

CHARLENE J. SATO'S
"A NONSTANDARD APPROACH TO STANDARD ENGLISH":
A MAJOR CONTRIBUTION TO THE FIELD OF
SOCIOLINGUISTICS

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Sato, C. (1989). A nonstandard approach to standard English. *TESOL Quarterly* 23(2), 259-82.

Introduction

In her article, "A nonstandard approach to standard English" (1989), Charlene Sato addresses several issues related to the controversy over the use of Hawai'i Creole English (HCE) and Standard English (SE) in the classroom. Opposing an assimilationist perspective and taking a pluralistic position toward language use in society, Sato stresses the importance of understanding the differences between SE and minority, or nonstandard, varieties in legitimizing the educational experience of language minority groups.

Sato defends her "nonstandard" approach by showing how a pluralistic perspective can contribute to the school success of minority language students. She bases this view on empirical studies that show minority varieties of English are different from SE both linguistically and in discourse structure, and thus adjustments in the classroom must be made to accommodate these differences if children are to be given the opportunity to succeed. Sato also offers suggestions on what teachers can do to contribute toward equal education for minority language speakers. We will summarize Sato's points and discuss the significance of her article.

Summary

Sato first acknowledges that drawing a clear line between dialect and creole is difficult since creole is sometimes treated as a dialect, especially in the larger context of American English, and sometimes called a language with its distinct syntactical features and vocabulary. Therefore, she uses the cover term *variety* to refer to creoles that function as nonstandard dialects such as HCE and Black English Vernacular (BEV).

Sato also emphasizes that creole varieties are traditionally viewed as less prestigious, while standards are closely associated with power in society and seen as modes for written

communication, especially used by educated speakers. Despite the prestige attributed to standards, Sato claims minority varieties persist in resistance to political and economical exploitation, and educators are faced with this home-school linguistic and cultural mismatch. She maintains that educators must face this challenge by promoting additive bidialectalism. She also argues that this mismatch can be lessened with an understanding of differences in linguistic and discourse patterns.

In contrast to beliefs that nonstandard varieties, such as BEV and HCE, are as mutually comprehensible as SE for speakers of the minority varieties, Sato contends that this is not true. In fact, she says the communication difficulties caused by the differences are underestimated. To show this, Sato cites studies (e.g., Choy and Dodds, 1976, and Speidal, Tharp, and Kobayashi, 1985) that found HCE speakers comprehend stories better in HCE than SE. According to Sato, miscomprehension may be a result of different form-function relationships (e.g., *get* in HCE serves as an existential marker), differences in grammar (e.g., copula omission allowed in BEV), or differences in lexical items (e.g., *neva* in HCE can mean *didn't*), among other possibilities related to linguistic structure. In addition, Sato explains how comprehension difficulties may be caused by differences in discourse organization. As an example, she cites research (Michaels, 1981, 1986) that showed that the topic-associating style of BEV is different from the topic-centered style of SE, making it difficult for Caucasian teachers unaware of this difference to make accommodations. As Sato shows, there may also be differences in the functions of questions, in the orientation between students and teachers, and in interaction patterns.

Essentially, what Sato is saying is that classroom adjustments to deal with these differences can enhance learning and the chances for success for speakers of nonstandard varieties. She suggests five steps that can be taken toward achieving equal education:

1. Teachers need to analyze the bureaucracy of the school system to see what changes are needed to improve the academic experience for nonstandard English (NSE) speakers.
2. Teachers need to recognize and get rid of negative attitudes toward NSE.
3. Teacher education programs need to incorporate analysis of teacher-student interactions.
4. Pre-service training and in-service training need to provide teachers with information on sociolinguistic diversity.
5. Classroom discourse management needs to facilitate students' participation in academic tasks and use student's language varieties; and it can be improved by classroom research of attitudes toward NSE and SE (e.g., by using a matched-guise type technique).

Sato's conclusion stated that an "English only" policy inhibits sociolinguistic diversity. The goal of teaching should be focused on facilitating understanding rather than setting

obstacles. Taking a drastic measure in eliminating minority varieties must by all means be prevented. We must therefore consider SE as an addition to other English varieties and not as a replacement.

Significance of the Article

Charlene Sato's article, "A nonstandard approach to standard English," is a significant contribution to the field of sociolinguistics for several reasons. Most importantly, the article increases awareness of the benefits of a taking a pluralist position in the standard English versus nonstandard English controversy often debated by politicians, administrators, educators, and other authoritarians who claim to know what is "good" for society. In addition, Sato's article shows that nonstandard varieties *are* different from SE, and thus, teachers should be careful in assuming what is best for students without being aware of these differences.

First, Sato explains that a pluralistic stance toward language variation, as opposed to an assimilationist one, promotes additive bidialectalism, instead of subtractivism. Therefore, speakers can acquire SE while maintaining and taking pride in their native language variety. Obviously, this has positive effects on self-esteem and self-identity, which in turn increases chances for success. Sato also says that maintenance of one's first language variety is a form of resistance toward political and economical exploitation. Second, Sato's article makes it clear that minority varieties differ from SE, both in syntactical features and in discourse patterns. This implies that classroom changes should be made to accommodate differences. For example, teachers may make changes in their own teaching style to fit the students' styles, and even teach students several different repertoires of communication, such as how to communicate in SE. The ideal result would be that students feel their home language is validated and they also have more choices in ways of speaking, thus more chances for success.

For the reasons stated, Sato's article has important implications for teachers, administrators, and politicians. These officials play a major role in creating power relationships in society. Teachers can act as gatekeepers and set lower or higher expectations of success for NSE speakers. Making a strong case in favor of language diversity, Sato's article is an important step toward the acceptance of pluralism.

References

- Sato, C. (1989). A nonstandard approach to standard English. *TESOL Quarterly* 23(2), 259-82.

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