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Snell, J and Andrews, R (2014) *To what extent does a regional dialect and accent impact on the development of reading and writing skills?: A Report for the BBC.* Report. (Unpublished)

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To what extent does a regional dialect and accent  
impact on the development of reading and writing  
skills?

A report for the BBC

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June 2014

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## 1. Introduction and executive summary

There is continued concern about whether a regional dialect and accent hinders or helps access to the writing of standard English. Furthermore, if there is linguistic hindrance, does it impede life chances, social mobility and employment prospects for young people? The present study was commissioned by BBC radio journalists in Hull, Middlesbrough, Newcastle, Liverpool and Bristol.

Specifically, the research question we established for this research review was 'To what extent does a regional dialect and accent impact on the development of reading and writing skills?'. In other words, we have aimed to answer the linguistic and sociolinguistic question rather than address the wider societal issues. In doing so, we have looked systematically at research on and in the English language from the 1960s to the present, both in the UK and internationally. Further research is required both on the sociolinguistic and on the wider socio-economic implications of our report.

Our key findings are as follows:

- Spoken English varies more than written English and more than most people realize.
- There is no straightforward relationship between spoken and written English.
- All children and young people (regardless of their home dialect and accent) will encounter difficulties in understanding the differences between spoken and written styles, and in handling the complexities of written structure, especially as they become more ambitious in their writing.
- Few UK-based studies have investigated to extent to which a regional dialect and accent in speech interferes with the development of written standard English, but pockets of research conducted in the 1980s and 90s suggest that the current emphasis on limiting regional variation in dialect and accent in school may be misplaced
- Children and young people can style-shift between standard and non-standard forms in their speech and writing where appropriate; and are strategic in their language use.
- For a small minority of pupils, difficulties in understanding the relationship between standard and non-standard forms can persist throughout school and into adult educational settings, and may inhibit the development of writing.
- Correcting non-standard dialect forms in pupils' writing without giving adequate explanation can lead to hypercorrection, confusion and anxiety.
- Negative attitudes towards regional accents and dialects and inappropriate responses to non-standard voices in the classroom can have detrimental effects on children's educational achievement
- The issue of why some groups of children and young people tend to underperform in education is complex and requires further research.

## 2. Standardization: politics, linguistics, pedagogy

Standardization of the way we talk and write – and therefore education towards such standardization – is a matter of strong governmental interest. In the 1988 Education Act, the British government introduced a National Curriculum for England which led, in due course, to a National Literacy Strategy in the late 1990s. That Strategy now no longer applies, and we are in a position, in 2014, of a government that is taking a narrower ‘benchmark’/functional approach to literacy and a ‘heritage’ line in relation to literature. In this section, we set out some of the key landmarks in standardization over the last 25 years in an effort to understand why regional variation in dialect and accent is still highlighted as an issue in national governmental drives towards standardization in speaking and writing. We begin by trying to gain some clarity on the use of the term ‘standard English’.

Regional dialect and accent variation will not fit into a national mould of ‘standard’ spoken or written English; indeed it is very difficult to arrive at clear definitions of what might constitute these ‘standards’. The term ‘standard English’ is best reserved for written language. It is ‘the dialectal variety that has been codified in dictionaries, grammars, and usage handbooks ... [and] has been adapted by most major publishers internationally, resulting in a very high degree of uniformity among published English texts around the world’ (Biber et al. 1999: 18). This definition emphasises ‘uniformity’ as a key criterion of ‘standard English’. The drive for uniformity cannot be applied to the spoken language, however, which is one of the reasons why the concept of a ‘spoken standard English’ is so problematic. Speech is always situated within specific contexts and interactions. Ideas about what counts as ‘standard’ or ‘acceptable’ speech will change from one situation to the next, and over time, leaving considerable scope for variation (and disagreement) in any definition of ‘spoken standard English’. A further complication is that speech does not simply mirror the grammatical structures of writing; this is especially true of spontaneous speech produced in informal settings (Cheshire 1999). Biber et al. (1999: 18) attempt to account for this in their definition of ‘standard spoken English’:

[W]e define standard spoken English as including grammatical characteristics shared widely across dialects, excluding those variants restricted to local or limited social/regional varieties. This approach recognizes that conversation has special grammatical characteristics not typically found in writing, and so we do not impose a written standard on our analyses of conversation.

(Biber et al. 1999: 18)

In both of the above definitions, ‘standard English’ is referred to as a ‘dialect’ because it can be distinguished from other varieties (e.g. Yorkshire dialect) by differences in grammar (morphology and syntax), and to a lesser extent, vocabulary (lexis). It has nothing to do with pronunciation. There is no national ‘standard’ of pronunciation. Received Pronunciation (RP) is considered by many to be the ‘prestige’ accent of English in the UK, but it is not a ‘standard’. This accent is peculiar in not being associated with any particular region (though historically its origins were in the speech of London and the surrounding area); rather it is associated with a particular social group, the upper-middle class (Wells 1982: 10; for further discussion of RP see Mugglestone 2003). RP has sometimes been referred to as ‘BBC English’, to reflect the fact that BBC presenters have traditionally had an RP accent. This has changed significantly in recent years. Scottish, Irish and Welsh accents can now be heard alongside RP on the national news, and in other programming, the BBC have embraced regional diversity in accents in order to better represent the nation as a whole. It is estimated that only around 3 to 5 per cent of the population speak RP (Trudgill 2002). A greater number speak some form of ‘standard English’ as a home dialect (around 15%), but most do so with a regional accent (around 9 to 12%). These figures suggest that most children arrive at school speaking a regional dialect and accent.

The drive towards increased standardization in spoken and written literacy in education began in the mid-1980s. Keith Joseph, as Minister for Education in the Thatcher government, was instrumental in merging O levels and CSEs to form the now standard GCSEs (in 1986); and in preparing the ground for the National Curriculum and a testing regime that was ushered in with the Education Reform Act of 1988 and a report by Cox (DES 1989). By 1990, the National Curriculum was in place, providing an emphasis on reading and writing as separate programmes of study in literacy, and with speaking and listening recognised (and tested), though in a minor role in relation to reading and writing as part of overall competence in the English language.

Concurrent with the advent of the National Curriculum, the Kingman Report (DES 1988) and a subsequent publication by Carter (1990) on the Language in the National Curriculum (LINC) project that grew from the Kingman Report both advocated knowledge *about* English as an important part of developing competence in the English language. The emphasis on 'about' rather than 'of' or 'in' reflected an interest in language awareness as a pedagogic tool for understanding and appreciating variety. The 1990 publication justifies the approach, and also records controversy with the government of the time which largely rejected the recommendations of the report in favour of a more systematic and de-contextualized line on 'standard English'. Nevertheless, Kingman and publications by Carter established an interest in knowledge about language, eventually giving rise to the A level English Language qualification, an increased interest in applied linguistics in education, and a specific interest in language variation and standardization.

In the 1990s, successive governments moved toward greater standardization. Stannard and Huxford (2007) - and Tymms (2004) and Andrews (2008) in critique - record a decade (from 1996 to 2007) of national strategies designed to increase levels of reading and writing performance in schools. There was little recognition of the diversity of regional dialect and accent during this phase of educational reform. Rather, the emphasis was on benchmark literacy, the subjugation of speaking and listening (after a period of development and recognition in those regards, and despite an increasing awareness that speaking, listening, writing and reading were not only inter-related, but part of a wider theory of multimodal communication that included still and moving image, sound, gesture and movement).

