

Donald Lazere

# ORALITY, LITERACY, AND STANDARD ENGLISH<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** *This article examines the debate initiated by Thomas J. Farrell's 1983 article, "IQ and Standard English." The author finds that Farrell's critics exhibit many of the shortcomings they often ascribe to Farrell, without necessarily refuting Farrell's thesis concerning orality and literacy. The author goes on to suggest the importance of social class in assessing the situation of basic writers coming to college from predominantly oral cultures, who are generally unprepared to write critically, follow complex lines of argument, or handle new vocabulary and allusions.*

The coalescence in the past decade of theoretical studies in developmental psychology and cognitive differences between oral and literate cultures invites a revised look at earlier disputes over problems in college basic writing instruction related to dialects. For one example, the 1974 Special Edition *College Composition and Communication Students' Right to Their Own Language* now appears to focus too narrowly on defending a single aspect of students' language—nonStandard versus Standard English oral dialects. Thus, other problems are minimized, including differences in stages of cognitive development between students whose language and culture are primarily oral and those who have assimilated the written language, the body of literate knowledge, and the codes of academic discourse on which college-level reading

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*Donald Lazere is professor of English at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. He is the author of The Unique Creation of Albert Camus and editor of American Media and Mass Culture: Left Perspectives. He is writing a book on the politics of literacy and culture, and his articles on this topic have appeared in the New York Times and Los Angeles Times book reviews, The Chronicle of Higher Education, New Literary History, Profession 89, College English, and Radical Teacher.*

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and writing depend. Likewise, responses to Thomas J. Farrell's article "IQ and Standard English" (*College Composition and Communication*, Dec. 1983)—an article that was a tacit rebuttal to *Students' Right*—have emphasized questions of Black versus standard dialect, while overlooking the central points Farrell made about Black English as the language of a predominantly oral culture. In this article I will look at some of the less-explored implications of these issues, using Farrell as the main point of departure.

Farrell's article begins by addressing the low performance of Black children on IQ tests, which he attributes to the measurement by such tests of performance in cognitive operations and mastery of syntactic structures intrinsic to Standard English as a grapholect. He goes on to assert that many Black students—particularly those from inner-city backgrounds—have been socialized in the purely oral cognitive patterns of Black English, which is essentially a spoken rather than written language. Consequently they lack control of the full panoply of conjugations and coordinating and subordinating syntax that distinguish Standard *written* English and that form a necessary matrix for abstract and analytic thought. Farrell singles out the incomplete conjugation of the verb "to be" in American Black English as the sign of a restricted sense of time and as a handicap to propositional reasoning. He concludes with a proposal for instructional techniques designed to help students bridge the gap between Black and Standard English, between dialect and grapholect.

It is difficult to make a balanced evaluation of Farrell's article because, beyond his titular subject, he has audaciously attempted to synthesize topics and sources covering nearly the whole range of recent theories of literacy in regard to both linguistics and literature—with very mixed results. Valid points are mingled with more questionable ones. Many of the criticisms offered by his four respondents in *CCC*, Karen Greenberg, Patrick Hartwell, Margaret Himley, and R. E. Stratton, are sound, in my opinion. They say his sole emphasis on Black oral culture as the cause of Blacks' difficulties in schooling is reductive, isolating matters of oral and written language from matters of vocabulary and subject matter—as well as from the larger social context in which learning does or does not take place. He endorses conventional, teacher-centered pedagogy as opposed to interactive literacy of the kind advocated by Shirley Brice Heath and Paulo Freire. He accepts Arthur Jensen's and R. A. Figueroa's use of a "digit span" IQ test as a valid measure of abstract reasoning proficiency, although he rejects Jensen's theory of racially inherited IQ. Greenberg and Hartwell effectively refute Farrell's premise that the incomplete conjugation of the verb "to be"

in Black English indicates a cognitive deficiency in that dialect. John Ogbu, in an article published before Farrell's in 1983, rejects the theory that American Black children's problems in school are primarily attributable to their oral culture. He makes a compelling case that different social groups from oral cultural backgrounds vary widely in adapting to literate schooling, and he offers, as an alternate explanation for Blacks' problems, an array of more influential factors involving specifically anti-Black social and cultural prejudice.

