



"Students' Right to Their Own Language": A Retrospective

Geneva Smitherman

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“Students’ Right to Their Own Language”: A Retrospective

Geneva Smitherman

e affirm the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language.

—Passed by the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), November, 1972, and by the CCCC Membership, April, 1974

It has now been well over a generation since Kwame Ture (then Stokely Carmichael) issued his clarion call for “Black Power” and thus charted a new course for the Civil Rights Movement in America. But his cry, horrendous and frightening as it seemed to be to some in 1966, was not without precedent in the annals of the African American struggle. For just twelve years earlier, Richard Wright had entitled his book on the emerging independence movements in Africa, *Black Power*. And surely Rosa Parks’ historic refusal to give up her seat to whites and move to the back of the bus on December 1, 1955, paved the way for Kwame Ture’s “Black Power”—a bold call for new directions and strategies. These actions and events from the Black Experience symbolize the motive forces that led to the unleashing of Brown Power, Woman Power, Poor People’s Power, Gay Power, and other human energy sources that fundamentally altered American power relations in our time.

THE HISTORICAL BACKDROP

As marching, fist-raising, loud-talking, and other forms of resistance marred the landscape of “America the beautiful,” the power elites huddled to design reforms to acculturate the oppressed into the dominant ideology. The Unhip among researchers, scholars, and intellectuals assembled the data base upon which these reforms were built, arguing, for instance, that even though the linguistic-cultural differences of those oppressed by race, class, or gender were cognitively equal to those of the mainstream, they were socially unequal. Early on, some scholars—like James Sledd in his 1969 *English Journal* “Bi-Dialectalism: The Linguistics of White Supremacy,” and me in my 1968 “Black Power is Black Language” (delivered in April, 1969 in Miami at my first CCCC Convention)—early on, such scholars tried to pull our coats (to enlighten) to the trickery (deception) of the power brokers. They argued that it was purely academic to demonstrate, in Emersonian, arm-chair philosophizing style, the legitimacy of the oppressed’s language and culture without concomitantly struggling for institutional legitimacy in the educational and public domains. If the patriarchally-constituted social and economic structure would not accept non-mainstream speech varieties, then the argument for *difference* would simply become *deficiency* all over again.

Against this backdrop, enlightened academics saw their task clearly to struggle for such legitimacy. They were not romantic idealists; indeed, many of them had been baptized in the fire of social protest and street activism. No, not idealists, but those who know that without vision, people will perish. These progressive academics began working within their professional societies and organizations to bring about mainstream recognition and legitimacy to the culture, history, and language of those on the margins. And it was not only within NCTE and CCCC that this struggle was waged, but all across the alphabetic spectrum—the APA

Linguist Smitherman provides some history to the 1974 “Students’ Right” document and calls for a new view of language.

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(American Psychological Association); the ASA (American Sociological Association); the MLA (Modern Language Association); the SCA (Speech Communication Association); the ABA (American Bar Association); the ASHA (American Speech and Hearing Association); and on and on across disciplines and throughout the Academy. Though the struggles were spearheaded by Blacks, it quickly became a rainbow coalition as Hispanics, women, Native Americans, and other marginalized groups sought redress for their ages-old grievances against an exploitative system.

Let us recall that the Cause was just if the methods awkward. The Enlightened were, after all, attempting to effectuate change WITHIN THE SYSTEM. And even those of us who were more revolutionarily inclined recognized the folly of doing *nothing* while waiting for the Revolution to come.

THE BIRTH OF "STUDENTS' RIGHT"

In this socio-historical climate, in the fall of 1971, the officers of CCCC appointed a committee to draft a policy resolution on students' dialects, and thus the first "Students' Right to Their Own Language" Committee was born. After months of intense scholarly work and political struggle, both within and outside our Committee, in March, 1972, we presented the CCCC Executive Committee (of which I was also a member at the time), with the position statement which has come to be known as the "Students' Right to Their Own Language." When I say "intense struggle," it is not dramatic hyperbole; for instance, we debated for hours on the question of the student's right to *his* own language vs. *his or her* own language: remember, this was over twenty years ago.