Since 2008, most focus has been on reforms to the primary school curriculum in English, though there has been a re-definition of GCSE English in terms of a qualification in literature for an élite (the top 20%); GCSE English (including some literature) as a standard qualification; and 'functional English for the bottom 20%'. Often, these young people are offered a less rich language curriculum, leading to (potentially) less social mobility. The examination system thus compounds the problem of an increasingly divided and inward-looking society, with an assumption that those being able to speak 'spoken standard English' will gain an advantage over those who speak a local dialect; and, in a literary dimension, literature study being confined to a tradition of English writers, to the exclusion of American and other accessible texts. Such hegemonic assumptions and narrow literary conceptions are problematic for the majority of the population who do not speak 'spoken standard English' and who also have a wider view of the relationship of identities to nationality.

Reforms to primary English continue to emphasize standard curricula and standard assessments. In 2011, the present coalition government published *The Framework for the National Curriculum – a report by the expert panel for the National Curriculum review* (DfE 2011). This wide-ranging review concluded that oral language (speaking and listening) continued to be a highly important and integral part of learning to read and write, but that despite the continued presence of speaking and listening in programmes of study in the 1999 and 2007 versions of the National Curriculum, insufficient curricular and assessment attention had been directed to the development of speaking and listening. Again, despite major reports on primary education from the Cambridge review team (e.g. Alexander et al. 2010) which suggested that a 'one size fits all' national curriculum is not

appropriate for England's diverse culture nor for the different circumstances of England's schools, the present government continues to press for reforms that slim down or narrow the language curriculum, concentrating on basic functional and higher level linguistic skills that fail to recognize the diversity in regional and ethnic language use in the country.

Most recently, the July 2013 publication *The national curriculum for England: framework document* (DfE 2013), for implementation from September 2014, states clearly: 'Pupils should be taught to speak clearly and convey ideas confidently using Standard English' (6.2, p10). As pupils move from the early years, there is increasingly little reference to speaking and listening, with an almost exclusive concentration on reading and writing skills. It appears that while the general invocation is to recognise the reciprocity of speaking, listening, reading and writing in literacy development, the actuality of the school curriculum is to assume reading and writing operate separately and without reference to speech. Indeed, in an appendix on the International Phonetic Alphabet, used to aid spelling competence, 'the pronunciations in the table are, by convention, based on Received Pronunciation and could be significantly different from other accents' (p64).

Finally, in a definition of 'standard English' in the glossary, the problems inherent in the notion of 'spoken standard English' in particular become apparent:

Standard English can be recognised by the use of a very small range of forms such as *those books, I did it* and *I wasn't doing anything* (rather than their non-Standard equivalents); it is not limited to any particular accent. It is the variety of English which is used, with only minor variation, as a major world language. Some people use Standard English all the time, in all situations from the most casual to the most formal, so it covers most registers. The aim of the national curriculum is that everyone should be able to use Standard English as needed in writing and in relatively formal speaking (p81).

Rather than giving a precise description of 'spoken standard English', what is offered instead is a small set of proscribed forms. As so often happens, standard English is defined negatively, as what it is not (i.e. 'non-standard English') (Crowley 2003: 260). The emphasis on Standard English is continued through primary school (key stages 1 and 2) through to secondary school (key stage 3). Throughout, 'standard English' is assumed to apply to both speech and reading/writing. There is no recognition of variation in dialect or in the way that spoken communication varies according to context, nor of the differences between 'spoken standard English' and 'written standard English'.

### 3. Speech, reading and writing

Learning to read and write one's native language is different to learning to read and write in a foreign language, because learners generally already have a great deal of knowledge about how to speak the language. When children learn to read and write English at school, they draw upon this knowledge of the spoken language to help them (Britton et al. 1975, Tough 1977). The application of this knowledge creates some challenges, however, because the relationship between speech and writing is not straightforward (Stubbs 1980).

The first point to make is that written language is highly standardized and conventionalized, while spoken language is not. Spelling is the most clearly standardized aspect of English. The process of standardization began in the fifteenth century, and spellings have hardly changed at all since around 1650. These spellings were codified in dictionaries in the eighteenth century and are used in all publications today. Spoken English, on the other hand, has continued to evolve and change. Consequently, the English spelling system made sense in relation to the pronunciation of educated people about 600 years ago (which is why there is a 'k' in 'knee' and a 'gh' in 'night'), but it does not correspond directly to any modern accent of English. It follows, then, that all speakers of English (regardless of the accent they speak) will encounter some difficulties in learning the English spelling system.

Received Pronunciation (RP) is considered to be the prestige accent of English in the UK. This accent is peculiar in not being associated with any particular region (though historically its origins were in the speech of London and the surrounding area); rather it is associated with a particular social group, the upper-middle class (Wells 1982: 10). It has also sometimes been called BBC English, to reflect the fact that most BBC presenters speak RP (though this has changed significantly in recent years). RP speakers do not pronounce the 'r' in words like 'work' and 'letter' (nor do speakers from Teesside, Liverpool, Hull or most other places in England). Some accents of British English do still pronounce orthographic <r> after vowels (e.g. those in some parts of the north-west and south-west of England, and in Scotland), as do most speakers of American and Irish English. Speakers who do not pronounce orthographic <r> after vowels (including those who speak RP) will make no distinction in their pronunciation of pairs of words like *caught* and *court*. These speakers will have to learn which individual words have an <r> in their spelling, and which do not. Those who speak other accents of English will encounter different (but related) issues in learning about the relationship between standardized spellings and the sounds of English.

It is important to note, then, that spoken English varies much more than written English, and actually, much more than people generally recognize (Stubbs 1980: 123). Accent variation is only one kind of variation in speech. Other variations are due to the simplification processes that occur as part of connected speech. For example, there is a tendency when we speak to increase the ease of articulation; that is, to make the production of speech more efficient. In doing so, we tend to make adjacent sounds more like each other. This process is called assimilation. For instance, when we say 'good night' as part of normal speech, 'good' is likely to be pronounced /gʊn/ rather than /gʊd/. The final sound is articulated as /n/ because the tongue is already getting ready to pronounce the first sound of 'night'. Sometimes we leave a sound out completely. This is called elision. Vowels in unstressed syllables are often elided (e.g. 'police' may be pronounced /pli:s/). The phonemes /t/ and /d/ are often elided when they occur as part of complex consonant clusters (e.g. 'tactful' becomes /takful/ not /taktful/) and across word boundaries. Pronunciation is most variable with 'grammatical' or 'function' words, like auxiliary verbs, prepositions, conjunctions and determiners. The spelling of these words is based on their citation form; that is, the way they would be pronounced in isolation. But such words are rarely pronounced in isolation, and in normal conversation are usually unstressed (except when used to indicate contrast); thus in continuous speech, 'and' may be

pronounced as /ənd/, /ən/ or even /n/. These changes in pronunciation often mean that the contrasts between function words are lost. For example, depending on the phonological context, 'have' may be pronounced as /hav, həv, əv, əf, ə/. In some contexts, then, the distinction between 'have' and 'of' is lost. This may be confusing for learners, as when they make mistakes in writing like 'I could of won' (rather than 'I could have won') (Stubbs 1980: 122).

All the processes described here are a normal part of connected speech for all speakers, no matter what accent of English they speak. These processes have even been documented for BBC news broadcasts (Brown 1977). Children learning to read and write therefore need to understand that a single spelling can refer to a range of pronunciations (Stubbs 1980: 120).

