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Language Is Power: The Story of Standard English and Its Enemies by John Honey

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John Honey. *Language is power: the story of standard English and its enemies.* London & Boston: Faber & Faber, 1997. Pp. x + 298.

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If we take John Honey at his word, he means well. He proclaims throughout this book that he is primarily interested in opening windows of opportunity to all by insisting on a clear standard for the English language. Through a language academy those standards will be open and public and all who meet them can be sure of being understood and respected for their language use. His position is weakened, however, by his inability to define 'standard English' in a consistent manner, by his unwillingness to recognize that his standard has a very definite class origin, by his belief in the inherent qualities of the English language and by his misrepresentation of work both for and against his position.

The book is divided into ten chapters. The introduction takes an initial stab at defining a standard language. The second, 'The language myth', attacks the 'linguistic equality' theory – Honey would call it a myth – which states that all languages are equal. The third, 'The dialect trap', is devoted to showing why knowledge of the standard language is necessary. The fourth, 'Some enemies of standard English', is divided between an analysis of Pinker's *The language instinct* in the light of the 'linguistic equality theory', and dismissal of a number of scholars' contentions that standard English is class-based. The fifth, 'Rewriting history', continues this line of attack, aiming specifically at the work of Tony Crowley and Raymond Williams. Honey objects primarily to the 19th-century date of origin of standard English (which he mistakenly imputes to these authors), and pushes the date back to the 15th century. Chapter 6, 'Authority in language: anagogy and Prescription', is primarily an attack on the work of the Milroys, followed by praise for the social effects of following established norms, and a call for the creation of a linguistic governing body for the English language. Chapter 7, 'Safeguarding English', provides a list of the types of errors that Honey would like to see eliminated through such a mechanism. Chapter 8, 'Language in school: the lost generation', traces the purported effects of linguistic liberalism in the classroom, and the evolution of the National Curriculum in English. Chapter 9, 'The language trap debate', claims that linguistic dogmatism shaped the critical reception of Honey's previous book on this topic. Chapter 10, 'A national and international language', proclaims the many benefits of English, and specifically British English, as an international language, and attacks recent books which criticize the role of the English language in cultural imperialism.

One fundamental problem for Honey is that he cannot define 'standard language'. His first attempt is to state that it is the written form of English

‘used in books and newspapers all over the world’. Thus it would be a learned form of the language, used for context-free communication, among people of a certain level of education. The standard written language ‘is a special form representing a superimposition upon natural language, one which develops its own structures, vocabulary, styles, qualities and functions, all of which need to be specially learnt’ (48–49). However, shortly afterwards Honey argues that the standard language does not require special training:

But you did not even need formal schooling to have access to standard English. Indeed you did not even have to possess any degree of literacy: a great deal of traditional lore, in the form of ballad and narrative in standard English, was handed down orally to the children and grandchildren of the labouring poor, so that it was possible for an almost illiterate nineteenth-century father, a merchant seaman, to tell ‘wonderful stories in choice English, never using a word of dialect.’ (85)

This view contradicts Honey’s earlier statements about the written and formally learned nature of the standard language. Still later he concludes that pronunciation, previously omitted by his definition of the standard as a written language, is important. He devotes a number of pages to Received Pronunciation, and, commenting on the ‘transcendental’ benefits of the standard language, he notes that in 1750 the miners of Kingswood in Gloucestershire were ‘notorious for their barbarous and savage behaviour’ and ‘their language was described as “the roughest and rudest in the nation”’. However, after schools and churches were established by Methodist pioneers, they were ‘much more civilised and improved in principles, morals, AND PRONUNCIATION’ [Honey’s emphasis] (136).

Reliance on this type of evidence might seem strange – Honey also cites the Earl of Gowrie, Thatcherite ministers and Prince Charles – but it reflects his belief that non-linguists have a better grasp of these issues than do professional linguists. This is not a coincidence, Honey would claim, for linguists have all been brainwashed to accept the ‘linguistic equality theory’, ‘the notion that that [sic] all languages, and all dialects of any language, are equally good’ (5). From a variety of sources Honey pieces together five propositions which he claims ‘represent the consensus of opinion ... about the nature of “linguistic equality”’ (8). These are:

- (a) there is no valid basis for the COMPARISON of languages or dialects;
- (b) no language or dialect is more DEVELOPED than another, nor more EFFICIENT or EXPRESSIVE;
- (c) no intellectual HANDICAPS can attach to speakers in virtue of speaking one language or dialect rather than another;
- (d) all languages and dialects are perfectly adapted to the PRESENT needs of all their speakers, and have the power to adapt virtually instantaneously in order to meet NEW needs.