In November of 1972, the CCCC Executive Committee passed the "Students' Right" resolution and began to pave the way to make this admittedly controversial resolution a matter of CCCC policy. They recognized that their membership, as well as other language arts professionals, would need to be educated about the current research on language variation, usage, and the history of American English. A Committee was appointed to develop a background document that would elaborate on the assertions in the brief "Students' Right" statement

before presenting the resolution to the full body of CCCC and eventually to the profession at large. The background document was presented to the CCCC Executive Committee at the Philadelphia NCTE Convention in November, 1973. Subsequently, this document and the resolution itself were distributed to CCCC membership.

In April of 1974, at the CCCC business meeting in Anaheim, California, the "Students' Right to Their Own Language" became the official policy of CCCC. That fall, the complete background document was published as a full issue of CCCC's journal, *College Composition and Communication*. The "Students' Right" resolution appears on the inside cover of that issue. The document seeks to inform by presenting a set of 15 issues, in the form of questions, about language, dialect, and teaching-learning—e.g., "Does dialect affect the ability to write?" "Why do some dialects have more prestige than others?" Included also is a bibliography of 129 entries keyed to these 15 questions (CCC, 1974).

NCTE'S RESPONSE TO "STUDENTS' RIGHT"

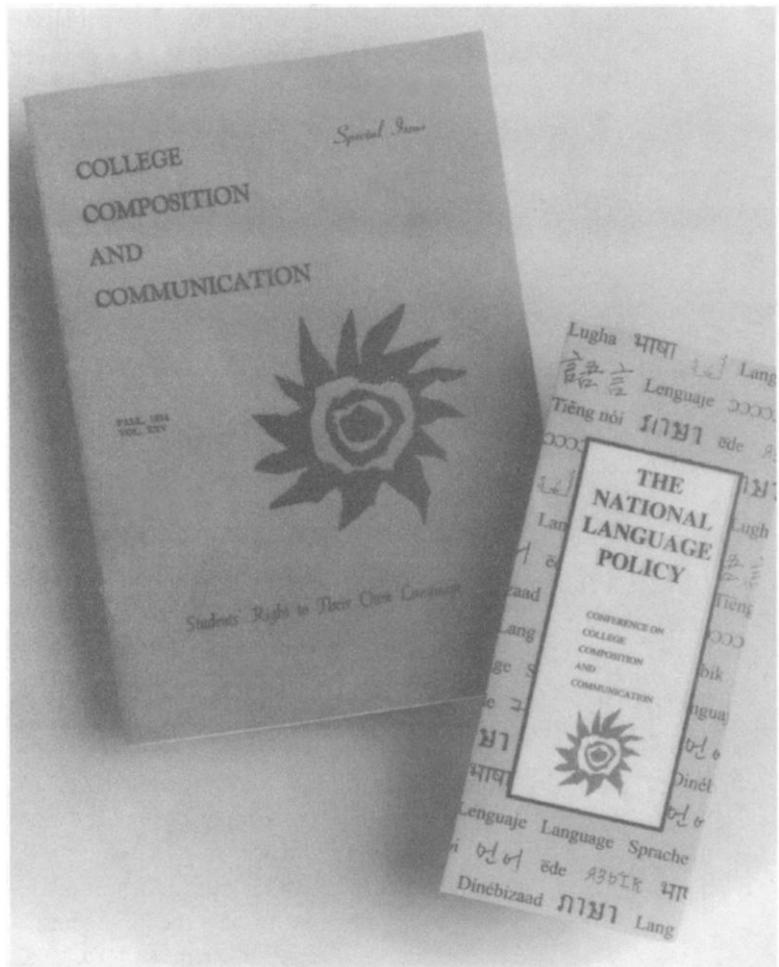
Although CCCC is politically autonomous, structurally, it is an institutional arm of NCTE, sharing some resources, headquarters, and, of course, concern for language education with NCTE. Further, many CCCC members, myself included, are members and workers of both organizations. In 1971, after the formation of what was to become the "Students' Right" Committee, CCCC leadership and its members began working within NCTE to promote the concept of the students' right to their own language. For the next three years, there was a concerted effort by CCCC to persuade NCTE to endorse the CCCC position statement. However, this did not occur. Instead, at its 1974 Convention, NCTE passed a weaker version of the CCCC's "Students' Right to Their Own Language." Although many of us on the "Students' Right" Committee and within CCCC were profoundly disappointed, we consoled ourselves by the thought that the action taken by NCTE was at least not a *negative* vote on the issue.

