a correction model? This presentation offers a theoretical and practical approach to public education that seeks to enlighten at the same time that it circumvents the polemical debates that have often characterized the public discussion of language diversity in American society. The approach to dialect awareness programs presented here is based on the underlying assumption that the public is inherently curious about language differences and that this intrigue can be seized upon to present programs that range from TV documentaries to formal educational curricula. It seeks to embed the legacy of language variation within authentic historical and cultural themes that are intrinsically interesting to the public, and assumes that the most effective and permanent education takes place when learners discover truths for themselves. It further presumes that positively framed presentations of language differences in sociocultural and sociohistorical context hold a greater likelihood of being received by the public than the direct confrontation of seemingly unassailable ideologies.

A range of public education venues are exemplified, from TV documentaries and museum exhibits for the general public to formal dialect awareness curricular materials developed specifically for K-12 students. Illustrative vignettes from TV documentaries produced by the North Carolina Language and Life Project show how this medium can be used to present issues that extend from language identity and solidarity to issues of language change, language choice, and language revitalization. Illustrative sociolinguistic vignettes include Native American, European American, African American, and Hispanic American ethnic and/or regional varieties.

Results from the pilot experimentation of an innovative, state-wide dialect awareness curriculum for middle-school students in North Carolina (Reaser and Wolfram 2006) indicate that students make significant gains on a pre- and post-survey related both to dialect knowledge and to language attitudes (Reaser 2006). More than 90 per cent of the students in these pilot programs report that they learned something that changed the way they thought about language and that the information was important to study for all students. The results clearly indicate that dialect awareness programs can make a difference in the public perception of language diversity.

Admittedly, the development of formal and informal dialect awareness programs casts sociolinguists as ideological brokers who offer alternative views of language diversity to an American public socialized according to the principle of linguistic subordination. On one level, an ideological conflict may seem unavoidable, but the presentation demonstrates that the public rhetoric on linguistic diversity can, in fact, be reconciled with a linguistically informed perspective, and that dialect awareness programs need not have a balkanizing sociopolitical or education effect.

### **References**

- Lippi-Green, Rosina (1997) *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Reaser, Jeffrey L. (2006) *The Effect of Dialect Awareness on Adolescent Knowledge and Attitudes*. Ph.D. dissertation. Durham: Duke University.
- Reaser, Jeffrey L. and Walt Wolfram (2006) *Voices of North Carolina: Language and Life from the Atlantic to the Appalachians*, Instructor's Manual and Student's Workbook. Raleigh: North Carolina Language and Life Project.