A Usable Past

CCC at 50

Part I

Shaping Controversies
Geneva Smitherman

CCCC’s Role in the Struggle for Language Rights

Among the language arts crowd, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) has become famous (or infamous, depending on your vantage point) for its 1974 Students’ Right to Their Own Language resolution. However, virtually since its inception, CCCC has served as the site of dialogues about language controversies. Pouring over nearly 50 years of back issues of CCC, I realized that through its journal—in initially called its “official bulletin”—CCCC has consistently provided a forum for scholars and activists to raise up the issue of language rights. While the central focus here will be on two organizational policies of CCCC, the “Students’ Right” resolution of 1974 and the National Language Policy of 1988, my historical narrative incorporates articles and commentaries on language in CCC. These contributions by members and leaders in the field highlight CCCC’s historical role in the struggle for language rights. While the organization has not always stepped decisively and swiftly to the challenge, its past record as advocate for those on the linguistic margins is, on balance, one in which CCCC can take pride.

Donald J. Lloyd And The “New Linguistics”

We begin this journey back in linguistic time with the words of linguist Donald J. Lloyd.

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The [article] is an expression at the very least of a frivolous obscurantism, or at the most of a vigorously cultivated ignorance...Failure to know [the factual studies of language] and what they mean...is responsible for the fact that the educational heart of darkness...is the English course...Emphasis on "correctness"—at the expense...of a fluid, knowledgeable command of our mother tongue—is responsible for the incompetence of our students in handling their language, for their embarrassment about their own rich...dialects, for their anxiety when they are called upon to speak or write...and for their feeling that the study of English is the study of trivialities which have no importance or meaning outside the English class....

In our day, to make statements about English and about language which do not square with linguistics is professionally reprehensible. Yet it is an indulgence arrogantly and willfully permitted themselves by many English teachers, not decently hidden in class, but in open publication in the journals of our field and in the concoction of the dreariest collection of ignorantly dogmatic textbooks that dominates any discipline in the schools. (10–12)

Thus Lloyd launched the first debate in CCC.1 It was February 1951, and CCC was just two years old. Lloyd was replying to "The Freshman is King; or, Who Teaches Who?" published in the December 1950 issue of CCC by Kenneth L. Knickerbocker of the University of Tennessee-Knoxville. In his scathing critique, with its signifyin title, "Darkness is King," Lloyd took Knickerbocker to task for coming to conclusions about the actual use of 19 "controversial" expressions (for example, Who did you meet?) based on an opinion survey by a lay person that had been published in Harper's Magazine. Lloyd argued that the "disputed expressions" had all been studied and "found to be in good use in this country," and he stated unequivocally that "the language of a person who uses none of these expressions is not superior to the language of one who uses some of them, or indeed, to that of one who uses all of them" (10). Not content with just knocking Knickerbocker upside the head, Lloyd also slammed the journal and the organization: "The appearance [of this article] in the bulletin of the CCCC is a little shocking," and "The assertion or implication that the language of a person who uses none of these expressions is superior on that account is a professional error which no English teacher should commit in print, and no editor should permit him to make" (10).

Surprisingly, Knickerbocker seemed not to be offended and even gave Lloyd props for his rhetorical skills: "This is a highly literate reply to my 'frivolous obscurantism.' It indicates that somewhere along the line Mr. Lloyd has been concerned with correctness. (I should like to teach my students to write as well as he does.) It may be that my little paper did not deserve to
reap such a fine whirlwind, but since it did, let it blow” (footnote, Lloyd, “Darkness,” 1951, 10). And blow it did! Although Knickerbocker was not heard from again on the subject, Martin Steinmann Jr. came into the fray, accusing Lloyd of lapses of logic that led him to “exhortations to action” (12). He and Lloyd did battle in three issues of CCC. Steinmann’s obtuse writing style makes his critique difficult to follow, but in the main he appears to be arguing that Lloyd has invoked linguistics as a science to tell us what people should say based on what they do say. Actually, Lloyd’s argument does not take this route at all. Rather, he points out Knickerbocker’s fundamental error in accepting what people think they say for what they do say. Space does not permit a detailed analysis of this debate nor the reply to the reply to the reply. Suffice it to say that Steinmann’s critique may be summed up as a “misguided foray into irrelevant tediousness and willful misconstruction of Lloyd’s meaning” (Sheridan).

Clearly, from the jump, then, CCC was a forum for linguistic debates and language issues of various kinds. To a great extent, this is attributable to the parallel development of Composition-rhetoric and Linguistics in the 1950s and 1960s, as both fields sought to reinvent themselves and stake intellectual claim to distinct identities among the established disciplines of the academy. Indeed, in those early years, linguistics was breaking away from anthropology and philosophy and formulating new grammars truly reflective of how English works (Structural, Transformational), grammars which were replacing the misfit Latinate-based models of old. At the time, there was a great deal of excitement about the “New Grammar,” and linguistics seemed to hold out great promise to resolve a host of problems in the human sciences: language teaching and learning, the mystery of the structure of human cognition—and the teaching of literacy. Thus the most frequently cited authors in CCC articles from 1950–64 were linguists: Charles C. Fries (with 13 cites), Kenneth Pike (11), Paul Roberts (10), Donald Lloyd (8), Noam Chomsky (7), (Phillips et. al. 452). These early articles generally focused on the relevance, for Composition Studies, of the theories and research coming out of Linguistics, and within this general concern, their focus was most often on the specific issue of usage and the teaching of writing to those students who used nonstandard forms and who did not (as Charles Fries had put it in 1940) “carry on the affairs of the English-speaking people” (12–13). In this early period, those students were typically not students of Color, but rural and/or working-class whites. Lloyd spoke for these white regional and social class dialects quite poignantly:

You discover...that dialects you have grown up to despise are rooted in respectable antiquity and still reflect the vicissitudes of pioneer life. If you respect American traditions, you find these traditions best embodied in the
language of the illiterate back-country farm families, whether they still stand on their own land or congeal in uneasy clots in our industrial cities. You come therefore to describe with respect. You give information; you do not devise new decalogues. (“English Composition” 41)

Some scholars argued that composition courses should be built around Linguistics, that the English language itself, when studied from the vantage point of the new grammatical paradigms, could well serve as the content of the composition curriculum. Titles of articles from this early period are illustrative: John Carroll’s 1956 “Psycholinguistics and the Teaching of English Composition,” Mary Elizabeth Fowler’s 1956 “Using Semantic Concepts in the Teaching of Composition,” a 1957 Panel report on “From Literacy to Literature: The Pedagogical Use of Linguistics,” a 1957 Workshop Report on “Applying Structural Linguistics in the Classroom” and a 1960 panel Report on “Linguistics in the Composition-Communication Course.”