There are two crucial differences between the CCCC and the NCTE actions around "Students' Right to Their Own Language."

First, the NCTE resolution distinguishes between spoken and written language in relationship to students' dialects, and although it "accept(s) the linguistic premise that all these dialects are equally efficient as systems of communication," the resolution goes on to "affirm" that students should learn the "conventions of what has been called written edited American English" (NCTE Resolution #74.2, 1974). This was an issue that the CCCC "Students' Right" Committee struggled with and deliberately decided *not* to focus on. We recognized that spelling, punctuation, usage, and other surface structure conventions of Edited American English (EAE) are generally what's given all the play (attention) in composition classrooms anyway. Based on the ground-breaking linguistic research of scholars such as Chomsky (e.g., 1968), Labov (e.g., 1970, 1972), Halliday (e.g., 1973) Hymes (e.g., 1964, 1972), Dillard (e.g., 1972), Shuy (e.g., 1964, 1967), and Fishman (e.g., 1970), the CCCC background publication contends that:

... dialect ... plays little if any part in determining whether a child will ultimately acquire the ability to write EAE. ... Since the issue is not the capacity of the dialect itself, the teacher can concentrate on building up the students' confidence in their ability to write ... the essential functions of writing [are] expressing oneself, communicating information and attitudes, and discovering meaning through both logic and metaphor ... [thus] we view variety of dialects as an advantage ... one may choose roles which imply certain dialects, but the decision is a social one, for the dialect itself does not limit the information which can be carried, and the attitudes may be most clearly conveyed in the dialect the writer finds most congenial ... [Finally] the most serious difficulty facing "non-standard" dialect speakers in developing writing ability derives from their exaggerated concern for the *least* serious aspects of writing. If we can convince our students that spelling, punctuation, and usage are less important than content, we have removed a major obstacle in their developing the ability to write. (1974, 8)

The second crucial difference between NCTE and CCCC around the "Students' Right" issue is that CCCC committed tremendous time and energy resources to the illumination of this language issue. For sev-



eral years after the passage of the position statement by the 1972 CCCC Executive Committee, CCCC committees worked to produce two documents (although one was never published) to provide guidance to teachers on the meaning and implications of the "Students' Right" position and the impact of this policy on classroom practice.

Although NCTE did not come on board with the full vigor we in CCCC would have liked, it did agree in its version of the "Students' Right" resolution to make available to other professional organizations the suggestions and recommendations in the CCCC background document and to

promote classroom practices to expose students to the variety of dialects that occur in our multi-regional, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural society, so that they too will understand the nature of American English and come to respect all its dialects. (NCTE Resolution #74.2, 1974)

IMPLEMENTATION OF "STUDENTS' RIGHT"

After the NCTE action, CCCC moved into the next phase of the "Students' Right"

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history. To be sure, there was high interest and enthusiasm, but unfortunately, there was also lingering confusion—you know, "Well, what they want me to *do*?" Although the CCCC background document was informative in terms of theory, it did not go far enough in praxis. CCCC leadership acknowledged that there was a need for more explicit teaching materials, sample lesson plans, and a more specific pedagogy. The Executive Committee thus appointed the "Selection and Editorial Committee for Activities Supporting Students' Right to Their Own Language," on which I also served.