The changes that have taken place historically in the pronunciation of English means that the English spelling system no longer consistently represents the sounds of words. This is not to suggest that the spelling system is random and odd, as some people might think, however. Clearly spelling is sometimes entirely predictable from the pronunciation (e.g. 'bat', 'pin' and 'ten'). In other cases, spelling is regulated by a set of rules or principles. For example, the position of a letter or sequence of letters in a word may determine the pronunciation of a spelling unit. At the start of words 'gh' always corresponds to /g/ (e.g. 'ghost', 'ghetto', 'gherkin'), but at the middle and end of words it is never pronounced as /g/ (it is often /f/ in these contexts). It is outside the scope of this report to give a comprehensive account of the principles of English spelling (see Carney 1998 for a brief accessible overview; also Venezky 1967, Stubbs 1980: ch3), but it is important to note that not all these principles relate letters to sounds. It is now well recognized that English spelling is not only phonemic (i.e. based on relating spelling units to sounds or 'phonemes'); it is 'morphophonemic' (Venezky 1995).

Morphemes are the smallest units of meaning in a language. Some words (e.g. 'book') represent only one morpheme; but most words do have more than one meaningful part. For example, 'books' has two meaningful parts: 'book' + 's'. The 's' ending has grammatical meaning: it signals plurality. This spelling unit is used to represent plurality regardless of the pronunciation. It is realized as /s/ in 'books', but as /z/ in 'dogs' and as /ɪz/ in 'horses'. The advantage is having a regular spelling to indicate plural meanings. The disadvantage is that this spelling does not relate to a consistent pronunciation. Similarly the '-ed' ending is used to represent the simple past tense in English whether or not the pronunciation is /t/ as in 'looked' or /d/ as in 'killed' or /ɪd/ as in 'wanted'. To say that the English spelling system is morphophonemic, then, is to say that it represents not only the sounds of English but also the structures of English (in terms of its meaningful component parts). It has been shown that children have difficulties when phonological rules clash with morphological spelling; for example they often spell regular verbs in the past tense by representing the end sounds, /t/ or /d/, rather than using the '-ed' ending (Nunes and Bryant 2011: 143-145).

Venezky (1967, 1995) has argued that knowledge of morphology is not just important for spelling but for reading too. For example, a learner must be able to recognize morpheme boundaries in order to predict regular sound-to-spelling correspondences. The spelling 'ph' regularly corresponds to /f/ (e.g. 'photograph', 'sphere', 'geography'). But across morpheme boundaries (as in 'uphill', where 'up' and 'hill' are each meaningful components, and thus separate morphemes) 'ph' is treated as the separate letters 'p' and 'h'. Leong's (1989) study demonstrated that children use morphemes as units during word recognition, and that the better children are at word recognition, the more they rely on morphemes. Altogether, there is a growing body of evidence that morphological knowledge is important for word reading, spelling, reading comprehension and vocabulary learning (Nunes and Bryant 2011).

It should be clear by now that writing is not simply a representation of speech. When learning to read and write, children have to grapple with complex correspondences between English orthography and the sounds and structures of English. They also have to recognize that spoken and

written language differ in their grammar and vocabulary too (Biber et al.'s (1999) *Grammar of Spoken and Written English* gives detailed descriptions; see also Carter and McCarthy 1997; Cheshire 1999). Many of these differences are due to the different functions that speech and writing serve (see Stubbs, ch5), and to the fact that speech is directly interactive and is usually produced spontaneously, with words and grammatical constructions being chosen on the spot. Understanding the differences between spoken and written styles can be a significant challenge for children, especially as they become more ambitious with their writing (see sections 4 and 5 of this report).

#### 4. Dialect and standard English in the UK

The issue of the use in UK schools of standard English and non-standard dialects has gained renewed prominence recently as several schools have attracted national media attention with their 'zero tolerance' approach to pupils' use of regional accents and dialects (or to what has variously been termed 'slang', 'colloquial language', 'ghetto grammar', 'the English of the streets', 'slanguage'). The concern that children should be able to conform to the conventions of standard English in their writing is understandable given that their success in education, and arguably their future careers, depend on the results of written examinations. But to what extent does a regional dialect and accent in speech interfere with the development of written standard English? There have been relatively few UK-based studies which have examined this issue in detail, but pockets of research conducted in the 1980s and 90s suggest that the current emphasis on limiting regional variation in dialect and accent in school may be misplaced, and that there is no pressing need for teachers to concentrate on non-standard dialect as a factor which prevents children from developing written standard English.

Williamson (1990, 1995) investigated the influence of Tyneside dialect forms on the writing of Year 6 (i.e. 10 to 11 years) and Year 11 (i.e. 15 to 16 years) pupils in an inner-city, working class area of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. For both groups, he found that the influence of the Tyneside dialect on pupils' standard English performance in writing was relatively minor when compared with other aspects of non-standard usage. First, most of the errors that occurred in their writing (between 76% and 79%) related to spelling, punctuation and other orthographic features, errors that cannot be attributed to regional variation in dialect and accent. It is worth reiterating here the point made in section 3 that because of the complex relationship between English orthography and pronunciation, problems of spelling are equivalent (though not identical) for all children, regardless of their accent. Second, while the use of non-standard grammatical features accounted for the next highest category of error, no more than 20 to 25 per cent of these errors could be clearly ascribed to the influence of the local dialect. Viewed globally, this meant that for both groups of children, non-standard dialect grammatical features accounted for just 3 per cent of the total number of non-standard usages. By far the most common type of grammatical error arose instead from issues with 'handling the complexities of written structure' (1990: 258) and 'from unfamiliarity with written as opposed to spoken styles' (1990: 259). For example, significant sources of error lay in 'the use of relatively complex verb phrases, often indicating some uncertainty over the expression, in writing, of concepts such as conditionality or aspect' (1995: 8) and in 'handling subordination, a feature which is typically both more prevalent and more sophisticated in writing than in speech' (1995: 9).

Overall Williamson found that Tyneside dialect features accounted for just 6% of non-standard usage in pupils' writing (evenly divided between grammatical and lexical items). The children in his study did have problems in writing in accordance with the conventions of standard English, but these had more to do with the differences between written and spoken English than with local dialect speech. He therefore concludes that '[t]he problem for these children, and for their teachers, lies in the difficulty of mastering the writing system, not in dialect variation' (1990: 260). He recommends that teachers in Tyneside should focus on the mechanics of spelling and punctuation (rather than worry about the impact of non-standard dialect) if they are to satisfy the requirements of the National Curriculum (Williamson 1995: 6).

In a later study, Williamson extended this work to include a larger sample of pupils based on writing obtained from an archive produced by the Assessment of Performance Unit (APU) in 1988 (just prior to the inauguration of the National Curriculum in English). The APU survey was a carefully planned national survey of 11 year-olds and 15 year-olds from different socio-economic backgrounds and from metropolitan and non-metropolitan counties. Williamson and Hardman (1997a, 1997b) selected a total of 362 scripts from across each age range in each of four dialect areas: Merseyside,

Tyneside, the South-West and London. Their analyses of these scripts confirmed Williamson's earlier findings. Overall, 127 of the children (35% of the written sample) used some non-standard dialect features, but 89 (70%) of these children did so on only one occasion and only 9 (7%) used more than two *different* dialect features, suggesting once again that 'the use of non-standard dialect [in writing is] a relatively rare phenomenon and one which shrinks into insignificance when compared, for example, with errors of spelling or punctuation' (Williamson and Hardman 1997b: 298). In addition, the nature of the writing task was found to have an impact, with pupils of both age groups using fewer non-standard dialect forms in writing tasks classified as 'expository' by the APU team and requiring a more impersonal response than, for example, a personal anecdote or piece of imaginative writing. Williamson and Hardman (1997b: 296) suggest that these genre-based differences indicate that the children 'may be capable of writing in standard English to an even greater extent than is suggested by our overall figures'.