- (e) Those who argue otherwise are reprehensible/harmful/ridiculous, even if their arguments are supported by EVIDENCE. (8–9) [emphasis Honey's throughout]

Considering these one at a time, this reviewer concludes that each is correct. The criteria for comparison suggested by Honey include the size of vocabulary, the capacity for abstraction, the use of passive voice, a wide range of verb tenses, and subordinating conjunctions. However, vocabulary is infinitely and easily expandable, as has been demonstrated repeatedly by many languages (including English as it replaced Latin and French as the language of learning and the law in the 15th through the 17th centuries). The capacity for abstraction is certainly not limited to English, or to any variant of English. Moreover, Honey seems to reject abstraction when he rails against a more abstract use of the verb 'decimate' (153–155).

The rejection of 'developed' vs. 'undeveloped' in the classification of languages counteracts the organic vision of linguistic development, popular in the first half of the 19th century, in which languages that used more monosyllables were somehow viewed as more primitive, and at an earlier stage of development, than languages with inflected forms. The lie to this system was (a) that Chinese had a cultural history at least as rich in literary production (the main criteria used by the linguists of this school) as the European inflected languages and (b) the most advanced languages in this rating system would be the agglutinating languages like Turkish, Hungarian and many native American languages. The unwillingness of Eurocentric linguists to accept a second-class rating with respect to those languages led to the abandonment of that theory.

'Efficiency' and 'expressivity' require an explanation of 'efficient for what', 'expressive of what'. For Honey, the measuring stick is always the ability to express Western European/North American culture. Other languages have to use circumlocutions to express these notions, and thus are deemed less 'efficient' (although Einstein has been translated into Wolof, precisely to counteract this type of generalization). However, if non-Western languages express ideas that Western European languages can express only with circumlocution, then they are guilty of 'specificational overload' (10–13).

In the realm of 'intellectual handicaps', one must ask what type of intellectual handicap Honey has in mind. If he means real intellectual ability, then he is clearly wrong; if he means ability to express the ideas important to the speakers of a particular linguistic tradition, then it is obvious (but has no place in science).

Concerning the adaptation of languages to present and future needs, I would quibble with the use of the term 'perfectly': no language is capable of expressing all that its speakers desire to express; this is one reason language is always changing. 'Instantaneously' is also an odd word to use with respect

to languages. Let's just say in a generation or two. There is no better example than the language he most wants to defend. English and French were widely judged incapable of being languages of educated discourse in the 15th century, but had become capable of this, through 'instantaneous' change, by the end of the 16th century.

The characterization of positions contrary to the linguistic equality theory as reprehensible/harmful/ridiculous might seem 'unscientific', but the fact is that the defence of standard English as inherently superior goes hand-in-hand with race, class, and ethnic prejudice. Consider the history of the organization 'U.S. English', which promotes the 'defence of the English language' in the United States. John Tanton, its first president, was forced to resign in 1986 when an internal memo of his attacked Hispanic Americans, wondering if Catholic immigrants with large families would take control in the numbers game of a democratic society:

Can *homo contraceptivus* compete with *homo progenitiva* [sic] if borders aren't controlled? ... Perhaps this is the first instance in which those with their pants up are going to get caught by those with their pants down ... As Whites see their power and control over their lives declining, will they simply go quietly into the night? Or will there be an explosion? (Cited in Crawford 1992: 172–173.)

If Honey's ideas are labelled 'reprehensible', it is because the theories lend themselves so easily to reprehensible political movements. The current president of US English, Mauro Mujica, is reported to have advised the Slovakian government as it prepared the harshest language laws in Europe, laws which have earned the universal condemnation of human rights groups (Kontra, 1998). Larry Pratt, the founder of English First, another 'defence of the English language' group in the US, was forced to resign from presidential candidate Pat Buchanan's campaign staff after it was revealed that he had been speaking to Neo-Nazi groups (Crawford, 1998). The equation of supposedly 'inherent' qualities of standard English with social behavior, as demonstrated by Honey in the case of the Kingswood miners, is used by demagogues to justify class/ethnic/racial discrimination. This is why the opponents of the 'linguistic equality theory' are not only wrong, but reprehensible. This is not necessarily a condemnation of Honey, for if he understood the linguistic equality theory, he might well drop his opposition.