This Committee was charged with assembling a publication of practical classroom assignments, activities, lectures, and teaching units that would show and tell how to apply the philosophy of the "Students' Right" resolution to the day-to-day experience of teaching and learning. Many of the people who served on this Committee, as on the other "Students' Right" Committee, are well-known and active members of the profession. We spent nearly *four years* compiling and editing some excellent material, solicited from practitioners at all levels of education, only to be informed that CCCC had "reluctantly decided" not to publish the collection.

What had happened since the passage of the original "Students' Right" resolution some years earlier is that the nation was moving to a more conservative climate on the social, political, and educational fronts. It was a move which would be solidified in 1980 by the election of President Ronald Reagan. Thus the mood of CCCC, as the mood of America, had shifted from change and promise to stagnation and dreams deferred.

PRODUCT AND PROCESS OF "STUDENTS' RIGHT"

We have overviewed the process; now let us look at the product in relationship to this process.

Even though earlier I generously labelled our group "progressive," we were not all of like minds about the "Students' Right" resolution, nor its implications. And we certainly were not of identical persuasion on the issue of America's linguistic ills and solutions to them. Hey, some of us even had reservations about the use of little four-letter words—not dem big, bad foe letter ones,

with initial fricatives and sibilants; just the little ti-notchy ones like "damn" and "hell." (Apropos of this, I do hereby confess to being the first to introduce "cussing" into Committee deliberations, to the distinct relief of my old comrade, Ross Winterowd of the University of Southern California.) Yet despite our diverse ideologies and political perspectives, we shared a spirit of collective enlightenment on the language question.

The "Students' Right" background document is a compromise publication, born of the contradictions among radicals, moderates, and conservatives. It is, moreover, the consequence of the talented editorial hand of Richard (Jix) Lloyd-Jones from the University of Iowa and of the skillful diplomacy of late linguist Melvin Butler of Southern University, our Committee Chair, whose tragic, untimely death prevented him from witnessing the fruits of his labor. For some of us, then as now, the document is seen as equivocating; it doesn't go far enough. For others, then as now, it is perceived as too permissive.

Yet, short of totalitarianism and fascism on the one hand, or armed revolutionary struggle, on the other, compromise is what comes from working *within* the system. And so those of us who embrace the dialectical vision of history applaud the recently-renewed momentum and interest in the "Students' Right to Their Own Language," for without struggle, there is no progress.

As should be obvious to all writing teachers worth their training, the "Students' Right" document is the product of multiple writing styles. After deciding to use the admittedly wack (corny) twenty-question format of the once-popular television quiz show, we divvied up the work and the writing. Although we critiqued each other's writing and despite the admirably awesome editing job done by Melvin, and later Jix, still it must be conceded that the document is stylistically uneven. Yet the final product is preferable to what any *one* individual might have written because it reflects a *collective* response to the language question: "What should the schools do about the language habits of students who come from a wide variety of social, economic, and cultural backgrounds?" ("Students' Right," 1).

African Americans weren't the only "submerged minorities" (a term we wrestled

with in Committee deliberations) forcing the question, as the “Students’ Right” framed it: “Should the schools try to uphold language variety, or to modify it, or to eradicate it?” Yet, a good deal of the background document (i.e., examples, illustrations, bibliographic references, etc.) focus on *Black* speech. This is logical given not only the large numbers of African Americans among the oppressed, but also given that Blacks were the first to force the moral and Constitutional questions of equality in this country. Further, of all underclass groups in the U.S., Blacks are pioneers in social protest and have waged the longest, politically principled struggle against exploitation.

Finally—and this is an ironic footnote in American life—whenever Blacks have struggled and won social gains for themselves, they have made possible gains for other groups—e.g., Hispanics, Asians, gays, etc., even some white folks! For instance, the nineteenth-century emancipation of African slaves in this country paved the way for the first Women’s Movement, during which, in fact, Black champions for the abolition of slavery, Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, for example, fought vigorously for women’s rights. In similar fashion, then, *Black* students’ right to *their* own language has made possible *all* students’ right to their own language.