The wider survey revealed a significant difference between the two age groups, demonstrating 'a progressive decrease in the incidence of non-standard dialect features [in writing] as pupils matured' (Williamson and Hardman 1997b: 298). This finding is replicated in Williams' (1989a, 1989b) research in Reading (Berkshire). Williams collected approximately 1000 written texts from 120 school children aged between 9 and 14 and quantified the occurrence in these texts of features of the Reading dialect. Her results show that working class children in Reading do include non-standard dialect forms in their writing, but the incidence decreases as they move up through secondary school. It is not clear from these studies whether the decrease is attributable to direct teacher intervention or to more general processes of maturation, though it is potentially significant that the Newcastle and Reading studies were based on data collected prior to the introduction of the National Curriculum and its official policy on the teaching of standard English. Further research might usefully test whether the establishment of the National Curriculum has effected any change on pupils' use of non-standard dialect in writing.

Williams' (1989a, 1989b) research also emphasized the important role that developmental factors play in the process of learning to write. For the younger children, the use in their writing of features that appeared to be dialect forms coincided with developmental features (e.g. the overgeneralization of *-ed* endings to the past tense forms of 'irregular' verbs). The working-class children used fewer of the generalized *-ed* forms than the middle-class children, and more of the forms that could only be attributed to the use of Reading dialect. Williams (1989a: 190) suggests that this may actually provide evidence that the working-class children were more advanced in their language development than the middle-class children, 'since the past tense forms they use in writing more closely reflect the forms used by the adult members of their local community'.

All the studies cited so far have highlighted a difference between children's use of non-standard dialect forms in their speech and in their writing (see also Cheshire 1982b). For example, in Reading, Williams found that *ain't* was widely used by all working class participants in their speech, but was not present at all in any of the written texts. This form was clearly identified by young people as a feature only of speech. Similarly, the non-standard present tense suffix *-s* (e.g. 'I writes to my pen-pal') was ubiquitous in the spoken texts of the working class children, but occurred in the written texts of only 38% of the same group. As pupils progress through secondary school, most use fewer non-standard forms in their writing, even where they maintain (or even increase) these forms in their speech. This suggests that by the end of compulsory education, adolescents are able to switch to standard forms in their school writing (Williams 2007).

It is worth acknowledging at this point the research that shows young people are also capable of switching between standard and non-standard forms in their speech. Crinson and Williamson (2004) studied the use of non-standard English in the formal and informal speech of 15-year-olds from two schools in Tyneside in catchment areas of markedly different socio-economic class. They found that

the middle-class students used almost no non-standard grammar in their speech in formal contexts. The incidence of non-standard forms in the formal speech of students from less privileged backgrounds was also very low (an average of 3.5 non-standard grammatical features per 30 minutes of conversation). In informal contexts, this increased to around 8 or 9 features. The key point, therefore, is that these pupils 'are capable of modifying their use of non-standard dialect when they feel that the situation demands it' (Crimson and Williamson 2004: 213). Snell's Teesside study (2010, 2013) demonstrated that children have developed this ability to style-shift by the age of nine. The working-class children in her study had both standard and non-standard grammatical forms in their linguistic repertoires. Some non-standard forms, such as possessive 'me' (e.g. 'Me pencil's up me jumper') and singular 'us' (e.g. 'Give us my shoe back'), conveyed particular social and pragmatic meanings not carried by the standard forms. Snell's analyses demonstrate that children are strategic in their language use, selecting the forms/meanings that fulfil immediate interactional and relational goals. Other researchers have shown that young speakers manipulate language variation in the projection of different identities. For example, in Cheshire's (1982b) study of adolescents in Reading, she found that boys used a lower frequency of non-standard forms when talking to their teacher than they did when interacting with peers in an adventure playground. In formal classroom contexts they accommodated to the standard speech of their teacher, an adult with whom they had a good relationship. Boys who disliked the teacher, however, did not do this. One boy even increased his use of non-standard dialect when talking to this teacher – a deliberate act of defiance in the face of a teacher he disliked (see also Edwards 1989; Austin 2014; Rampton 1995, 2006).

UK-based studies that have examined the impact of non-standard dialect on children's performance in written English appear to have 'established grounds for believing that non-standard English is not a Cerberus barring the gate to literacy for our pupils' (Williamson and Hardman 1997b: 298). Most young people are able to switch between standard and non-standard forms in their speech and writing. Nevertheless, these studies have indicated that there may be a core of non-standard dialect forms that are very difficult to eradicate from writing entirely, perhaps because they are so widely used in speech that children are not aware of their non-standard status (Williamson 1995: 11; see also Hudson and Holmes 1995). This seems to be particularly the case with the verb phrase. For example, Harris (1995: 127) reports that students in a Further Education college in London were unable to identify the non-standard verb form in the following sentence: 'Me and me mate was walking home'. When asked to translate this sentence into standard English they produced several versions, eventually settling on 'My friend and I was walking home'. The students found the auxiliary verb form 'was' more natural than 'were' in this context because 'it represents an extremely common grammatical pattern within London English' (p127). Teachers who want to tackle errors related to non-standard dialect are therefore advised to focus on the verb phrase (Williamson and Hardman 1997a: 168; Williams 1989a: 185), though teachers and researchers are not yet agreed on what form such intervention should take.

Researchers have considered the potential impact of teachers' corrections of non-standard dialect on children's development of written standard English. The work of Cheshire (1982a, 1982b) and Williams (1989a, 1989b, 2007) in Reading indicated that teachers did not have a clear concept of what constituted local dialect in Reading nor a 'consistent policy for dealing with non-standard forms that occurred in children's work' (Williams 1989a: 194). Differences in approach were noted not just between teachers but also within a single teacher's marking practices: non-standard dialect forms were corrected in some cases but not others, thus leading to confusion for children. Williams (1989a: 196) also calls into question the efficacy of teacher corrections, which in some cases led to 'hypercorrection' on the part of pupils, as in the following example from nine-year-old Jackie: 'When we had ~~done~~ did some housework' (Jackie's own correction). In the Reading dialect, two variable forms are used to represent the past tense: 'done' and 'did'. The teacher had corrected Jackie's use of 'done' for the past tense in previous written work, but without explanation. In the example

presented here, the pupil assumes (erroneously) that 'did' rather than 'done' must also be the 'correct' form in this context. Without adequate explanation, children are less likely to develop an understanding of the conventions of standard English or how these relate to their own ways of speaking. They may become uncertain, even anxious, about which form to use, as indicated in another example from Williams' Reading data: 'We ~~was~~ ~~were~~ was in the park' (Williams 1989a: 196). Williams (2007) argues that on the basis of such examples, insisting on standard English in the early stages of writing development may put children whose home dialect is not standard English at a disadvantage. Cheshire (1982b: 63) further argues that 'children who realise that their language is not appropriate in school, but who do not know the reason for this, nor the ways in which it should be changed, will inevitably become less motivated to use language in school than their standard-English speaking peers' (see also Snell 2013: 122).

Related to the issue of teacher corrections are teacher attitudes to non-standard dialects. There is evidence that some teachers ascribe negative characteristics to non-standard voices (e.g. Garrett, Coupland & Williams 1999). Many sociolinguists have argued that negative views about non-standard accents and dialects can have detrimental effects on children's educational achievement (e.g. Cheshire 1982b; Edwards 1983; Snell 2013; Trudgill 1975; Williams 1989b, 2007). Williams (2007) argues that 'it is precisely such negative attitudes ... that may give rise to difficulties when speakers of NS [non-standard] dialects learn to read'. She cites Goodman and Goodman's (2000) claim that it is not dialect in and of itself that interferes with reading, but rather the rejection of children's own dialect that leads to problems. Goodman and Goodman's claims are based on a longitudinal study of the reading proficiency of six African American children. They conclude that:

Given appropriate opportunities and experiences with a range of content and texts, speakers of any dialect of a language are capable of learning to read. All readers are capable of using their language flexibility to become literate members of their communities.

