Exploring the complexity of high school students' beliefs about language variation

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the knowledge and beliefs about language variation from high school students in the San Francisco Bay Area. Using quantitative analysis of a survey of language beliefs, combined with a thematic analysis of student interviews, the study explores the language ideologies demonstrated by students from a wide range of sociocultural backgrounds. Key findings include that neither race nor linguistic background predict whether students hold dominant language ideologies that frame Standardized English as the correct form of English, or critical language ideologies that uphold the value of all English varieties. The key characteristics that predict language ideology are parents’ language ideology and students’ awareness that they speak more than one variety of English. The findings support previous theorizing that suggests language ideologies shift with context and purpose. Students describe the racialized nature of language although there is great diversity of language ideology within racialized groups. As suggested by Kroskrity (2010) increased awareness of linguistic diversity and language ideologies is related to contestation of dominant language ideologies. Altogether the findings paint a picture of students with wide ranging knowledge and beliefs about language variation that will complicate teaching about language variation in school. Teachers will do well to assess what their students know and believe about language before teaching them. Researchers are encouraged to continue to explore student understandings of language variation as this area remains underdeveloped.

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I think because there's so many different forms of English, like, I couldn't choose which one is the correct one. My idea is there's many correct ones, but, according to my teachers and stuff, or other people, Standard English is correct. But I don't think that's, like, correct for myself.

- Raul, 10th Grade

1. Introduction

Work on culturally relevant pedagogy has long emphasized the linguistic aspects of culture. Given that one of the primary tenants of culturally relevant pedagogy is the incorporation of student knowledge and experiences in instruction, it is important to understand what students know and believe about language. As the opening quote suggests, students may be wrestling with understanding their own linguistic experiences in light of school and societal messages about the value of different language varieties. Existing literature on dialect awareness instruction emphasizes teachers’ knowledge and beliefs about language variation with little exploration of students’ knowledge and beliefs. To support teachers’ implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy and associated dialect awareness curricula there is a need for information about students’ understandings – and misconceptions – about language variation.

This study helps to paint a picture of student understanding of language variation by asking: What do students know and believe about language variation? How do students understand the prevailing social narratives about speakers of different dialects? To what degree do students accept the prevailing narratives and to what degree do they espouse counter-narratives?

With this knowledge in hand, teachers will be better equipped to anticipate the needs of their students and the range of responses to teaching about language variation in English classrooms.

2. Situating the study

2.1. Research on language variation in U.S. schools

Research on English language variation in U.S. schools has a history almost as long as research on language variation itself, however students’ understanding of language remains largely absent from
this research. Studies as far back as the 1930s document the use of Pigdin English in Hawaii and the responses of teachers to the use of this English dialect (Reinecke & Tokimasa, 1934). Building on the rich body of sociolinguistic research produced in the 1960s, educational research on language in schools during the 1970s focused on the degree to which teacher’s beliefs and biases about language impacted their expectations for student achievement with consequences for student learning (Smitherman, 1977; Taylor, 1972; Williams, Whitehead, & Miller, 1972). In the 1980s and 1990s, alongside research on multicultural education and other resource pedagogies, research on language variation in U.S. schools began focusing on pedagogical approaches that leverage students’ language varieties as resources for learning (Ball & Lardner, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1992; Perry & Delpitt, 1998; Rickford, 1999). One branch of this research considered how to address teachers’ attitudes toward language through teacher education (Bowie & Bond, 1994; Byrnes, Kiger, & Lee Manning, 1997). The emphasis on pedagogical approaches and teacher attitudes is necessary, but not sufficient, for preparing teachers to enact critical language pedagogies.

Much recent research on student language variation focuses on student use of different language varieties. This research highlights the value of students’ multi-lingual and multi-dialectal skills and emphasizes ways to promote those skills in the academic environment (Alim, 2005; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejeda, 1999; Young & Martínez, 2011). Even so, this research often falls short of assessing what students already know and understand about their language use. Important findings in recent scholarship endorse teaching meta-awareness of language variation to students (Brown, 2006; Christensen, 2011; Godley & Loretto, 2013; Janks, 2009; Mallinson & Charity Hudley, 2010) but how students respond to instruction around language variation may differ depending on their prior knowledge and beliefs.