THE NEED TO RECOGNIZE STUDENTS’ LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Let me remind you that those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it. In spite of recently reported gains in Black student writing, chronicled by the NAEP and higher scores on the SAT, the rate of functional illiteracy and drop-outs among America’s underclass is moving faster than the Concorde. A genuine recognition of such students’ culture and language is desperately needed if we as a profession are to play some part in stemming this national trend. I write genuine because, in spite of the controversy surrounding policies like the “Students’ Right to Their Own Language,” the bicultural, bilingual model has *never* really been tried. Lip-service is about all most teachers gave it, even at the height of the social upheaval described earlier.

You see, the game plan has always been linguistic and cultural absorption of the

Other into the dominant culture, and indoctrination of the outsiders into the existing value system (e.g., Sledd 1972), to remake those on the margins in the image of the patriarch, to reshape the outsiders into talking, acting, thinking, and (to the extent possible) looking like the insiders (e.g., Smitherman 1973). In bilingual education and among multilingual scholars and activists, this issue is framed as one of language *shift* vs. language *maintenance* (see Fishman 1966, 1983). That is, the philosophy of using the native language as a vehicle to teach and eventually *shift* native speakers *away from their home language*, vs. a social and pedagogical model that teaches the target language—in this country, English—while providing support for *maintaining the home language*—Spanish, Polish, Black English, etc. All along, despite a policy like the “Students’ Right,” the system has just been perping—engaging in fraudulent action.

I am a veteran of the language wars, dating to my undergraduate years when I was victimized by a biased speech test given to all those who wanted to qualify for a teaching certificate. I flunked the test and had to take speech correction, not because of any actual speech impediment, such as aphasia or stuttering, but because I was a speaker of Black English. Such misguided policies have now been eradicated as a result of scientific enlightenment about language and the renewed commitment to cultural pluralism that is the essence of the American experiment.

A few years after my bout with speech therapy, I published, in the pages of this journal, my first experimental attempt at writing the “dialect of my nurture”: “English Teacher, Why You Be Doing the Thangs You Don’t Do?” (Smitherman 1972). Encouraged by former *EJ* editor, Stephen Tchudi (then Judy), I went on to produce a regular *EJ* column, “Soul N Style,” written in a mixture of Black English Vernacular and the Language of Wider Communication (i.e., Edited American English), and for which I won a national award (thanks to Steve Tchudi, who believed in me—Yo, Steve, much props!). In the 1977 edition of *Talkin and Testifyin: the Language of Black America*, I called for a national language policy, the details of which I had yet to work out. A decade later, I had come to realize that such a policy was

needed, not just for African Americans and other groups on the margins, but for the entire country, and that the experience of African Americans could well be the basis for what I called a tripartite language policy (Smitherman 1987). Like I said, I been on the battlefield for days.

CCCC'S "NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY"

Over the years since 1971, CCCC has evolved its linguistic and social consciousness beyond the issue of students' right to their own dialect to encompass the students' right to multiple ways of speaking. In 1987, it established the Language Policy Committee to study the current "English-Only" Movement and to develop a position for CCCC on English-Only's call for a Constitutional amendment to make English the sole language of this country. That Committee, like its predecessor, the "Students' Right" Committee, formulated a CCCC position that has become organizational policy. In March 1988, CCCC adopted the "National Language Policy," which is as follows:

There is a need for a National Language Policy, the purpose of which is to prepare everyone in the United States for full participation in a multi-cultural nation. Such a policy recognizes and reflects the historical reality that, even though English has become the language of wider communication, we are a multi-lingual society. All people in a democratic society have the right to equal protection of the laws, to employment, to social services, and to participation in the democratic process. No one should be denied these or any other civil rights because of linguistic and cultural differences. Legal protection, education, and social services must be provided in English as well as other languages in order to enable everyone in the United States to take full advantage of these rights. This language policy affirms that civil rights should not be denied to people because of linguistic differences. It enables everyone to participate in the life of the nation by ensuring continued respect both for English, the common language, and for the many other languages that have contributed to our rich cultural and linguistic heritage.