Along with these valid points by Farrell's critics, however, are others that are disputable. To begin with, his critics, like the authors of *Students' Right*, tend to reduce the issues to a defense of nonstandard dialect, making dubious use of William Labov's research establishing the linguistic equality of Black vs. Standard English. Critics of this school have overlooked qualifications that Labov himself made about his work that are crucial to the issues at hand: his research dealt with spoken rather than written language; with children rather than with college-age youths; and with informal discourse rather than scholastic language. These limitations call into question certain attempts to apply Labov's studies "wholesale" (one of Labov's own phrases) to college-level reading and writing, as *Students' Right* seemed to do, although it never made clear whether it was meant to apply to college students. Farrell himself could also be clearer about what age level his article deals with; he talks about IQ tests, which are given before college, but his pedagogical proposals come out of techniques used in college courses by other instructors he cites (480) and by himself, saying that he has taught college-level English to Black inner-city students for ten years (481). As Labov said in a central passage discussing studies by Basil Bernstein of middle-class vs. working-class language in England:

The verbal skills which characterize middle class speakers are in the areas which we have been calling "school language" in an informal sense, which speakers confined to a nonstandard dialect plainly do not control. There is no reason to presuppose a deep semantic or logical difference between nonstandard dialects and such an elaborated style. Some aspect of the formal speech of middle class speakers may very well have value for the acquisition of knowledge and verbal problem solving. But before we train working class speakers to copy middle class speech patterns wholesale, it is worth asking just which aspects of this style are functional for learning and which are matters of prestige and fashion.

The question must be answered before we can design an effective teaching program, and unfortunately we have not yet begun to answer it.

Working class speakers also excel at a wide range of verbal skills, including many not controlled by middle class speakers. . . . Most of these skills cannot be transferred wholesale to the school situation. Until now there has been no way of connecting excellence in the verbal activity of the vernacular culture with excellence in the verbal skills needed in school. Yet it seems plain that our educational techniques should draw upon these nonstandard vernacular skills to the better advantage of all concerned. (38)

In its last sentence, this 1969 passage provided a cue for the subsequent, fruitful efforts at drawing upon vernacular skills by scholars such as Mina Shaughnessy, Shirley Brice Heath, Mike Rose, Ira Shor, and other followers of Paulo Freire. But it also provided justification for Farrell's emphasis on the reading and writing problems of nonstandard speakers under the present conditions of schooling. Farrell is seriously attempting to define "just which aspects of this style are functional for learning" and consequently to "design an effective teaching program."

A second shortcoming in Farrell's critics is that, in rejecting his reductive overemphasis on orality and literacy, *they* reductively dismiss the case that oral culture may indeed be one significant factor, among others, of the difficulties faced in school by Blacks and other children whose formation is that of oral culture. (Ogbu too, while enumerating many other, external factors in Blacks' scholastic problems, never really shows that Black oral culture is *not* an important issue.) Farrell's analysis could apply equally, with variations, to most oral cultures and languages, not just those of Blacks. He had followed much the same lines of argument in his earlier articles that did not discuss race but that made the case that many of the problems of college basic writers in general stem from their predominantly oral cultural background. Drawing from Vygotsky, he enunciated the intriguing thesis that the patterns of cognitive development in children between acquisition of speech and of reading and writing proficiency (and also, at a higher level, the patterns of development between college basic writers and more advanced students) recapitulate the historical development from oral to literate societies, as delineated by Farrell's mentor Walter J. Ong. It was those earlier articles that first brought Farrell to my attention, since his explanations confirmed my observations of my own students, who are overwhelmingly White and middle class, but

whose language is primarily the oral one of television, radio, popular music, and peer conversation.<sup>2</sup>

Another necessary qualification about Farrell's analysis of Black culture in particular is that Farrell fully appreciates the literary and linguistic richness of the Black oral tradition in the United States, as well as its roots in African culture; his familiarity with and admiration for this culture belies some critics' charges of racism against him. He argues, however, that for reasons grounded in the past denial by Whites of Black access to schooling, Black culture has not been strongly attuned to the written word or academic discourse. Farrell also makes it clear that his thesis does not apply to all American Blacks, but only uneducated ones: "There are educated blacks who speak standard English, and their children generally score better than most of their black ghetto peers on IQ tests. This paper is obviously not about them" (479). He might have pursued this point further, to stress that he really is talking more about issues of class than of race. His points could apply to any comparison of working-class groups whose culture is oral to groups in higher classes with access to literate culture, with all the implications of Basil Bernstein's theory about restricted working-class versus elaborated middle-class linguistic-cognitive codes.