Beginning with the proposition that “an English composition course around linguistics” would “take the English language as a social instrument expressing, conditioning, and…conditioned by the society that uses it,” Lloyd even goes so far as to say that linguistics “is a promised land for the English teacher” (“English Composition” 40, 43). Linguist and long-time CCCC leader Harold B. Allen, however, was quite cautious about the possibilities of language-based curricula for composition. He argued that research was needed in order to ascertain the applicability of linguistic knowledge to the production of powerfully written essays:

It is my present conviction that power in the use of language, rather than mere skill, derives from sensitive awareness of the manifold resources of language, in structure as well as in vocabulary. This conviction rests on a priori grounds; but so does the belief of those who omit linguistic content and rely upon dogma. We need evidence that comes from research. (“Linguistic Research” 57)

Still, Ralph B. Long was not only cautious but caustic in his review of two texts for the “Freshman English” course. In “Grammarians Still Have Funerals,” Long questions the usefulness of the “New Grammar” for composition instruction, indicts linguists for their “odd romantic primitivism” when it comes to speech and writing, and lambastes one for declaring that “a person would just as soon call himself a con man or an alchemist as a grammarian.” Long rebuts:

I have called myself a grammarian for many years…Until Roberts’ book came along, it would not have occurred me to compare grammarians—or even New Linguists, in spite of the extravagant claims many of them make...
Linguist James Sledd, however, seems to have put the lie to Long's assertion. Often referred to as "the conscience of the field" (see Olson 298), Sledd has been a regular on CCCC and NCTE conference programs over the decades, during which time he has consistently challenged compositionists and other language arts theorists and practitioners on behalf of linguistically marginalized and economically disenfranchised voices. In 1956, in his first appearance in CCC, Sledd asserted that while subordinate clauses are grammatically subordinate, this should not be confused, as it often is even today, with being logically subordinate. Thus, some teachers' admonition to put the main idea in the main clause and the subordinate idea in the subordinate clause doesn't always work. While this essay doesn't deal directly with language rights issues—a theme that Sledd would, in the coming decades, write about eloquently and powerfully—"Coordination (Faulty) and Subordination (Upside-Down)" is important in our historical narrative because it offered a precise and accurate linguistic description as a corrective for the misassumptions about language that many writing teachers held (and perhaps still hold?). Thus Sledd, a stalwart of the language rights struggle, here exemplifies the contributions of the New Linguists to the then-emerging field of Composition Studies.

Concerning standards of usage, in 1957 Charles Hartung echoed other progressive linguists in making a case for the value of linguistics in establishing usage norms for composition students. He argued that usage should be governed by "the doctrine of the linguistic norm," a standard derived from balancing "the intention of the speaker, the nature of the language itself, and the probable effect on the audience" (62). But while throughout the 1950s and 1960s, linguists and other CCCC scholars advocated the legitimacy and adequacy of all language variations, they also consistently called for composition instructors to toe the line in terms of teaching the social inadequacy of nonstandard forms. "If a new doctor or minister says 'you was,' confidence in him is lowered. Educated people should talk like educated people, no matter who is listening or what the occasion may be" (Ives 154). In his 1952 "Preparing the Teacher of Composition and Communication—A Report," based on his visit to 47 different colleges and universities, where he interviewed department heads, graduate deans, full and part-time faculty, and graduate students, Harold Allen argued strongly that the composition instructor should possess linguistic
knowledge and sophistication. Despite what appears to be a progressive position on language differences, however, he went on to advocate that instructors should “help students to substitute one set of language practices for another set…to teach standard usage to freshmen who do not have command of it” (11). This is essentially a philosophy of subtractive bilingualism and is exactly the kind of contradictory position that Ernice Kelly would lambaste the entire CCCC organization for in her 1968 “Murder of the American Dream” speech. Even Lloyd, often considered a linguistic radical, acknowledged that instructors would find that they had to make a “change” in their students. However, in contrast to his contemporaries, Lloyd explicitly advocated an additive bilingualism, that students respect and retain their home languages:

If we find anything that we have to change—and we do—we know that we are touching something that goes deep into [a given student’s] past and spreads wide in his personal life. We will seek not to dislodge one habit in favor of another but to provide alternative choices for freer social mobility. We seek to enrich, not to correct…By respecting their traditions and the people from whom they come, we teach them to respect and to hold tight to what they have as they reach for more. (“English Composition” 42)

By 1962, as evidenced in his “On Not Sitting Like a Toad,” Lloyd had refined his pedagogy for using “New Grammar” concepts (for example, pattern practice drills) to teach alternative language habits while simultaneously promoting retention of the mother tongue. In a class all by himself in the first years of CCCC, Lloyd anticipated the thinking that would lead to the “Students’ Right” resolution two decades later.

“Murder of the American Dream”

One major result of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s was the creation of educational policies to redress the academic exclusion of and past injustices inflicted upon Blacks, Browns, women, and other historically marginalized groups. Programs and policies such as Upward Bound, open enrollment, Educational Opportunity Programs (EOPs), preferential/affirmative action admissions, and the development of special academic courses (“basic” writing) brought a new and different brand of student into the college composition classroom. Unlike the returning military veterans and other working class white students of the 1950s and early 60s, this new student spoke a language which not only reflected a different class, but also a different race, culture, and historical experience.

The symbolic turning point was 1968. The assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., which occurred while the CCCC Convention met in Min-
neapolis, brought the organization “shockingly to an awareness of one of its major responsibilities” (Irmscher 105). In his memorial to King in the May 1968 issue of CCC, editor William Irmscher indicated that the organization now had a “new demand” placed upon it. Although he did not put it in these terms, for the first time, race/Color as a central component of linguistic difference became an in-yo-face issue that the organization could no longer ignore. Not that race/Color was a new issue that had somehow just fallen from the sky. Rather, the organization had heretofore simply proceeded as if racial differences did not exist and as if race did not need to be taken into account in the life of CCCC. In a sense, Irmscher’s half-page homage to King symbolizes CCCC’s loss of innocence.

Erniece B. Kelly’s speech, “Murder of the American Dream,” was delivered at the annual meeting in Minneapolis after the news of King’s assassination and reprinted in the May 1968 issue of CCC. In this brief but powerful work, Kelly reproached CCCC for the lack of Black representation in the program, rebuked the organization for the exclusion of Black intellectual and literary products in anthologies, and took it to task for the way it deals with Black Language. Kelly states:

Here we meet to discuss the dialects of Black students and how we can upgrade or, if we’re really successful, just plain replace them…Why aren’t there Blacks here who will talk about the emergence of an image among Blacks which does not permit them to even bother with the question of whether or not the white man understands their dialect?…Why aren’t there Blacks…[dealing] with the richness and values of the language of the Black ghetto?…such ideas have been dealt with and their complexities examined. Why weren’t these papers presented here? (107)

Subsequently, and as a direct response to her “Murder of the American Dream” speech, Kelly was invited to co-edit an issue of CCC, which appeared later that year, in December 1968. That issue includes articles by four African American writers, a first for CCC.