(Goodman and Goodman 2000: 434).

Much of the research on the relationship between non-standard dialect and reading ability has been conducted in the United States, focusing on African American Vernacular English (see section 6 of this report). There has been much less research on non-standard dialect speakers and reading in the UK. Our review found only one relevant study (Edwards 1976). Edwards (1976) set out to understand the role of language in the underachievement of West Indian-heritage children in British schools. She used a standard test of reading and comprehension to calculate a comprehension age relative to the reading age of 40 West Indian-heritage and 40 Caucasian British children (matched as far as possible for age, social class and reading ability). The West Indian-heritage children scored significantly lower for reading comprehension. Edwards concludes that the most probable explanation is that interference from Creole vocabulary and structures causes difficulties in understanding British English. She also acknowledges that the attitude of the teacher may be of critical importance.

In summary, in the early stages, the writing of all children closely resembles 'talk written down' (Kroll and Vann 1981), which means that it is likely to incorporate many features of speech, including features of non-standard dialect. UK-based studies, albeit limited in number, have indicated that the impact of non-standard dialect on writing is relatively minor (especially when compared with errors in spelling, punctuation and other aspects of orthography). Nevertheless, for a small minority of pupils, difficulties in understanding the relationship between standard and non-standard forms can persist throughout school and into adult educational settings, and inhibit the development of writing (Harris 1995). The extent to which teachers should focus specifically on non-standard dialect in the teaching of reading and writing is therefore a decision to be made by the individual teacher, taking into account the needs of the pupils he or she is working with.

Where teachers do focus on non-standard dialect there is currently little agreement over what constitutes an appropriate pedagogical response, which causes problems both for the teacher (Harris 1995) and for the learner (Cheshire 1982b, Williams 1989b). Sociolinguists and educational researchers are keen to work with teachers and learners to address this issue. Since the 1970s, sociolinguists in the UK have attempted to bring linguistic concepts and research to bear on educational issues related to language, and in particular to help teachers understand the grammatical structure of regional varieties of British English (Trudgill 1975, Milroy and Milroy 1993, Bauer and Trudgill 1999; see Cheshire 2005 for a review). A recent initiative, set up by researchers at Queen Mary, University of London, and University of York, is a Linguistics Research Digest, which aims to provide 'up-to-date reports on the latest research papers on language issues in an engaging, jargon-free way' (<http://linguistics-research-digest.blogspot.co.uk>). The digest is particularly aimed at helping teachers of English Language to keep abreast with cutting-edge research. Sociolinguists have also designed materials on language variation and awareness for use in the classroom (e.g. Cheshire and Edwards 1991, 1998; Thomas and Maybin 1998; see Harris 1979 and ILEA Afro-Caribbean Language and Literacy Project in Further Adult Education 1990 for materials specific to Creole-speaking Caribbean immigrants in the UK and to multilingual and multiethnic classrooms), and some have proposed curriculum development which might start to enable learners to gain control over the conscious manipulation of both their own dialect and standard English in writing (e.g. Harris 1995: 139-143; Crinson and Williamson 2004: 216-18). Further research is required, however, to consider how best to disseminate sociolinguistic knowledge to those involved in teaching reading and writing and how to evaluate its use in education (Cheshire 2007).

## 5. Other European and world studies

### *Europe*

Researchers, educators, and policy makers in other European countries have also been concerned with the relationship between the 'standard' language and 'non-standard' varieties at school. Giesbers, Kroon and Liebrand (1988: 78) suggest that the publication of Labov's 'The logic of non-standard English' in 1969 (see section 6) gave rise to increased research interest in dialect and educational achievement in the Netherlands, as well as other European countries. They conducted their own study in three schools in Gennep, in the Northern part of the Dutch province of Limburg. The aim was to 'investigate the possible existence of a relationship between speaking a dialect as a mother tongue and school achievement in primary education (4-12 year olds)' (Giesbers et al. 1988: 79). Based on information provided by questionnaires completed by parents and teachers, they categorized 227 children as either 'speakers of the local dialect' or 'speakers of standard Dutch' and examined a broad range of the children's language abilities. We report here only on their results related to reading and writing.

Giesbers et al. (1988) measured the children's reading proficiency using five objective tests. Only one of these (the Nijmegen School Achievement Test of Reading Comprehension) showed the influence of language background, with twelve-year old standard Dutch speaking children performing better than their dialect-speaking peers. Writing ability was measured with four standardized tests, each 'containing items designed to elicit standard language and orthography' (p85), and two writing tasks (free composition on the topic of leisure activities and letter writing). The two pieces of writing were evaluated according to three criteria: 'structure and coherence of text'; 'communicative adequacy (logical argumentation; comprehensibility); and 'general evaluation (style; originality; interest)' (p86). The number of words written and the number of non-standard features used were also counted. Only one of the standardized tests showed a difference between the two groups of children. The findings from the free writing tests were more complicated, however: 'Twelve year old standard speakers performed better on 'structure and coherence' and 'communicative adequacy' in the letter writing tests ... In contrast, the dialect speaking twelve year olds are better on 'communicative adequacy' in writing about their leisure activities' (p86). There were no differences between the two groups in the number of words written or in the number of errors made in either of these writing tasks, leading the researchers to conclude that 'dialect speakers do not find themselves at a disadvantage as far as the technical or transcriptional aspect of writing is concerned' (p89).

Overall, Giesbers et al. (1988: 89) conclude that 'language background [i.e. whether the child speaks the local dialect or standard Dutch] does not exert a straightforward influence independent of SES [socio-economic status] and sex'. They emphasize that the issue of why dialect-speaking children tend to underperform in education is complex and requires further research:

[T]he possible disadvantages of dialect speaking children develop in very subtle ways, with teachers' attitudes towards the dialect, pupils' attitudes towards the school, differences in communicative habits, and, of course, linguistic differences between the dialect and the standard language all playing their role... we would like to end with the suggestion that future research on the dialect-standard controversy in education should concentrate on the interactional aspects of the problem rather than the purely linguistic ones.

(Giesbers, Kroon and Liebrand 1988: 91)

More recently, the issue of pupils' language achievement has become the target of public and media attention in Cyprus. Primary school teachers in Cyprus have noted that children have problems in

oral and written production of Standard Modern Greek (Pavlou and Christodoulou 2001). There is no official document in Cyprus which states what the language of education should be, but Standard Modern Greek (SMG) is generally accepted as 'the formal language of education, the media and the written code', while the Greek Cypriot Dialect (GCD) is 'the home and everyday spoken variety' (Ioannidou 2009: 264). The reality of the classroom may be different, however. While Greek Cypriot teachers supposedly use Standard Modern Greek in the classroom, Yiakoumetti and Esch (2010: 294) suggest that many may actually use 'Cypriot Standard Greek'. Moreover, research has shown that teachers (as well as pupils) style-shift between SMG and GCD forms in the classroom. Ioannidou (2009: 267) conducted an extended study of interaction in one Greek Cypriot primary classroom. She found that teachers and pupils associated the Cypriot dialect 'with the more informal occasions [in the classroom] such as commenting, complaining, joking' while Standard Modern Greek was associated with 'all those occasions directly connected with the teaching and learning process in the classroom'. Similar patterns were uncovered in a larger study, which collected data from six primary and six secondary schools in Cyprus over a ten-month period (Ioannidou and Sophocleous 2010). The researchers found that 'instances where the teacher lectured about new concepts or gave instructions on what students should do involved the use of more standard variants...In contrast, when the teacher made a parenthetical comment indirectly relevant to what was being discussed or made a humorous remark..., more GCD variants were employed' (Ioannidou and Sophocleous 2010: 305). These studies suggest that there is no 'clear-cut dichotomy between the standard being the language of the classroom and the dialect the language of break-time, as many policy-makers would argue' (Ioannidou, 2009: 268).