Thus Farrell hypothesizes that the culture of uneducated Black English reflects traits typical of oral cultures and nonliterate speech, which tend to use paratactic language and thinking, that is, placement of phrases or clauses one after the other without logical connectives or sequence. In contrast, literate cultures and written language make more use of hypotactic (subordinate) and syntactic (coordinate or sequential) structures and ideas. In other words, oral culture tends to be appositional and formulaic, while literate culture tends to be propositional in reasoning, so that writing facilitates a much greater degree of abstract and analytic reasoning.

Perhaps the key issue here is not Standard English or even written language per se, but the whole greater repertory of both syntax and reasoning that becomes possible through the resources of a grapholectic system, particularly in academic discourse. Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* remains a timely source of clarification on this point, as on so many others. Shaughnessy uses both the phrase "academic discourse" (237) and a variety of other phrases to describe what I mean here, including "the dominant code of literacy" and "the general dialect of literacy" (13), "the code that governs formal written English" and "the dialect of formal writing" (45), "academic language" (187), "the vocabulary of general literacy" (237), and "the idioms of academic prose" (287). Her chapters on syntax and on vocabulary are especially illuminating, in

her delineation of the kind of syntax and words—and their interrelation—that constitutes academic discourse. Her categories in the vocabulary of general literacy that basic writers must master (216–21) incorporate elements of Hirschian cultural literacy (e.g., *Gandhi, the French Revolution, Marxism*), logical and critical thinking terminology (*generalize, document, prove, causation, condition*), modes of discourse (*define, compare, summarize, interpret*), and literary terms (*irony, figures of speech, fiction, drama, novel*).

In light of the recent tendency for phrases like “academic discourse” to be consigned along with “Standard English” to the realm of the politically incorrect in the cause of cultural pluralism, the introduction to Shaughnessy’s chapter on vocabulary is pertinent:

The language the BW student inherits when he enters college is a language that has been developed over several centuries by writers who were discovering and exploiting the analytical powers of written English. It is not the purpose of this study to describe the ways in which that language has been and can be misused—how it has served to sharpen class divisions or dull the wits of captive readers or camouflage the mediocrity of people’s thoughts—but rather to view it as the common language not only of the university but of the public and professional world outside, in short as a language BW students need to learn if they are to cope with the books and lectures and papers that constitute the work of college

....

But even more important than remembering the forms and definitions of words is having the judgment to use them in appropriate ways, a judgment that comes not from the study of vocabulary lists but from having been a steady reader of the kind of writing people do in college. . . . The availability of certain words within the academic lexicon opens up the possibility of changing the thought-style as well as the word-style of [the basic writer’s] writing. . . . Words learned well clarify and extend meaning. Like tools in a craft, words prompt the writer to do more—elaborate, compare, condense, define, allude, etc.—than he could have done without them. (187–89)

In other words, academic discourse is not just arcane scholarly jargon or an oppressive device “to sharpen class divisions,” but the key to entering what sociologist Alvin Gouldner, in an essay titled “The New Class as a Speech Community,” terms “the culture of

critical discourse." It is the discourse of serious journalism and literature, the higher circles of government, business, economics, and the professions—which most people in today's information-oriented society need to learn in order to be adequately informed about their social world, whether for purposes of participating in it or developing critical opposition to it.

There is, to be sure, a chicken-and-egg problem in the relation of Standard English to academic discourse in general; it may not be possible to determine whether cognitive advances are made through mastery of complex written syntax or from the acquisition of knowledge, vocabulary, and complex ideas in the subjects embodied in academic discourse—even though mastery of the syntax may be a precondition to mastery of the ideas. So Farrell's point might be modified to say that Blacks (or Whites) whose language depends in large part on the patterns of oral discourse are at a double disadvantage in having limited access to both the syntactic complexities of academic language and to the body of knowledge and ideas embedded in it.

*Students' Right* cites Labov's and other sociolinguists' studies showing that nonstandard dialects do not impede learning to read and write. But here again, the application of Labov is too casual: the fact that dialect differences do not form a major impediment to reading or writing at the elementary level does not alter the reality that restriction to Black English or any other oral language with a nonscholastic vocabulary and syntax is an impediment to successfully dealing with the complexities of college-level reading and writing. Gearing subject matter close to students' own experience, and using interactive teaching methods as advocated by Freire, Heath, Rose, and others, can only go so far to bridge the gap if students have not stored up necessary background knowledge and have not developed habits of analytic reading and writing, so that they are out of their element in the codes of academic discourse.