The late Sarah Webster Fabio poses the questions, “What is Black?” (also the title of her article) and “What is Black language?” Indicating that these questions were frequently being asked during that time, she defines Black Language as

direct, creative, intelligent communication between black people based on a shared reality, awareness, understanding which generates interaction; it is a rhetoric which places premium on imagistic renderings and concretizations of abstractions, poetic usages of language, idiosyncrasies—those individualized stylistic nuances…which…hit “home” and evoke truth (286).
James Banks’s “Profile of the Black American” deals with a range of cultural issues, one of which is language. His brief comments on language and composition assert the legitimacy of Black students’ language and downplays the need to master “standard English”:

When evaluating their compositions, the teacher must realize that these students emanate from a different culture...which possesses a language with a different structure and grammar, but nevertheless a valid structure and grammar. Thus the teacher must concentrate on the quality of ideas in the composition rather than on the student’s use or misuse of standard American English grammar. Our mission is to teach these students how to think, to describe their environment, and to encourage their creativity...Grammar is incidental; the student will later pick up standard English grammar if he sees a need for it and if we have succeeded in developing his reflective and problem-solving skills. (296)

In the same issue, Leonard Greenbaum’s “Prejudice and Purpose in Compensatory Programs” predicts an Orwellian nightmare for those seeking to suppress African American speech and other language varieties.

Dialect has positive aspects...that are not part of standardized English...The desire to eliminate dialect is an egocentric solution proposed out of power and out of traditional modes of education that have always shunned the experimental in favor of the pragmatic. This was how the “system” dealt with immigrants at the turn of the century and just prior to and during World War II, and it is how, similarly, some propose it should deal with rural or inner-city dialects in the 1960’s. This desire, no doubt, will win out. I can predict what lies in our future—a uniform society, most likely in uniform...we are hastening to our meeting with Orwell. (305)

It is interesting that several of the articles in this special issue touch on the question of language even when that is not a particular article’s central focus. The late Elisabeth McPherson’s brilliant, thoughtful piece, “Hats Off—or On—to the Junior College,” employs, as a point of departure, a controversy about male students wearing their hats inside a community college building. “There was more involved than a possibly out-of-date, middle-class custom. There was a racial issue, too; it was only the Negro students for whom the hats, very narrow-brimmed and often very expensive, were a badge and a symbol” (317). In the course of her discussion, she touches on the matter of language as a mark of identity and culture, citing the work of linguist Benjamin Whorf and invokes the hat metaphor to address the question of dialects:

The question of usage...is very much like the question of hats. Which is the more important status symbol for the student: leaving his hat on and keeping
his own identity? Taking it off and learning to be an imitation WASP? This is a decision only the student can make...If changing his dialect is not the student's own idea...we have no right to insist on it simply because we prefer the sound of our own. If we are a college, and not just defenders of the status quo, we've more important business than worrying about dialect changes. (322)

Three years after the publication of this essay, McPherson would become a crucial member of the “Students’ Right to their Own Language” Committee. Nearly two decades later, in 1987, she accepted appointment to the Language Policy Committee, on which she continued to serve despite a lingering and debilitating illness.

**Students’ Right to Their Own Language**

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

—CCCC, *Students’ Right*, inside front cover

The *Students’ Right* resolution followed logically on the heels of the dramatic 1968 annual meeting of CCCC and the subsequent December 1968 special issue of CCC, which were themselves affected by the social movements, political events, and assassinations in the world beyond Academe. The Resolution is grounded in the sociolinguistic branch of linguistics, a natural affinity for CCCC. When the 1970s split in linguistics occurred, dividing the Cartesian/theoretical school (associated with Noam Chomsky) from the socially constituted school (associated with Joshua Fishman), CCCC followed the latter.

As an organizational position, the *Students’ Right* resolution represented a critical mechanism for CCCC to address its own internal contradictions at the same time as marching, fist-raising, loud-talking protesters, spearheaded
by the Black Liberation Movement, marred the social landscape of “America the beautiful.” Some language scholars had begun to question bidialectalism as a goal for the linguistically marginalized (see Sledd’s 1969 “Bi-Dialectalism”). They argued that the bidialectalism philosophy was only being promoted for those on the margins. Further, since linguistic research had demonstrated the linguistic adequacy of “nonstandard” dialects, why wouldn’t the “system” accept them? To reject them was tantamount to making difference into deficiency all over again. From this viewpoint, it was clear that the charge to intellectual-activists was to struggle for the wider social legitimacy of all languages and dialects and to struggle, wherever one had a shot at being effective, to bring about mainstream recognition and acceptance of the culture, history and language of those on the margins. It was this line of thinking that moved me to get involved in CCCC and the Students’ Right struggle; it also moved many of my peers in other fields to become involved in their respective professional organizations. Most of us had been baptized in the fire of social protest and street activism. No romantic idealists, we knew the roadblocks and limitations involved in trying to effectuate change within the system. But we also knew that without “vision, the people perish.” Besides, as I commented to a fellow comrade (a psychologist, who was one of the founders of the Association of Black Psychologists), what else was we gon do while we was waitin for the Revolution to come?

In this socio-historical climate, in the fall of 1971, the CCCC officers appointed a small committee to draft a policy resolution on students’ dialects. I was a member of that committee and by the time of the 1972 vote, also a member of the CCCC Executive Committee. In March 1972, we presented the CCCC Executive Committee with the Students’ Right position statement, a fairly terse, but highly controversial (some said “explosive”) paragraph. The CCCC Executive Committee passed the resolution at its November 1972 meeting, promptly enlarged the Committee, and charged it with developing a background document to elaborate on the meaning and implications of the Students’ Right policy. The Executive Committee realized that this resolution would stir up controversy and that many language arts professionals, including those teaching composition, held a variety of myths and misconceptions about language and dialects. Our job was to amass the latest scholarship and research on language diversity and on language matters relevant to the teaching of composition. The document we produced would be distributed to the membership in preparation for a vote. At the annual meeting in Anaheim, California, in April 1974, the Students’ Right to Their Own Language was passed by a wide margin and subsequently became organizational policy. That fall, the resolution and supporting background document were published as a special issue of CCC.
CCC was not merely being trendy, nor politically correct, in passing the *Students’ Right* resolution. Rather, the organization was responding to a developing crisis in college composition classrooms, a crisis caused by the cultural and linguistic mismatch between higher education and the non-traditional (by virtue of color and class) students who were making their imprint upon the academic landscape for the first time in history. In its quest to level the playing field, U.S. society was making it possible for these students from the margins to enter colleges and universities. Most of these students, however bright, did not have command of the grammar and conventions of academic discourse/“standard English.” Yet they often had other communicative strengths—creative ideas, logical and persuasive reasoning powers, innovative ways of talking about the ordinary and mundane. How was this contradiction to be resolved? What professional advice could CCCC provide to frustrated composition instructors charged with teaching this new and different student clientele how to write? What could be done to help these students succeed in the composition classroom? And in the long view, how could the composition classroom, as part of the higher education of these students, prepare them for life beyond Academe? The Introduction to the *Students’ Right* indicates that CCCC was sharply and painfully cognizant of these issues:

Through their representatives on Boards of Education and Boards of Regents, businessmen, politicians, parents, and the students themselves insist that the values taught by the schools must reflect the prejudices held by the public. The English profession, then, faces a dilemma: until public attitudes can be changed—and it is worth remembering that the past teaching in English classes has been largely responsible for those attitudes—shall we place our emphasis on what the vocal elements of the public think it wants or on what the actual available linguistic evidence indicates we should emphasize? (1)

In the *Students’ Right* resolution and in the subsequent background document, we sought to accomplish three broad goals: (1) to heighten consciousness of language attitudes; (2) to promote the value of linguistic diversity; and (3) to convey facts and information about language and language variation that would enable instructors to teach their non-traditional students—and ultimately all students—more effectively. In pursuit of these goals, the Introduction of the background document posed questions that composition professionals might ask themselves:

We need to discover whether our attitudes toward “educated English” are based on some inherent superiority of the dialect itself or on the social
prestige of those who use it. We need to ask ourselves whether our rejection of students who do not adopt the dialect most familiar to us is based on any real merit in our dialect or whether we are actually rejecting the students themselves, rejecting them because of their racial, social, and cultural origins.... Our major emphasis has been on uniformity, in both speech and writing: would we accomplish more, both educationally and ethically, if we shifted that emphasis to precise, effective, and appropriate communication in diverse ways, whatever the dialect? (2)

To convey facts and information about the latest research on language and language diversity, the background document was structured in the form of 15 discussion sections, each beginning with a question implicit in the resolution. All of the fifteen questions were similar in content, if not form, to areas of concern about which members of the profession were agonizing as they sought to understand what it means, in practice, to advocate, in theory, that students have a right to their own language. The questions were:

(1) What do we mean by dialect?
(2) Why and how do dialects differ?
(3) How do we acquire our dialects?
(4) Why do some dialects have more prestige than others?
(5) How can concepts from modern linguistics help clarify the question of dialects?
(6) Does dialect affect the ability to read?
(7) Does dialect affect the ability to write?
(8) Does dialect limit the ability to think?
(9) What is the background for teaching one “grammar”?
(10) What do we do about handbooks?
(11) How can students be offered dialect options?
(12) What do we do about standardized tests?
(13) What are the implications of this resolution for students’ work in courses other than English?
(14) How does dialect affect employability?
(15) What sort of knowledge about language do English teachers need?

Finally, the background document concluded with an annotated bibliography of 129 entries keyed to the answers to the fifteen questions.
Behind The Scenes

Both supporters and detractors have assumed that the “Students Right” Committee was comprised of like-minded individuals. Although all of us were committed to addressing the language crisis facing the new wave of students in composition classrooms, and to helping resolve this crisis, there was a wide range of personal styles and great diversity in political ideologies among us. On one level, one might have considered us “progressives,” but we clearly had our own internal contradictions. And so in the production of the resolution and the supporting monograph, our long hours of scholarly work were accompanied virtually every step of the way by intense political and ideological struggle.

One of our early debates occurred over the use of his. “The Student’s Right to His Own Language” was the wording of the original resolution, and while a couple of the women in the group put forth strong objections to the masculinist tone, one of the men thought the whole argument was silly and a waste of time because the generic “he” had been used for centuries, and everybody knew it included women too. He then began to quote several historical examples, going way back to the Bible. One of the women interrupted this filibuster-like strategy and suggested that we should call it “students’ right to her own language” since “her” was just as generic as “he.” Then we tried “his or her,” but someone objected to this on grounds of verbosity. We even tried using “people,” but someone remarked that we were dealing with “students,” not “people.” Whereupon a lengthy debate ensued over whether or not the labels “people” and “students” could be used interchangeably. At the time, my womanist consciousness was just developing, and so I was not very vocal in this hours-long debate, for which I was soundly blessed out by one of the women when we took a bathroom break, who wanted to know what kind of linguist was I who was “afraid” to challenge male hegemony? The debate was finally resolved when Elisabeth McPherson, genius that my girl was, proposed that we cast the wording in the third-person plural. We had all been so locked into our linguistic prisons that we hadn’t even thought of this quite simple solution to the problem. While this issue seems old hat now as we head for the 21st century, lest we forget, concerns about sexism in language did not always exist—even among many women.

Nor were we of identical persuasion on the issue of America’s linguistic ills and the solutions to them. Hey, some members were even opposed to the use of four-letter words among us, not just the big, bad ones, but even the little ones like “damn” and “hell.” (I report with pride that I was the first to introduce “cussing” into Committee discourse, to the relief of one of my male comrades.) The debates that were going on in the society, in
the profession, and in CCCC about how to address America’s social and sociolinguistic problems went on among us, filtered through the prism of language. Why should linguistic minorities have to learn two languages and majority members of society get by on one? That’s linguistic domination. Why not accept a student paper with “nonstandard” surface features of language if the message was clear and the argument well-supported? That’s what the “right” to their own language means. No, giving two grades, one for content, one for grammar, is a cop-out, you are still saying there is something “wrong” with the writer. Let’s make the medium the message and write this monograph in a combination of Black English, Spanglish and standard English. And so it went. Then, as now, for some of us, the final document is seen as equivocating; it doesn’t go far enough. For others, then as now, it is perceived as too permissive.

It has been said that politics is the art of compromise. And compromise we did. After the lengthy debates and verbal duels, we finally produced a document that we all felt we could live with. Credit for blending the multiple writing styles into a readable document goes to the talented editorial hand of Richard Lloyd-Jones and the skillful diplomacy of the late Melvin Butler, linguist and Committee Chair, whose untimely death prevented him from witnessing the fruits of his labor.

Reactions to the Students’ Right

The fall-out was tremendous. Stringent, vociferous objections were put forth. There were calls for the resolution to be rescinded and the background document recalled. Some blasted CCCC for abdicating its responsibility and pandering to “wide-eyed” liberals in the field. Others accused CCCC of a “sinister plot” to doom speakers of “divergent” dialects to failure in higher education by telling them that their stigmatized language was acceptable. A few simply said that CCCC had done lost they cotton-pickin minds.