As in the UK, research in Cyprus has shown that children manipulate language variation for strategic effect. Ioannidou (2009: 273) describes how one group of boys in her study flouted the implicit 'rules' of the classroom, using dialect in standard-dominated situations, as an act of defiance or a marker of their Cypriot identity. They were able to use standard forms, but did so 'only when they felt they needed to do so and not when it was imposed on them either by the teacher or by the linguistic status quo of the classroom'.

Yiakoumetti and Esch (2010: 306) argue that given the 'undeniable fact' that 'dialects will emerge in the classroom whether or not teachers and language systems allow it', the key issue is how teachers respond to dialects, because negative responses can 'profoundly affect students' sense of identity and ultimately their performance'.

Papapavlou and Yiakoumetti (2003) investigated the use of written standard language (SMG) of sixth-grade Greek Cypriot pupils. Forty-nine pupils were asked by the classroom teachers to write in Greek on the topic of 'A remarkable Easter'. Students made an average of around 6 Cypriot 'errors' (ranging from 3.5 to 9.5) for every 100 words. Most of these errors related to morphology and lexis. Papapavlou and Yiakoumetti (2003) recommend, therefore, that teachers concentrate on these two key areas, but state that 'the difficulties faced by bidialectal speakers, as well as, how these difficulties can be overcome, need further systematic research in all types of bidialectal settings' (p346).

Research in Cyprus thus highlights findings similar to those documented in UK research. Again, there appear to be relatively few studies focusing specifically on the question of whether speaking a non-standard dialect interferes with the development of competence in the written standard language.

### *Creoles and minority dialects*

Winch and Gringell's (1994) study of the writing performance of children in St. Lucian primary schools concludes that 'the conventional wisdom, that creole interference causes St. Lucian children

to have serious problems with their writing, needs careful re-examination' (p178). Their analyses of 309 examination scripts, consisting of letters and narratives produced by 9- to 11-year old children in low-achieving schools, provide no evidence to support this assumption. Instead, they find evidence that children's low examination scores relate to three key areas. First and foremost, the children appeared to experience difficulties in coping with the conventions of writing. This difficulty is an issue not just for children in the Caribbean, but also for children in the UK (as documented in section 4 of the present report) and elsewhere. Winch and Gringell (1994: 165) raise the possibility that 'some commentators have confused the general problem of spoken language interference with the specific problem of creole interference, simply because the spoken language, in this case, happens to be creole'. They advise teachers that:

[i]t will be a more profitable strategy...to give children a practical understanding of the most important of these differences [between speech and writing] and an ability to take account of them in their own writing from the earliest stages of schooling. This would be more helpful than seeking to correct errors wrongly attributed to dialect interference.

(Winch and Gringell 1994: 179)

Second, difficulties in coping with some aspects of the writing system increased as children became more ambitious with their writing, and thus some errors were related to developmental factors:

Children find it difficult to handle complex constructions in writing and consequently make more errors of this kind when they attempt to express complex thoughts in complex and compound sentences. These errors are, however, due not so much to incompetence as to the development of competence.

(Winch and Gringell 1994: 175)

Finally, some errors appeared to be caused by unfamiliarity with certain written genres. When asked to write in an unfamiliar genre (in this case a letter of complaint), the children used more colloquial and non-standard forms.

Siegel (1999) discusses some of the inequities and obstacles faced by speakers of creoles and related minority dialects in formal education around the world. He outlines a range of initiatives that have attempted to deal with these problems (see also Yiakoumetti and Esch (2010) on 'dialect-promotion' and 'bidialectal' educational programmes). The goal of these initiatives is to enable students 'to acquire the standard language while maintaining their own way of speaking and thus their linguistic self-respect' (p515). They therefore make use of creoles and minority dialects in the education system. Some have claimed that this practice will cause negative transfer or confusion (i.e. 'interference') between the non-standard and standard varieties, thus making it more difficult for students to acquire literacy skills in the standard language. Siegel discusses research undertaken in a range of international contexts that has challenged the 'interference argument' (focusing e.g. on Aboriginal English and Australian creoles in Australia, Caribbean creoles in the Caribbean and in migrant communities in the UK, Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea, and African American Vernacular English in the USA). He ends by calling not just for further research but also for a great deal more 'practical work' in this area, through collaboration between sociolinguists and the communities within which they work.

In the USA, by far the largest body of research on the relationship between non-standard dialect and standard English literacy has focused on African American Vernacular English. This is the topic of the next section of this report. It should be noted, however, that sociolinguists in the USA have, of course, researched other varieties of American English, and have published materials promoting awareness of these varieties for teachers, pupils, and members of the public (see e.g. Charity Hudley and Mallinson 2011; Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1997; Wolfram, Schilling-Estes and Hazen 1997).

## 6. African American Vernacular English

One of the most salient comparisons to the situation regarding accent, dialect, standard English and literacy in England is the case of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in the USA. Since the 1960s, the nature and status of AAVE in American society have been discussed in academic and educational circles.

Rystrom (1969, 1970a, 1970b, 1973), Wolfram (1970), Goodman (1970), Piestrup (1973), Hunt (1974), Liu (1975) and Cunningham (1977) represent a first wave of such discussion. Rystrom (1969) refers back to research in the mid-1960s on attitudes towards language usage, the terminology and methods used by dialectologists (Shuy 1967) and the ways in which Negro [sic] dialect differs from standard English (Labov 1969). He identifies two other attitudes that defined early studies of African American Vernacular English dialect: one, that the AAVE dialect disadvantaged young black Americans, not only educationally, but socially and economically. The other was that 'Negro speech interferes with the cognitive development of a Negro student because of linguistic deficiencies within the dialect' (p501). The latter view has been proven to be unfounded in its yoking together of speech and a single measure of cognitive development, and in the notion that dialects could have 'linguistic deficiencies', let alone in the presumed association between language and race/ethnicity. Nevertheless, much research in this period worked with an assumption of deficit that was perceived as needing to be redressed.

Such remedial provision was advocated by several researchers in the 1960s (e.g. Bereiter and Engelmann 1966), all suggesting a single remedial relationship between non-standard dialect and reading competence. In its most extreme cases, the proposal was to teach standard dialect in order to make reading more accessible, on the assumption that the standard dialect was closer to print in a book. Rystrom (1970a) proved that there was no such interaction (i.e. correlation) between dialect training, reading schemes (readers, textbooks) and reading achievement, and that 'the data presented...do not support the assumption that a dialect training program will significantly increase the reading achievement scores of children who speak Negro dialect' (p598). Indeed, such dialect training was seen to confuse rather than aid the process of learning to read.

Even so, Wolfram (1970), acknowledging that black English was more than a dialect in his statement and that it was 'a fully formed a linguistic system in its own right, with its own grammar and pronunciation rules', makes the contrast again between such language and that of the 'standard English reader [from a reading scheme]' ((p11). Part of the problem here appears to be that the 'standard English reader' of the time adopted a narrow, class-based diction not shared by AAVE. One of the solutions, mentioned above and already rejected by Rystrom (but proposed by Venezky, 1967) was for training in standard English speech prior to reading; another solution was to 'allow' black young people to speak the standard written English text in their own dialect. Yet other solutions include one which has recently found favour in limited circles in England, viz. to teach a phonetic approach, where sounds and letters approximate each other; and one in which reading materials are adapted or changed to come closer to the dialect of the young reader. This latter suggestion would be followed by a staged approach from the dialect reader to the spoken standard reader.