My own thinking about these issues has evolved from the experience of teaching works like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* or James Baldwin's "Notes of a Native Son" and *The Fire Next Time* in Freshman English and advanced literature classes. My expectation that working-class Black students might better be able to relate to the subject matter has been thwarted by their difficulties with the syntactic and intellectual complexities. Many White and Black students alike have difficulties in sustaining sufficient attention to read through and retain the complete work, in following the complex sentences and lines of argument, and in handling new vocabulary and allusions, leading many students to give up in frustration. Furthermore, their summaries of these works tend to be



limited to the narrative events, overlooking the analytic and critical content, confirming National Assessment of Education Progress and psychological studies indicating that there is a difficult stage-developmental step between reading or writing narration and critical analysis.

Regardless of the prior social causes of educational deprivation, then, college faculties are left in the position of teaching many Black and other students who simply aren't prepared for college-level reading and writing. At this point, Farrell's pedagogical strategies for helping students make the transition from oral to written discourse—oral reading of or listening to recordings of texts, French-style *dictées*, etc.—must be considered on the grounds on which he presents them: do they work? (Cultural pluralists take offense at Farrell's recommendation of McGuffey's *Readers* as oral texts for transcription, although this was their original use; if McGuffey's content is culturally biased, many other readings, including those by Black authors, would serve as well.)

Farrell's case would be stronger, had he presented testimony from his Black students or others having undergone similar techniques, that they found them beneficial. By the same token, some of Farrell's critics seem more intent on laying down a correct political line than on considering what real Black students happen to want. Farrell, after all, does not advocate forcing these techniques on all students, but offering them to those who want to improve their academic reading and writing skills and performance on tests, or who want to learn to use Standard English—in *addition to*, *not instead of*—Black dialect. If they judge that McGuffey or any other resource has helped them, who is to deny the legitimacy of that judgment? Moreover, Farrell's general position receives tacit support from Lisa Delpit, whose recent article, "Skills and Other Dilemmas of a Black Educator," concludes from her experience teaching Black inner-city children that they dislike the current neglect of standard form and mechanics and *want* instruction in the formal skills they need to progress in schooling.

Is Farrell's article racist, then, as its critics in *CCC* and elsewhere have charged? I think not, if racism entails malice toward a race, prejudices and overgeneralizations about it, or the advocacy of discriminatory policies toward its members. None of these, I believe, characterizes Farrell's position, since his aim is to help Blacks to attain educational equality, and since he is not discussing all Blacks but only those of a certain level of class and education, whom he recognizes are the victims of past White discrimination. Karen Greenberg's response in *CCC* concludes, "Advocating a separate pedagogy for students because of differences in their genes



or in their language is racist'' (460). But it is necessarily racist to advocate a separate pedagogy based on different levels of linguistic or cognitive achievement among members of one race, or of all races?

There are, of course, larger issues involved in Blacks' relation to academic culture, as Ogbu and many others have convincingly argued. The whole history of denial of education, segregated and underfunded schools, and undeniable prejudice in the classroom against Black culture has been the major determinant in the widespread alienation of Blacks from formal schooling. Pedagogical policies like Farrell's cannot be viewed in isolation from the much more important political agenda needed to redress imbalances between Blacks and Whites in multiple socioeconomic relations, of which education is only one. Nevertheless, if blaming Blacks as the victim is one error to be avoided, another is an attitude on the part, not only of many Blacks but of some White cultural critics, that categorically rejects the notion of cultural deprivation—specifically in reading and writing achievement—as a factor in academic performance, that denies any value in conventional academic culture and regards it as monolithically oppressive rather than potentially liberating, and that pretends that Black or any other subculture in isolation can form an adequate basis for higher education.

One form of this attitude is sometimes found in contemporary America among not only Blacks but other groups, e.g., Appalachian Whites, who have maintained a strong oral tradition as a resource for retaining the group's identity in the face of deprivation of access to literate culture. When any such groups finally begin to attain that access, they are bound to feel a large measure of distrust toward literate culture because of its past discrimination against them, and to feel that they may be deserting or denigrating their own culture. Richard Rodriguez's autobiography *Hunger for Memory* poignantly expresses this problem in his life as a Mexican-American. This psychology is understandable but can be contrary to their own potential benefit, as it often produces defense mechanisms causing advocates of their culture to deny any value in the dominant, literate culture.