On the other hand, there were many who embraced the spirit of the resolution. They thanked CCCC for the supporting document, which many found extremely helpful, even as they acknowledged its flaws. Some complimented the organization for its “moral and professional courage.” Others stepped to the challenge of developing writing assignments to “tap the potential” of their marginalized students. A few simply asked CCCC why it took yall so long.

Ideas about student-centered approaches to composition instruction and about sensitivity to students’ language/dialects have by now become fairly commonplace in the discourse community of composition and in the language arts profession generally. Which is not to say that everyone subscribes to these ideas today, just that talk about them is no longer perceived as “weird.” However, in the context of the 1970s, to promulgate
ideas about students’ right to anything was a bold, new style of pedagogy. Such ideas elicited strong reactions among CCCC professionals (irrespective of whether they supported the resolution or not) and moved the intellectual production of knowledge in the field to a whole nother level.

Articles and commentaries on the Students’ Right, written in the years immediately following the resolution’s passage, contain some of the most creative teaching ideas and are some of the most innovatively-written essays published in CCC to date. In 1972 John R. Hendrickson wrote a response to the Executive Committee’s resolution in “tibetan-American inglish” and critiqued the resolution through the device of parody. He argues that the resolution doesn’t go “neer far enuff,” that it should include language that exempts students from playing “musik” as it is written by classical composers and from learning about evolution since some “piple dont bleev” in it (301). David W. Cole employed the story of the Gileadites versus the Ephraimites as a metaphor to argue against the resolution. In the Biblical parable, the Ephraimites couldn’t pronounce the word “shibboleth” in the correct Gileadite accent and could thus be prevented from crossing over the River Jordan. Similarly, Cole argued that non-mainstream dialect speakers will be prevented from crossing into the mainstream. Lawrence D. Freeman examined Constitutional Amendments and court cases that provide legal justification for students’ right to their own language. Citing such cases as Wisconsin v. Yoder and Griggs v. Duke Power, Freeman argued that language rights can be seen as protected by custom and that there is a legal basis for hiring instructors who are skilled in the dialect/language of the students they will instruct. Seeking to devise teaching assignments grounded in the legitimacy of the students’ language, Lou Kelly devised a method of “copyreading” which emphasizes clarity of meaning and expressiveness rather than grammatical correctness. Students can discover for themselves places where their writing should be edited for clarity and power, thus demonstrating, according to Kelly, that a composition instructor can facilitate students’ competency in standard English while simultaneously respecting their own idiolects. Louie Crew conducted an experiment with a class of Black English-speaking students in which they demonstrated creative capacity to “wrench” positive words and phrases from negative statements. He had students rephrase “white is ugly” and “black is beautiful” without using the words “white,” “black,” “ugly,” or “beautiful.” They came up with phrases like “ivory-faced honky” and “blue-eyed hookworms” (43–44). Allen N. Smith argued that “no one has a right to his own language” (155), that the resolution is a contradiction in terms, for language is a social act. And William G. Clark critiqued the background document for what he deemed hypocrisy in its recommendation that teachers inform students preparing for certain occupations about the necessity of Edited American English. Clark asserted that this advice
undermines “the resolution’s claim about all dialects being equally valuable, implicitly valorizes standard English, and is a cop-out on the part of CCCC” (217).

The organization held its ground. It did not revoke the resolution, nor did it recall the background document. (In fact, that 25-year-old document is still in print and can be ordered from NCTE.) Some folk, ever-resistant to change, continued to rail against the policy. However, the initial hysteria faded, and fewer articles and commentary about the resolution appeared in CCC after about 1977. Instead, many in the field, fully cognizant that marginalized students were in higher education to stay—and would, in a matter of years, become the majority of the student population—began to direct their energies to creative and pedagogically responsible ways of implementing a Students’ Right philosophy in their composition classes. As Donald Stewart would put it a few years later, the challenge is “how to respect the dialect the student brings to school yet not avoid the responsibility of teaching him or her alternative dialects and editing skills for coping with different language situations” (330).

The Students’ Right to Their Own Language was a policy formulated to address the contradictions developed in the midst of a major paradigm shift in higher education, itself the result of a major paradigm shift in the social order. Language arts professionals across the Nation and on all levels were encountering the new brand of students and experiencing classroom crises similar to those of composition instructors. The CCCC Students’ Right policy opened up a national dialogue about language diversity and professional responsibility. As Jix Lloyd-Jones, long-time CCCC leader and member of both the Students’ Right Committee and the Language Policy Committee, has said:

The statement had an intellectual base in sociolinguistics, but its energy came from support of social diversity. It forced a reconsideration of “correctness.” It implied a model of language as “transactional” rather than as artifact. Behind the anger of the political oratory was acceptance of a thesis about the nature of language. (490)

In due course, other language arts organizations adopted policies reflecting the research and scholarship on language diversity coming out of sociolinguistics. But lest we forget, CCCC was the pioneer.

**CCCC and CCC During the “Second Reconstruction”**

Although many compositionists and other language arts professionals greeted the Students’ Right policy with high enthusiasm, still a great degree of lingering confusion existed: “Well, then, if I don’t correct the grammat-
ical errors, what do I do?" as one well-meaning instructor queried. It seemed that the Students' Right background document was welcomed because it was informative in terms of theory; however, it did not go far enough in praxis. CCCC leadership acknowledged the need for something more in the form of explicit teaching materials, sample lesson plans, and a more practically-oriented pedagogy. In 1976, the Executive Committee thus appointed the “Selection and Editorial Committee for Activities Supporting Students’ Right to Their Own Language,” on which three of the original Students’ Right Committee members—Elisabeth McPherson, Jix Lloyd-Jones, and I—served. This new committee was charged with assembling, for publication, practical classroom assignments, activities, lectures, and teaching units that would show and tell how to apply the philosophy of the Students’ Right resolution to the day-to-day experience of teaching and learning. By 1980, our committee had more than enough material for what we felt would be a valuable sequel to the Students’ Right document. However, despite having spent nearly four years compiling and editing some excellent material, solicited from practitioners at all levels of language arts education, we were informed that CCCC had “reluctantly decided” not to publish the collection. What had happened since the passage of the original Students’ Right resolution by CCCC Executive Committee (in 1972) and CCCC membership (in 1974) is attributable in great measure to the changed national climate of the 1980s.

Owing to the socio-political, educational, and economic decline in Black and other historically disenfranchised communities during the 1980s, political theorists such as Ronald Walters have dubbed the years from 1980 to 1992 as the “Second Reconstruction.” The “first” Reconstruction had been launched in the late 1870s, with the Federal Government’s abandonment of ex-slaves to Southern governments, which promptly rolled back the freedmen’s political gains, and ushered in an era of lynchings and brutal assaults against Blacks which would not be redressed until the Black Freedom Struggle of the 1960s. After the promise and some fulfillment of the social movements of the 1960s and 70s, the U.S. moved to a more conservative climate on the social, political, and educational fronts—a move solidified in 1980 by the election of Ronald Reagan. By that time, the mood of CCCC, like the mood of America, seemed to have shifted from change and promise to stagnation and dreams deferred.