Notable exceptions to the trend described above include Godley and Escher (2012) and Martínez (2013), who center their studies on students’ understanding of their own language use. Godley and Escher (2012) explore students’ attitudes toward spoken dialects through interviews with a group of students that were part of a larger study of critical language pedagogy. They find that their African-American students possess a range of beliefs about what dialects (Standard English or African American English) should be spoken in school, as well as articulating a wide range of rationales for those beliefs. Martínez’ (2013) study explores middle-school students’ understanding of their own use of Spanglish. In his study, Martínez highlights the contradictions between how students explicitly name their beliefs about Spanglish (articulated beliefs) and the underlying beliefs demonstrated through their use of the language variety (embodied beliefs). Like Godley & Escher, Martínez shows the influence of pervasive societal messages about the value of different varieties of English on students’ understanding of their own language use.

Outside of the U.S. context, McKinney (2017), as part of a more extensive exploration of language ideologies in contemporary South African schooling, attends to both teachers’ and students’ beliefs about language. She explores the tension around ways that students uphold and resist discourses that value “a narrow range of linguistic resources associated with prestige varieties of English” (McKinley, 2017, p. 80). Using the construct of anglonormativity – which McKinney describes as a privileged, yet invisible, white ethnolinguistic repertoire – she describes how students both reproduce these racialized linguistic patterns and contest them at the same time. Importantly, McKinney analyzes students’ explanations of their language beliefs as well as examples of students’ language practices.

Research exploring student beliefs about language variation is important for two reasons. First as Martínez suggests, quoting Kroskrity (2004), research on students beliefs helps reverse “a longstanding scholarly tradition of delegitimating common people’s views of language” (p. 507). Second, an understanding of students’ knowledge and beliefs about language variation is necessary to improve the teaching about language variation recommended in the research on pedagogical approaches cited above (Metz, 2018).

Knowledge of students’ understanding is a primary component of pedagogical content knowledge (Grossman, 1990; Shulman, 1987) and is particularly important for work with students who have been historically underserved by school (Lee, 2007). As Grossman explains, “To generate appropriate explanations and representations, teachers must have some knowledge about what students already know about a topic and what they are likely to find puzzling” (1990, p. 8). Lee points out that valuing students’ understanding “is made more challenging when teachers and curriculum makers must overcome deficit assumptions about the nature of routine practices and attendant belief systems of students” (2017, p. 35). Previous research on language variation in schools provides rich resources for content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge, but there is little basis for developing teachers’ knowledge of students’ understandings of language variation. This study, in conversation with studies like those by Martínez, McKinney, and Godley & Escher, provides a resource for teachers to consider the types of understanding and beliefs they may contend with in their own classrooms as they teach students about language variation.

2.2. Language ideologies

This study explores students’ beliefs through the frame of language ideologies. There is an extensive and growing body of literature on language ideologies with no consistent definition (See, for example, Irvine, 1989; Kroskrity, 2010; Milroy, 2001; Rosa & Burdick, 2017; Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). However, within the complementary and sometimes conflicting approaches, there is a fundamental consensus that language ideologies describe sets of beliefs about what language is and how it works in society. Recent scholarship on language ideologies asserts that there is no “objective” understanding of language but rather that all understandings of language are ideological (Rosa & Burdick, 2017). For the purposes of this study, I adopt Irvine’s definition that equates language ideologies with “the cultural (or subcultural) system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests” (Irvine, 1989). The explicit naming of moral and political interests allows for a grouping of language ideologies for analytic purposes.

For the first part of this study I follow Martínez (2013) in bundling a set of language ideologies under the label dominant language ideologies. This bundle of ideologies includes the broad standard language ideology (Milroy, 2001) that centers a variety of English based on standardized conventions of written English. It also includes the political/moral belief that Standardized English (SE) is the correct and best language variety. This set of beliefs positions other varieties of English as deficient, sloppy, lazy, and lacking value in situations of consequence. Dominant language ideologies connect these beliefs about language to the speakers of the language (Wortham, 2008), thus asserting that speakers of other

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1 I follow other critical language scholars in using Standardized English rather than Standard English, to signal that standardization is a social process and not an inherent aspect of any particular language variety. In the survey, I used the more common term Standard English to avoid confusing students. In this paper, I use the term Standard English when I refer to the survey construct.
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