This attitude has also been visible in recent polemics over cultural pluralism, revision of the academic canon, and college courses in Western Civilization. This is not the place to delve extensively into these disputes, so I will limit myself to a few comments directly pertinent to our concerns here. First, many of the great Black writers from Frederick Douglass to W. E. B. Du Bois, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Maya Angelou did not regard

Standard English and Western literate culture as a source of oppression, but of knowledge leading to liberation. James Baldwin attacked the racism of Western culture and discrimination against Black English, but, like Frantz Fanon attacking France's cultural and linguistic domination of its colonies, did so in a voice that had mastered the dominant culture and language, drawing from the sources of opposition within them. Likewise for leaders in other countries who formulated revolutionary ideas within the traditions of standard Western languages and intellectual culture, including Marx and Engels, Trotsky, Lenin, Gandhi, Chou En-lai, Gramsci, Ho Chi Minh, Castro, and Allende. Such leaders in the U.S. and the Third World have frequently placed more value on literacy in the standard language for their people than do many American middle-class intellectuals bending over too far backwards in the cause of multiculturalism.

Several of the authors in the superb Greywolf Annual Five anthology *Multicultural Literacy: Opening the American Mind*, while amply chronicling the history of discrimination against minority cultures and emphasizing their overlooked contributions to Western culture, support my arguments here. Japanese-American poet David Mura pinpoints the error in the extreme versions of cultural pluralism:

Of course, arguing for multiculturalism is not the same thing as saying that, as a minority writer, I don't need to read the works of European culture. . . . [Mura would] agree with Jesse Jackson that there was something wrong with those students who greeted his appearance at Stanford with the chant, "Hey, hey, ho ho/Western culture's got to go." As Jackson pointed out, Western culture was their culture. It is difficult to strike an appropriate balance. (144)

Another contributor, Michelle Wallace, a Black professor of American studies at SUNY Buffalo, deplors cultural illiteracy in American public education, including the failure of CUNY, when she was going there in the days of open admissions in the seventies, to require Chaucer and Shakespeare—as well as John Hope Franklin and W. E. B. Du Bois—although she also notes that "the classics may make more sense to some of us as records of blindness to the plight of the world's majorities than as sublime masterpieces" (170).

Writing elsewhere in a similar vein, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., one of the leading contemporary Black literary scholars, discussed the double vision needed by African-American writers and critics:

Learning the master's tongue, for our generation of critics, has

been an act of empowerment, whether that critical language be New Criticism, so-called humanism, structuralism, post-structuralism, Marxism, feminism, new historicism, or any other "ism" that I may have forgotten. Each of these critical discourses arises from a specific set of texts within the Western tradition. For the past decade, at least, many of us have busied ourselves with the necessary task of studying these movements in criticism, drawing upon their modes of reading to explicate the texts of our tradition. (26)

... Let us—at long last—master the critical traditions and languages of Africa and Afro-America. Even as we continue to reach out to others in the critical canon, let us be confident in our own black tradition and in their compelling strength to sustain systems of critical thought as yet dormant and unexplicated. (45)

Both the balanced judgments of these authors and the daunting ambiguities in the issues surveyed earlier suggest that if defenders of Standard English and mainstream academic culture, like Farrell, can sometimes perhaps be simplistic, their critics are sometimes no less so in simply dismissing as racist any attempt to grapple with these issues in their full complexity.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> My thanks to John Baugh, Frederick Crews, and Tal Aronzon for their comments on a draft of this article.

<sup>2</sup> My own studies and teaching have convinced me, along with many scholars in diverse disciplines, that television and other aspects of mass culture have contributed to a decline in literacy and a regression to the most negative traits of oral culture—while maintaining few of the positive traits—among nearly all social classes and ethnic groups. For a synthesis of sources on this topic and rebuttal to those who argue that literacy or cultural pluralism has been positively promoted by mass media, see Lazere, 1986–87 and 1987, especially my general introduction and the introduction and readings in the section "Media, Literacy, and Political Socialization" in *American Media and Mass Culture*.

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