It was within the climate of the Second Reconstruction that Thomas J. Farrell’s 1983 bombshell, “IQ and Standard English,” appeared in CCC. Farrell re-raised the old linguistic-cognitive deficiency theory about speakers of what was then still being called “Black English.” (Although the term “Ebonics” was coined in 1973, it didn’t catch on until the Oakland School Board’s 1996 resolution.) Even though Farrell asserted that “mean IQ difference” between “black ghetto children” and speakers of “standard
English” has “nothing to do with genetics or race, per se” (481), still he contended that:

The non-standard forms of the verb “to be” in Black English may affect the thinking of the users. Black ghetto children do not use the standard forms of the verb “to be”… Many of those same black ghetto children have difficulty learning to read, and they do not score highly on measures of abstract thinking. I am hypothesizing that learning the full standard deployment of the verb “to be” is integral to developing Level II thinking because the deployment of that verb played a part in the development of abstract thinking in ancient Greece. (477, 479)

As shocking as it was to see Farrell’s article in CCC, it has played a crucial role in the language rights debate for two reasons. First, it is a reminder that old arguments, which are assumed to be dead and long since buried, can resurface in new and potentially more dangerous forms which distort current research for “supporting” evidence. Second, despite my Lloydian reaction to this article’s appearance in CCC, and notwithstanding my disillusionment about CCCC’s rejection of the 1980 Students’ Right follow-up publication, it is significant to note that by 1983 there had emerged a critical mass of compositionists who could and did provide solid, valuable rebuttals to Farrell, relying on research from sociolinguistics. And further, it is significant that CCC allowed the publication of four very lengthy “Counterstatement” essays in its December 1984 issue. One was from Karen Greenberg, who argued in her brilliant response that “be” verb constructions are simply applied according to different but identifiable rules of Black English, and that Farrell’s terminology, such as “paratactic” and “hypotactic,” was “pseudo-scientific,” adding only the “gloss of respectability” (458). The other three valuable critiques in this CCC issue were offered by Patrick Hartwell, Margaret Himley, and R. E. Stratton.

“National Language Policy”

In the 1998 celebration of African American History Month there was a television commercial for Mickey D’s [gloss: Ebonics for McDonald’s] which features a white father and his young son browsing through a gallery with paintings of African American heroes and she-roses. The father points to the work of Jacob Lawrence, and tells his kid “That’s Jacob Lawrence, a famous painter.” Next, they come upon a painting of Harriet Tubman, and the father says, “That’s Harriet Tubman, a leader in the Underground Railroad.” The kid exclaims, “Wow, that’s cool” as a voice-over comes on saying, “It’s not just Black History, it’s American history” (emphasis Mickey D’s).
The recognition that the story of Africans in America is the story of all Americans, that indeed, the history of other marginalized groups is also American history, marks the beginning of this nation’s journey toward a mature social consciousness. Although the U.S. is comprised of diverse racial and ethnic groups, the common goal is to make this democratic experiment a success. In this quest the experience of one group is inextricably bound up with the experience of other groups. As Martin Luther King often said during his lifetime, we are one nation, and we must all learn how to live together, or we shall all die together.

Much like the theme of the Mickey D’s commercial, and the legacy of King, CCCC’s National Language Policy is a linguistic imperative for all groups—not just Blacks, Browns, the poor, and others on the margins. While addressed to and for all citizens, the National Language Policy is not a repudiation of the Students’ Right resolution. That policy was the right move for that historical period, and it filled a deep pedagogical void. The National Language Policy symbolizes the evolution of CCCC sociolinguistic consciousness and was the next logical stage after the Students’ Right campaign.

In the Fall of 1986, California passed its English Language Amendment to the State Constitution, making it the first state in contemporary times to establish, by law, a policy of “English Only.” The late S. I. Hayakawa, then Senator from California, had introduced the first Constitutional Amendment on this issue in 1981, but it had stagnated in Congressional committees. The proponents of English Only had thus decided to take their campaign to various states with the goal of securing the requisite number of state language amendments to give English Only the status of an amendment to the U.S. Constitution. California, with its large number of Spanish speakers, and Asian and Mexican immigrants, had been selected as the test case.

A number of organizations and caucuses opposed California’s measure and the growing formation of an English Only Movement. Within CCCC, the opposition came during the 1987 convention from the Progressive Composition Caucus (PCC). The Caucus described itself as a group of “composition instructors who view writing as a potentially liberating activity and teach from a socialist-feminist perspective. Our curriculum often emphasizes non-canonical literature and exposes sexist, racist, homophobic and corporate manipulation of language” (PCC Newsletter). Although PCC wanted CCCC to take a stand against English Only, there was also sharp tension at the time between PCC and the CCCC Executive Committee and leadership over the issue of conducting the Convention in a hotel involved in a labor action. Uncertain if they could trust CCCC to do the right thing, PCC decided that their sense-of-the-house motion should not only call for concerted
opposition against English Only but should also include the name of someone they trusted to carry out the mandated opposition. The day before the Annual Meeting, PCC asked me if I would accept the charge and if I would allow my name to be included in their resolution. As I listened to their arguments, all I could think about was the dissin and doggin I had endured during the “Students’ Right” years, and I kept saying “no way.”

At the Annual Meeting in 1987, the PCC submitted the following sense-of-the-house motion:

Preamble: As the leading professional organization dealing with language and literacy, the CCCC should be in the forefront of the effort to decide issues of language policy. Resolved: That the CCCC support the NCTE resolution opposing English-only legislation by appointing a well funded task force, chaired by Geneva Smitherman, to articulate the issues and formulate and implement strategies to educate the public, educational policy-makers, and legislatures; further, that this issue receive major emphasis in the 1988 Conference theme, “Language, Self, and Society.” (CCCC Minutes, 21 March 1987, pg. 5)

The motion passed. The task force that was appointed was called the “Language Policy Committee” (LPC). Its charge was to develop a proactive response to the English Only Movement for consideration by CCCC Executive Committee, to compile information on English Only, and to network with other professional organizations and groups mounting English Only opposition campaigns.