Resistance to the idea of 'dialect readers' from parents, teachers and others has been based on a wider sense that providing reinforcement for dialect in the school provides learners with a 'second-class' linguistic education: one that will not equip young people in terms of social mobility; employability; access to middle-class *mores* and values. Ultimately, the issue in the USA, as in England, is one of class differentiation and mobility rather than of minority race/ethnicity access to a standard literacy. As Wolfram (1970) puts it, 'the vernacular is socially stigmatised both by the dominant class and those who actually use the stigmatised forms. Despite these attitudes,

vernacular reading materials have been reported to be successful as a bridge to literacy in the national language' (p31). The lack of significant difference between speakers of black English and white English was also found in a study by Rystrom (1973), who suggested the more pressing problem was the difficulty faced by *all* children in forging sound-letter relationships; indeed 'the fact that speakers of black English bring a somewhat different distribution of phonemes to the reading process does not appear to be a factor in the reading acquisition process' (p184).

Hunt (1974) sums up the position well: allowing for dialect variation and use in pronunciation 'neither suggests that black dialect be 'taught' nor that there be 'lower standards' for black children. It simply suggests that the language children have learned be recognised and accepted, especially in the early reading stages. There is probably general agreement that standard English [is] a necessary tool and should be taught at some point in the school curriculum'. The 'standard English' referred to is written standard English.

Interestingly, 9 year-old black readers made a dramatic improvement in reading in the four years from 1972 to 1976, according to National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests, but black readers of all ages continued to lag behind their white counterparts (Cunningham 1977). One of the reasons posited for continued relative difficulties in learning to read was 'not in their language but in their teachers' attitudes toward and reaction to that language' (p651). These attitudes were not deemed racist, but to do with ignorance of the fact that all dialects are equal linguistically, but not necessarily socially and politically. Teachers' attitudes were probably reflective of a wider social view of black dialect 'as a low status stigma and its association with a rejected culture' (Liu 1975). Liu further suggests that to ameliorate the situation, black dialect should be accepted as a legitimate means for communication and 'standard English should be offered as an alternative or an additional dialect'.

More recent studies in the USA (Adger and Wolfram 2000; Goodman and Goodman 2000; Labov 2003; Godley, Carpenter and Werner 2007; Kirkland and Jackson 2009; Dyson and Smitherman 2009; Sperling et al. 2011) have shown a revival of interest. Labov (2003), whose work in the late 60s and early 70s (especially his 'The logic of non-standard English' (1969)) was pivotal in building recognition that AAVE was as complex and subtle as standard spoken dialects, noted that there had been little change in the 30-40 point difference between the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading levels of mainstream and minority children from 1970 to 2000. In the USA, 'African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is becoming increasingly differentiated from other dialects as residential segregation increases...[and] the Latino minority is expanding rapidly with immigration of Spanish-speaking populations so that an increasing number of children approach the problem of learning to read English with Spanish as their native language' (p129). In both cases, the pedagogic approach has been to combine decoding (including what has come to be called a systematic synthetic phonics approach in order to solidify the understanding of the relationship between sounds and letters in English) with 'the reading of connected and meaningful text, narratives that deal with the concerns and interests of the children involved' (p131). Other relevant work includes Labov 1995; Labov, Baker, Bullock, Ross and Brown 1998; Labov 2008; and Labov and Baker 2010.

Kirkland and Jackson (2009) focused on black masculine literacies in 11-14 year-olds. Rather than take a deficit approach, their study looked at 'how literacy formed and functioned' within a group of seven young men who defined themselves as 'cool'. The frame for understanding literacy is one which broadens the concept to include the combination of written and oral forms of communication, plus 'visual, gestural and other kinds of symbols' (p279) – in other words, a multimodal approach to literacy, informed by social semiotic theory. For these young black males, their version of AAVE functioned as an 'antilanguage to promote solidarity' (p288), rather than a sub-dialect in relation to 'standard spoken English'. This positioning suggests that users of a dialect can move between 'standard spoken English' (or 'the language of wider communication' (Sitherman

1999) and their own chosen dialect. The purpose of maintaining their own dialect is 'a systematic way as a means for helping young black men fit in and gain entry into cool cultures and contexts but also to distinguish them [from the majority]' . Young black men, within these terms, are 'multiply literate' (p294).

More general than a focus on dialect is a consideration of 'voice' in relation to writing and reading (literacy) development. Sperling et al. (2011) explore the concept of 'voice' in its various manifestations: as the physical voice; as an aspect of identity/ies; as a personal imprint running through expression in writing and other modes; from rhetorical as well as linguistic perspectives; and as a social as well as individual accomplishment. Such a range of references ties the concept of voice to the identification with local and regional communities which we see in the use of dialect. In relation to the use of AAVE and the work of Kirkland and Jackson, cited above, research into 'voice' can be aligned with a need for solidarity but also a strategic use of dialect alongside and in combination with spoken standard English to navigate one's way through different social situations.

Wheeler, Cartwright and Swords (2012) take up the difference between speech and reading, looking specifically at how AAVE may influence reading assessments and subsequent instructional decisions. They propose that students learn to choose the language variety appropriate to the context. In this way, they suggest that factoring dialect into reading assessment results in improved literacy performance (abstract).

We have thus moved a long way from the deficit model where dialect is seen as an inferior version of 'standard spoken English' with all its attendant problems. These problems included the perception of a learning gap between dialects and standard written English; a social stigma attached to dialects; and an assumption that the use of dialect is connected to cognitive deficit.

## 7. Conclusion

### *Implications for policy*

The issue of the use in schools of standard English versus non-standard dialects and creoles has attracted the attention of educational policymakers in the UK, and around the world. Attempts have been made to prescribe the use of standard English in speech as well as writing, but too often policymakers have not taken seriously the task of clearly defining what is meant by 'written standard English' and 'spoken standard English', and in fact have tended to assume that both are merely realisations of an idealised 'standard English' code (Crowley 2003). This problem is not simply one of definition. Speech does not replicate the grammatical structures of writing, and for many children, understanding the differences between spoken and written English presents a central problem as they develop as readers and writers. This is an issue for all children, not just those who come to school speaking a regional dialect and accent.

The research reviewed in this report makes clear that there is no straightforward relationship between children's language background and their achievement in school literacy. UK-based studies, albeit few in number, have indicated that the current emphasis on regional variation in dialect and accent as a barrier to the acquisition of Standard English literacy is misplaced. The use of non-standard dialect forms in writing is a relatively rare phenomenon in UK schools, and one which shrinks into insignificance when compared with errors in spelling and punctuation and with the difficulties children face in coping with the complexities of written structure. Research in the UK, Cyprus and the Caribbean has shown that regional dialects and creoles will emerge in children's talk in the classroom regardless of policy proscriptions. The incidence of non-standard dialect features in writing, however, declines as children progress through the educational system. By the end of compulsory schooling, most adolescents are able to switch to standard forms in their writing while maintaining their own distinctive dialect and identity in their speech. Attempts to erase the use of local dialect in speech are therefore futile.

We can learn a number of lessons from the experience of the establishment of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in the USA. Early work in this topic assumed a deficit model in which the African American dialect was assumed to be inferior to the 'standard spoken version' of English. A deficit approach had repercussions right throughout the educational systems, and various attempts were made to help young people of African American descent bridge the gap between spoken dialect and the spoken standard version of English, principally in order to make reading more accessible.