This policy has three inseparable parts:

1. to provide resources to enable native and non-native speakers to achieve oral and

literate competence in English, the language of wider communication.

2. to support programs that assert the legitimacy of native languages and dialects and ensure that proficiency in the mother tongue will not be lost; and
3. to foster the teaching of languages other than English so that native speakers of English can rediscover the language of their heritage or learn a second language.

The formulation of such a national language policy would mean that on *all* levels of education, every student would be required to develop competence in at least three languages. One of these would be, of course, the Language of Wider Communication, which everyone would learn. The second would be the student's mother tongue—e.g., Spanish, Polish, Black English, Italian, Arabic, Chinese, Appalachian English. The legitimacy of the home language would be reinforced, and students' ability to function in that language would be part of their expanded linguistic repertoire by the end of twelve years of schooling. Thirdly, every student would have command of at least one totally foreign language. That language would vary, depending on the options and social conditions in local communities and schools.

"STUDENTS' RIGHT" AND NEW PARADIGM SHIFT

In retrospect, then, the "Students' Right to Their Own Language" served its historical time and paved the way for this next evolutionary stage. We're now in the period of a new paradigm shift, from a provincial, more narrowly conceived focus to a broader internationalist perspective. We thus are being forced to address the issue of multiple linguistic voices, not only here, but in the global family. NCTE and CCCC, having grappled with these issues through the "Students' Right" era is, I think, well-positioned for a leadership role in formulating a national language policy for this nation. Not just a policy for the narrow confines of, say, composition classrooms, which was our more modest goal in developing the CCCC "Students' Right" resolution, but a language policy that would impact *all* levels of education in *all* school subjects and in *all* social and institutional domains.

This is what is needed to carry us into the next century, just six years away. I thus

*I thus herein
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herein issue a call to all language arts educators and the entire NCTE membership to sign onto the CCCC National Language Policy. We—and your students—await your response.

Note

Kwame Ture, then Stokely Carmichael, first used the “Black Power” slogan in a speech in June, 1966 on a protest march in Greenville, Mississippi. The march, designed to go across the state of Mississippi, had been initiated by James Meredith, the first Black to be admitted to the University of Mississippi, who had been ambushed and shot early on during the march. Carmichael and other Civil Rights leaders had come to Mississippi to continue Meredith’s march. The concept of empowerment, as well as the accompanying rhetorical strategy, had been carefully worked out by the leadership of the Student Non-Violence Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which was waiting for the opportune moment to introduce the slogan of “Black Power” into the discourse of the Civil Rights Movement. A few days before Stokely’s speech, SNCC worker, Willie Ricks, had begun using the slogan in local meetings to rally the people. And it was actually Ricks who convinced SNCC leadership—and Carmichael—that this was the historical moment to drop “Black Power.” In retrospect, Kwame Ture confessed that Stokely Carmichael “did not expect that ‘enthusiastic response’ from his audience of sharecroppers, farm workers, and other everyday Black people in Mississippi.” “The Time Has Come, 1964–66,” *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads* (1965–1985).

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EJ SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO

The Dismal Landscape of Writing

“It is not the teacher’s pathway alone which lies so often among arid deserts of themes. The pupil, for the sake of a mark or at the seeming whim of the teacher, traverses all too frequently a dismal terrain. He finds a sameness even in relating his own experiences, if this must be done term after term.

“This drear landscape may give way to scenery which acquires a meaning and interest for him if his own and his fellows’ stories, essays, descriptions, oral reports, letters, outlines, and debates can derive a unity and purpose from being related to some one broad general subject. One such unified composition course may deal with *Our Nation*, another with *Citizenship*, or *Our City*; others with *French Life*, *Roman Life*, with *Recreations*, *Vocations*, or *Periodicals*.”

Cornelia Carhart Ward. 1920. “Unified Composition Courses.” *EJ* 9.1 (Jan.): 48.

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