CCCC kept its part of the bargain. The organization provided funding, full support and resources for the LPC to carry out its charge. Our Committee met over the summer of 1987 and developed the National Language Policy and a strategic implementation plan. We presented our work to the CCCC Executive Committee meeting and to the annual meeting in March 1988, and the following resolution passed unanimously:

Background

The National Language Policy is a response to efforts to make English the “official” language of the United States. This policy recognizes the historical reality that, even though English has become the language of wider communication, we are a multilingual society. All people in a democratic society have the right to education, to employment, to social services, and to equal protection under the law. No one should be denied these or any civil rights because of linguistic differences. This policy would enable everyone to participate in the life of this multicultural nation by ensuring continued respect both for English, our common language, and for the many other languages that contribute to our rich cultural heritage.
CCCC NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY

Be it resolved that CCCC members promote the National Language Policy adopted at the Executive Committee meeting on March 16, 1988. This policy has three inseparable parts:

1. To provide resources to enable native and nonnative speakers to achieve oral and literate competence in English, the language of wider communication.

2. To support programs that assert the legitimacy of native languages and dialects and ensure that proficiency in one’s mother tongue will not be lost.

3. To foster the teaching of languages other than English so that native speakers of English can rediscover the language of their heritage or learn a second language. (CCCC National Language Policy Brochure)

The National Language Policy stresses the need not just for marginalized Americans but all Americans to be bi- or multi-lingual in order to be prepared for citizenship in a global, multicultural society. More than a policy for students of one particular color or class, the National Language Policy recognizes that the ability to speak many tongues is a necessity for everybody.

This time the motion of history was on our side. Negative reaction to the National Language Policy has been minimal. Further, this organizational policy has not had to undergo the agonizing argumentation, contestation, debate—and denial—that the Students’ Right resolution endured. By no stretch am I saying that compositionists have all been doing the right thing over the decade since the passage of the National Language Policy. What we are witnessing, though, is a developing sociolinguistic sophistication and political maturity about language rights issues. As the field of Composition-Rhetoric has evolved, so too has the language consciousness of CCCC professionals. Further, theorists now recognize the need to address realities relative to students’ native language/dialect in the comp-rhetoric context, a posture that has, unfortunately, not always been the case.

Contributions to CCC in the period since 1988 clearly reflect a long-overdue recognition of the linguistic-cultural complexity of the composition classroom and of the writing instructor’s task in that classroom. Terry Dean wrote of the pedagogical difficulties facing a “monocultural teacher” in a multicultural/multilingual composition classroom and proposes strategies for creative instruction in such a classroom. Howard Tinberg provided the example of a student who studied the speech of people on the island of Campobello, a community whose “customs and language seemed distinct,” but whose “values and traditions were close enough to her own hometown’s ways that she could feel a bond” (81). Drawing on her own multivocal competence across several linguistic and cultural traditions,
CCC leader Jacqueline Jones Royster challenged us to “construct paradigms that permit us to engage in better practices in cross-boundary discourse, whether we are teaching, researching, writing, or talking with Others, whoever those Others happen to be (37–38).” Analyzing the language and literacy practices of white students, Margaret Marshall makes a compelling argument for a broadened notion of “diversity,” and contends that “we need a way of thinking about difference in student writing as more than a simple match between a set of predetermined divisions and uses of language (232).” A similar line of thought and conceptualization about the language and rhetorical complexity of students of Color—across linguistic traditions—appears in work published in CCC by scholars such as Lu, Soliday, Anokye, Canagarajah, and Bizzell. In sum, then, the spirit of CCC National Language Policy—a broad-based challenge to address linguistic diversity throughout the body politic, not just among those who have historically been on the margins—is increasingly being reflected in the pages of CCC as the organization ends one half century and begins another.

Conclusion

If it is true, as CCC leader Anne Ruggles Gere has asserted, that changing language attitudes is tantamount to changing a world view, then there may not be a lot that a policy from a professional organization can do about the myths and misconceptions about language that continue to plague the struggle for language rights. One cannot erase long-held attitudes and deeply-entrenched biases and stereotypes with the stroke of a pen—you know, go henceforth and sin linguistically no more. On the other hand, those who (whether consciously or unconsciously) display the negative effects of *linguicism* are products of the school (and the college, though in fewer numbers) because everybody goes through school. The classroom, then, is a major player in shaping language attitudes, and the classroom that is particularly crucial for the formation of ideas about language is that of the K–12 level. And here is where CCC, as a post-secondary organization, has very limited influence.

Although CCC is politically autonomous, structurally, it is an institutional arm, operates under the broad umbrella, and shares the national headquarters of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). In 1971, after the formation of what was to become the Students’ Right committee, CCC leadership and members began working within NCTE to promote the concept of the students’ right to their own language. For three subsequent years, there was a concerted effort by CCC to persuade NCTE to endorse CCC language policy. However, this did not come to pass. Instead, at the 1974 NCTE Convention, NCTE membership passed a
weak version of a language rights resolution. It was simply called NCTE Resolution #74.2, which carefully bypassed the label *Students’ Right*. While Resolution 74.2 “accept[s] the linguistic premise that all these dialects are equally efficient as systems of communication,” it goes on to “affirm” that students need to learn the “conventions of what has been called written edited American English.” This was a posture that CCCC deliberately and consciously sought to avoid in its policy resolution because usage, spelling, punctuation, and other “conventions” of “written edited American English” were typically the only aspects of the writing process that teachers focused on. Thus, the *Students’ Right* background document had asserted that

Dialect…plays little if any part in determining whether a child will ultimately acquire the ability to write EAE…. Since the issue is not the capacity of the dialect itself, the teacher can concentrate on building up the students’ confidence in their ability to write…. If we can convince our students that spelling, punctuation, and usage are less important than content, we have removed a major obstacle in their developing the ability to write. (8)

Many people in the language arts field (and, I would wager, most of those outside the field) erroneously credit NCTE with the “Students’ Right” resolution. I have repeatedly heard this from numerous people over the years since CCCC passed its resolution. This misattribution continues today. In a review published in the very pages of this journal in May 1997, Gary A. Olson states: “While the essays in this collection touch on a number of issues, the two pervasive concerns are bidialectalism, especially in relation to NCTE’s [sic] “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” (298). Recently in the *Journal of English Linguistics* special issue on Ebonics, linguist Walt Wolfram bemoans the persistence of negative language attitudes despite the efforts of professional organizations:

Furthermore, the adoption of strong position statements on dialect diversity by professional organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English (namely, the statement on Students’ Right to Their Own Language)… barely made a dent on entrenched attitudes and practices with respect to language differences. (109)

But in order for a “dent” to be made in these attitudes and practices, the *Students’ Right* would need to be embraced by K–12 teachers. Adoption by NCTE would have gone a long way towards building the K–12 support necessary to make such a “dent.” The struggle waged by CCCC leaders and members to get NCTE support for the resolution was acrimonious and fierce—in-yo-face. (To date, some of them folk still don’t speak to each
other!) And so it is a bitter irony that NCTE is credited with passage of this progressive language policy. Let the record be clear: Despite the Faulknerian agony and sweat of the human spirit of many language warriors, NCTE never passed the *Students’ Right to Their Own Language* resolution. In retrospect, this should not come as a surprise, because NCTE’s sociolinguistic history is a mixed one. Back in 1917, it led a national promotion of “Better Speech Week,” in which students recited the following pledge with regularity:

I love the United States of America. I love my country’s flag. I love my country’s language. I promise:

1. That I will not dishonor my country’s speech by leaving off the last syllable of words.

2. That I will say a good American “yes” and “no” in place of an Indian grunt “um-hum” and “nup-um” or a foreign “ya” or “yeh” and “nope.”