As the debate developed in the USA, between the 1960s and the 2000s, researchers and educationalists, as well as policy-makers, became aware that the 'problem' of AAVE was shared by other groups whose dialect seemed not to correspond to the standard spoken version of the language. The 'problem', gradually, began to define itself in relation to class rather than race and ethnicity.

What has emerged is a move away from the deficit model to one in which the vernacular language is valued and appreciated as a dialect alongside (not inferior to) the nationally accepted spoken standard version.

There is, however, still a need on both sides of the Atlantic, and worldwide, to understand two fundamental points: first, that any spoken standard dialect is, in effect, a dialect that has assumed national status as a 'language' and sits alongside other dialects; second, that any spoken grammar is different from a written grammar in a number of respects, and cannot be equated with

writing/reading in a direct relationship. There is no linguistic or educational disadvantage in moving from a Hull dialect, for example, to standard written English, in writing and/or reading.

Policy makers also need to realize that speakers manipulate language variation for strategic effect. Non-standard dialect is often used as a form of resistance to the hegemonic national language; its use sometimes has political as well as personal significance.

Attempts at standardization, therefore, should be confined to writing/reading, as in standard written English (a worldwide currency), rather than in an attempt to impose a spoken standard.

### *Implications for practice*

Many of the implications for practice follow from the suggested implications for policy. The implications drawn out here will be of interest to teachers who are concerned with developing literacy, whether at primary, secondary or tertiary levels in the education system.

The extent to which teachers should focus specifically on regional dialect forms in writing is a decision to be made by an individual teacher, taking into account the needs of the pupils he or she is working with. Where teachers do focus on non-standard dialect, the verb phrase is likely to be the most profitable area in which to invest their time, because this is where most errors related to non-standard dialect occur. It is best to develop a consistent and transparent strategy in dealing with such errors in order to avoid creating unintended confusion and anxiety for the learner. Researchers have suggested, however, that time might be better spent on the mechanics of spelling and punctuation and on the differences between spoken and written English if teachers are to satisfy the requirements of the National Curriculum.

As well as being aware of the distinctions made above between spoken and written English, between dialect and accent, and between regional dialects/accents and spoken standard English, teachers will need to be aware of the functions of speech and writing/reading. Each mode has its own affordances. Some things can be done in speech that are not appropriate in writing, and vice-versa. Local dialect may be appropriate in some circumstances and spoken standard English in others. What is clear is that accent is not a matter that needs to be considered in formal situations where some form of spoken standard English is required: standard English can be spoken in a range of different accents, as it is on the BBC News, for example.

A further important point made in the section on Speech, Reading and Writing is that command of the English spelling system is dependent not only on 'phonics', i.e. the grapho-phonemic system in English. It is also informed and aided by morphological considerations. By these, we mean the 'grammar of words': how words are constructed from prefixes, root words and suffixes. Furthermore, some aspects of English spelling are only learnt through visual memory and/or by the meaning that is being conveyed, as they follow neither phonological nor morphological rules. It is therefore necessary for teachers of the language, whether they are specialists (literacy, English teachers) or use language as a key medium for the expression of their subject (e.g. Geography or Physics specialists) to know about the many levels at which language works. There are implications for teacher trainers as well as teachers in this regard.

### *Implications for further research*

We have found, in undertaking this review of the relationship between accent, dialect and literacy, that there is not a great deal of research in England or the UK about the relationship, either

linguistically or in education research. We acknowledge the limitations of what we have undertaken and would welcome correspondence with anyone who could point us towards such research.

The main (and significant) gaps appear to be in the relationship between regional dialects and standard written English literacy in England. Insufficient work has been done and published in this area, and yet such work is important as it will help to define the specific problems that some young people encounter when moving from a local dialect to proficiency in written standard English by the time they leave full-time education. Existing studies are based on data collected prior to the introduction of the National Curriculum and its official policy on the teaching of standard English. Future research might usefully test whether the establishment of the National Curriculum has effected any change on pupils' use of non-standard dialect in writing. Further research should also focus on the issue of what constitutes an appropriate pedagogic response to the use of non-standard dialect forms in writing. There is currently little agreement on this issue between researchers, educational practitioners and policy makers, which causes problems both for both teachers and learners.

There is also a need for more comparative studies between the situation in England and the rest of the UK, and between England and other comparator countries around the world. None of the extensive research into African American Vernacular English made reference to the UK. Nor does the more limited amount of research in England generally refer to AAVE studies. Yet there is much to learn from common problems that are faced globally. The more the world moves to three or four world languages (English, Mandarin Chinese, Spanish and possibly Arabic), the more the relationship between local dialect, national languages and world languages will become critical to personal and social/economic advancement.

Our research also suggests that as well as looking into gaps in linguistics, sociolinguistics and education in literacy, there needs to be further research into attitudes towards accent, dialect and literacy. Too often, assumptions are made by learners and teachers that a regional dialect or accent will impede progress towards fully-fledged literacy; or that a regional accent or dialect is an impediment to social mobility and employment. These assumptions are often shared by employers and others in positions of power. These are social, political and economic issues that need to be addressed to make sure that accent, dialect and spoken standard English are appreciated for what they are; that their relationship to literacy is understood; and to ensure that equity is applied when it comes to key aspects of social advancement, like applying for and appointing to jobs.

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## Appendix 1

### **Methodology**

In undertaking this report, we have used a form of systematic research review.

Our first step was to formulate a clear research question with the commissioning body: the BBC. This question is 'To what extent does a regional dialect and accent impact on the development of reading and writing skills?'

The second step was to create a research plan or protocol. This went through three drafts, again in discussion with each other and with the BBC, to ensure we had a clear framework for the research. The final version of the research protocol is included as Appendix 2.

The third step was to identify sources, locate specific relevant publications, and to get hold of abstracts. Where appropriate, the full texts of key publications on the specific topic of the study were sourced. While our initial searches were via journals and books we knew in the field, subsequent electronic searches used large-scale databases such as Taylor and Francis Online, Oracle, and other such resources in our respective university libraries. The References and Bibliography section lists all the publications we found, including those that we referenced and discussed in the body of the report.

Fourthly, every abstract/text that we found was double-screened for relevance. We excluded those titles that did not seem to be entirely relevant to the study.

Once screened, we had an idea of the map of the field we were investigating, and of how subsections of the map might be written up in the report. The fifth stage thus involved the creation of a provisional structure for the report, and divided responsibilities for first-drafting sections of the report. All sections were read and edited by both co-investigators to provide critical commentary, cohesion and consistency of style.

In a sixth stage, we both read the first full draft of the report and then prepared it for formatting and submission to the BBC.

## Appendix 2

### Plan for scoping review

#### Aim

To provide a scoping review report and bibliography

#### Research question

To what extent does a regional dialect and accent impact on the development of reading and writing skills?

#### Keywords<sup>1</sup>

Accent, dialect, [non-standard dialect], dialect interference, literacy, reading, writing, [Standard English], school, grammar

#### Specific point

To include consideration of the accents and dialects of Bristol, Liverpool, Newcastle, Middlesbrough, Hull

Review to consider research published – dates

1960-present

Research – language

Published in English in UK, USA, Canada

Formats for research publication

Reports, chapters in books, books, research articles and other online sources as appropriate

Journals reviewed

Reading Research Quarterly

Educational Studies

Language and Education

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<sup>1</sup> We did not always use all keywords in our searches, as these occasionally produced no hits.

Linguistics and Education  
Journal of Sociolinguistics  
Language in Society  
Journal of Research in Reading  
English in Education  
Reading 3-13  
Changing English

Types of research

All

Age groups covered

5-11, 11-16, 16-25