Finally, Prof. Honey's greatest weakness is his distortion or out and out misrepresentation of the points of view of those he criticizes. For example, Honey claims that groups in the US were 'promoting the school use of the form of Black English labelled "Ebonics" ... in place of standard English' (26). In fact, as in the 1996 Ebonics controversy in Oakland, California, the emphasis was always on helping teachers understand the nature of African-American Vernacular English, so that they could help students make the transition from that variety of English to 'standard' English. Most of the

linguists he castigates as ‘enemies of standard English’ are nothing of the sort. They do not confuse, as Honey does, the potential of a language to express anything with the current expressive needs of its speakers. For the purposes of the scientific study of language, all languages, all dialects, all idiolects, are of equal interest.

The most blatant example of Honey’s proclivity for misrepresentation is the example drawn from Hollingworth 1977, in which he discusses a controversy in 1890 relating to the use of dialect in teaching in the schools of Rochdale. Honey’s version is as follows:

In Rochdale, an interesting preservationist inspector of the schools (HMI Mr Wylie) caused controversy in the local press in 1890 by his attempts to foster the use of local dialect in school. The response of some parents is illuminating: ‘Keep the old Lancashire dialect out of the schools, Mr Wylie, for I want my children to talk smart when they’re grown up.’ (100)

The source, however reads quite differently. The letter referred to is not from a parent but rather from John Trafford Clegg, who used these letters to launch his career as a dialect writer. His two letters on the subject were written in dialect:

Keep th’owd Lanky eawt o’th’schoo’s, Mesther Wylie, for aw want my childher to talk smart when they grown up. (Letter to the *Rochdale Observer*, March 15, 1890; cited in Hollingworth 1977; the full text of his letters is available in Clegg (1898: xviii–xxiv).)

Clegg’s real objection was that the life of the dialect would be lost if reduced to the stultifying form of grammatical analysis employed in the instruction of literary works from the canon. In a second letter he notes

... if yo’r begun’ to thrim it deawn to rules an’ teych it ‘systematically’ yo’ll just get a tuthrie roughseaundin’ words an’ sayins’, an’ yo’ll find ‘at o’ the flavour an’ beauty an’ power’s flown away (Letter to the *Rochdale Observer*, March 29, 1890; cited in Hollingworth *ibid.*)

Clegg’s objection to Wylie’s plan is based in part on a misunderstanding of what Wylie proposed, and in part on fear that scholarship would destroy or at least alter the regional language. The use of dialect in these letters lends at the very least an element of irony to the anti-dialect stance expressed by the author. By changing the language of the text and misidentifying its author Honey has seriously misrepresented its nature and its importance.

The point is important, for it supports Honey’s rejection of transitional use of dialect in the schools, a perspective that has robbed schools of a potentially valuable resource for aiding students to learn the standard language. All the research evidence has shown more rapid attainment of literacy, in both the non-standard and the standard language, through the use of the dialect readers (see Rickford 1997: 178–180). In the 1970s

Houghton-Mifflin experimented with dialect readers for native speakers of African-American Vernacular English, and found that the students gained, on average, 6.2 months in measured reading comprehension skills over a 4 month period (using the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in Reading Comprehension).

If Prof. Honey were not so anxious to heap scorn on his critics (and admittedly some of them have heaped scorn on him), if he were to read their works with an eye to determining what points of common ground he has with linguists, I believe he would be surprised by the extent of common agreement. Language is power, and no one would deny it. However, the status of standard English has everything to do with the power of the groups that come the closest to speaking it as a native language. My objections are to the notions that (a) standard language is arrived at by means other than power relationships; (b) further institutional support in the form of a language academy for the standard language is effective and fair; and (c) denying institutional use of non-standard language is the most effective and fair way of teaching the standard. *Language is power* uses bad logic, based on bad examples, to support ideas that feed linguistic demagoguery; in short, bad science in support of bad public policy.

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