3. That I will do my best to improve American speech by avoiding loud rough tones, by enunciating distinctly, and by speaking pleasantly, clearly, and sincerely.

4. That I will learn to articulate correctly as many words as possible during the year. (qtd. in Gawthrop 9–10)

Fortunately, the NCTE done come a long way, baby!

The other major reason that CCCC language policy pronouncements have not had broad-based impact has to do with the need to publicize these policies. One must do something, somehow actively engage in the process of language attitude change, organize language discussion panels and program events outside ivory—and ebony—towers, go out into the vineyards and speak the truth to the people, wherever one finds them—in the churches, the streets, the bars and pubs, at block club and other kinds of community meetings, on television talk shows, in one’s personal social life, and on and on. This is the challenge of the membership of CCCC as we move into a multilingual/multicultural era of national and global life.

None of this should be construed as stating that CCCC’s role in the language rights struggle has been insignificant. On the contrary, CCCC has had a significant impact as a language pioneer, initiating a national conversation on issues of dialect and language diversity. Whether you agreed with the *Students’ Right* position or not, as an educator you were forced to address the issue. You could no longer ignore language and dialect diversity, whatever position you took, you had to reckonize (to put a slightly different twist on the Hip Hop term).
It is crucial to have organizational positions as weapons which language rights warriors can wield against the opponents of linguistic democratization. The Students’ Right and the National Language Policy provide the necessary intellectual basis and rhetorical framework for waging language debates and arguments. Further, since intellectuals provide the ideological rationale for public policy, it was and is important for organization like CCCC to go on record as supporting language rights. Organizational pronouncements about language can and do have influence and impact. A case in point: There was a time, up until around the mid-1970s, that speech tests were required to qualify for entry into university teacher education programs. People like me flunked these linguistically, culturally, and gender-biased tests and got forced into speech therapy. These tests have now been eradicated. This is a direct result of the intellectual and the activist wings of the social movements of the 1960s and ’70s, manifested in the Academy in research that came out of sociolinguistics and in professional organizational positions like the Students’ Right to Their Own Language.

The documented spirit of resistance in the Students’ Right and CCCC National Language Policy is an important symbol that change is possible—even within the system. Of course the battle is not over; there is still work to be done in the vineyard. In the December 1997 issue of CCC, Arnetha Ball and Ted Lardner revisit the 1977–79 “Ann Arbor Black English case.” In this Federal court case, I served as the chief advocate for a group of single Black women (most of them on welfare at the time) and their children (most of them boys), who sued the Ann Arbor, Michigan, School Board for its failure to educate their children, primarily its failure to teach them literacy skills. At the Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School the children attended, they had been classified as “learning disabled,” primarily on the basis of their language (Ebonics). They were essentially educational cast-offs who were on their way to joining the already enormous pool of functional illiterates in too many African American communities in the U.S. The Judge ruled in the mothers’ favor, acknowledging the legitimacy and systematicity of the children’s home language—“Black English”—and mandating the School Board to devise a remedy to equip its teachers with literacy practices for these Ebonics-speaking children.

Ball and Lardner analyze the constructs underlying “teacher knowledge,” using the teachers in King as a case study. They contend that teacher “lore” often substitutes for objective knowledge: “[teachers are] willfully ignorant of disciplinary knowledge” and “think they should be free...to ignore [for example] modern linguistic scholarship” (476). Further, they argue that teachers need a way of critiquing their own affective habits so as to develop “confidence in their ability to adapt” knowledge about linguistics in general, and in the case of King, about Ebonics in
particular, to the literacy needs of students who speak Ebonics (AKA “Black English,” “African American Vernacular English”). This recent Braddock Award winning essay recalls Donald J. Lloyd’s battle for linguistic enlightenment 48 years ago, and says to CCC and language warriors that the struggle for language rights continues.

In the same issue of CCC, there is another brilliant essay, this one by Charles F. Coleman. Using concrete examples taken from essays by what he terms ESD (English as a Second Dialect) students, Coleman demonstrates the ineffectiveness of traditional grammar approaches which result in what he calls “iatrogenic” effects (a borrowing from medicine, meaning that the so-called corrective creates new problems). His work, which is also applicable to ESL student writers, draws upon linguistic knowledge to pinpoint specific speech practices and to suggest ways of teaching that are informed by knowledge of those practices. Like Ball and Lardner’s essay, Coleman’s article also recalls Lloyd and the (now-old) “New Linguistics.” However, Coleman’s work says to us that although the struggle for language rights yet continues, CCC can win.

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Notes

1. Donald J. Lloyd, who taught for years at Detroit’s Wayne State University, was a major figure in the early years of Composition Studies and Linguistics. His PhD in literature from Yale University hardly equipped him to teach literacy and language, and he notes that he learned, through trial and error over the years with his students, how to teach writing. He is co-author of American English in Its Cultural Setting (1962) and is credited with coining the phrase, the “national mania for correctness.” On a personal note, while doing the research for this article, I remembered that Lloyd had taught me introductory linguistics at Wayne State. At the time, his ideas about language were profoundly shocking to most of his students—including me, who at the time was an untutored, fresh-from-the-ghetto very young teen-ager. Being the first of my family to go beyond the seventh grade—much less college—and on whom the family hopes for educational success were riding, I recall being highly attracted to—but at the same time fearful of—Lloyd’s “heretical” challenge to prevailing language norms.

2. The other “Students’ Right” Committee members were: Adam Casmier, Ninfa Flores, Jenefer Giannasi, Myrna Harrison, Richard Lloyd-Jones (who synthesized and edited our individually written sections), Richard A. Long, Elizabeth Martin, the late Elisabeth McPherson, and Ross Winterowd. Robert F. Hogan and Nancy S. Prichard served as NCTE ex officio members.

3. The other LPC members were: Elizabeth McTiernan Auleta; Ana Celia Zentella; Thomas Kochman, Jeffery Youdelman; Guadalupe Valdes; Elisabeth McPherson. Of the original group, Ana Celia Zentella, Elizabeth McTiernan, and I are still on the (now reconstituted) Language Policy Committee. Other current Committee members are: Richard Lloyd-Jones, Victoria Cleet, Gail Okawa, Victor Villanueva, Rashidah Muhammad, Elaine Richardson, Kim Lovejoy, and Jan Swearingen.
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