

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

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## **Abstract**

The issue of whether a regional accent and/or dialect impact(s) on the development of literacy skills remains current in the UK. For decades the issue has dogged debate about education outcomes, portable skills and employability. The article summarizes research on the topic using systematic review methodology. A scoping review was undertaken with the research question 'To what extent does a regional dialect and accent impact on the development of reading and writing skills?'. The review covers research relevant to the teaching of 5-16 year olds in England, but also draws on research within Europe, the USA, Australia and the Caribbean. The results suggest that curricula have marginalized language variation; that the impact of regional accent and dialect on writing is relatively minor; that young people are adept at style-shifting between standard and non-standard forms; and that inappropriate pedagogical responses to regional variation can have detrimental effects on children's educational achievement.

## **Keywords**

Accent, dialect, non-standard dialect, language variation, Standard English, literacy, writing

## **Introduction**

The issue of the use in UK schools of standard English (SE) and non-standard dialects has gained renewed prominence recently as several schools have attracted national media attention with their 'zero tolerance' approach to pupils' use of regional accents and dialects (or to what has variously been termed 'slang', 'colloquial language', 'the English of the streets', 'slanguage') (see e.g. Fricker 2013, Harris 2012, Shepherd 2012, Williams 2013). The concern that children should be able to conform to the conventions of SE in their writing is understandable given that their success in education, and arguably their future careers, depend on the results of written examinations. But does having a regional dialect and accent hinder or help access to the writing of SE?

Specifically, the research question we established for this research review was 'To what extent does a regional dialect and accent impact on the development of reading and writing skills?' In doing so, we have looked systematically at research on and in the English language from the 1960s to the present, both in the UK and internationally. While we do not discuss research conducted outside the UK in the present article, a complete list of the references gathered in the review can be found at the following link: [www.snell.me.uk/wp-content/uploads/Full-List-of-References.docx](http://www.snell.me.uk/wp-content/uploads/Full-List-of-References.docx).

In undertaking this study, we have used a simplified form of systematic research review. Our key words and terms for inclusion were 'accent', 'dialect', 'dialect interference', 'literacy', 'reading', 'writing', 'school' and 'grammar'. The age groups of students covered were 5-11, 11-16 and 16-25. In the light of the research question, we identified sources, located specific relevant publications, and obtained abstracts. Where clarification was needed, the full texts of key publications on the specific topic of the study were sourced. While our initial searches were via journals and books we knew in the field, subsequent electronic searches used large-scale databases such as Taylor and Francis Online, Oracle, and other such resources in our respective university libraries.

Every abstract/text that we found was double-screened for relevance. Once screened, we had an idea of the map of the field we were investigating, and of how sub-sections of the map might be written up. All papers that are discussed in the review were read in full by one of the authors.

In this article we present the key issues raised by the review, structured around four key sections. The main body of the article focuses on the findings of UK-based studies that have investigated the use of regional dialects and standard English in UK schools. In order to contextualize these findings, however, we first discuss standardisation in the broader context of linguistics, politics and pedagogy, and address some misconceptions about the relationship between speech, reading and writing. We begin by trying to gain some clarity on the use of the term 'Standard English'. Throughout the article we follow Coupland (2000, p. 622) in adopting the abbreviation SE in order 'to avoid complexities over upper- versus lower-case, and plus or minus quote-marks'. These differences mark important distinctions, as Coupland (2000, p. 622) points out, but these lie largely outside of the scope of this article.

### What is 'Standard English'?

In their *Grammar of Spoken and Written English*, Biber et al. (1999, p. 18) write that SE is 'the dialectal variety that has been codified in dictionaries, grammars, and usage handbooks ... [and] has been adapted by most major publishers internationally, resulting in a very high degree of uniformity among published English texts around the world'. Most linguists would agree with this definition of SE as the medium of writing in the English language. There is no doubt, therefore, that written SE should be taught in schools, and it is quite right that this should be stressed in curriculum documents. When it comes to the spoken language, however, the concept of SE is far from straightforward. First, speech does not simply mirror the grammatical structures of writing; this is especially true of spontaneous speech produced in informal settings (for more detail see Cheshire 1999). Carter (1990, p. 158) warns that if we judge spoken English by the codified standards of written English, '[a] test of spoken English may, therefore, become a test of one's abilities to speak a very restricted code – a formal English used routinely by dons, civil servants and cabinet ministers'. This, he writes, would be 'artificial' and may even constitute a form of 'illiteracy'. Biber et al. (1999, p. 18) attempt to address this issue in their definition of 'standard spoken English':

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

(Biber et al. 1999. p. 18)

This definition highlights a second problem, however. How should spoken SE be defined? Biber et al. adopt a negative definition, classifying spoken SE according to the absence of certain features (i.e. 'those variants restricted to local or limited social/regional varieties'). But which linguistic features should we *include* in a description of spoken SE? It is difficult (if not impossible) to answer this question because speech is always situated within specific contexts and interactions. Ideas about what counts as 'standard' or 'acceptable' speech will therefore change from one situation to the next, between different groups of speakers, and over time. The 'very high degree of uniformity' that can be achieved in written language can thus never be achieved in spoken language, leaving considerable scope for variation (and disagreement) in any linguistic definition of spoken SE. It is for this reason that spoken SE is often defined instead in terms of the social characteristics of its speakers, 'signifying a level of excellence to be reached and a quality to be emulated' rather than a sense of uniformity (Crowley 1989, p. 133). Trudgill (1999, p. 118) writes, for example, that SE 'is the variety associated with the education system in all the English-speaking countries of the world, and is therefore *the variety spoken by those who are often referred to as "educated" people*' (emphasis

not in original; see Crowley 1999 and Coupland 2000 on the issues raised by using the criterion of 'educatedness').

Finally, Biber et al.'s definition of spoken SE focuses only on grammatical characteristics. This is the line taken by many other linguists, including Peter Trudgill, who argues that SE 'has nothing to do with pronunciation'. He writes that while Received Pronunciation (RP) in the UK 'is in a sense standardized, it is simply a standardized accent of English and not Standard English itself' (Trudgill 1999, p. 118). It is important to acknowledge, however, that social judgements, beliefs and perceptions about language (including in education) rarely follow linguists' distinctions between accent (pronunciation) and dialect (grammar and vocabulary) (Garrett, Selleck and Coupland 2011, p. 59). Pronunciation has been a source of social commentary since at least the eighteenth century (Crowley 1989, Beal 2009), and is still the level of language most readily accessible for evaluation today. This means that it is difficult to avoid the issue of accent when thinking about what may or may not constitute a spoken SE (or indeed whether such a variety exists).

Rather than trying to define spoken SE, some linguists have argued that all standard languages are idealizations; the usage of any individual speaker will never conform exactly to this idealization, and thus no one actually speaks SE (Coupland 2000, 2007; Crowley 1989; Milroy 1999; Snell 2013). The *idea* of the standard is kept alive in speakers' minds, however, through the writing system and education in literacy, which Milroy argues 'equate the standard language – or what is believed to be the standard language – [...] with 'correct' usage in that language'. For Milroy, this notion of correctness plays 'a powerful role in the maintenance of the standard language ideology through prescription' (Milroy 1999, p.28). We turn now to the issue of prescription through educational policy and curricular documents.

### **Standardization: politics and pedagogy**

Standardization of the way we talk and write – and education towards such standardization – is a matter of strong governmental interest. In the 1988 Education Act, the British government introduced a National Curriculum for England which led, in due course, to a National Literacy Strategy in the late 1990s. That Strategy now no longer applies, and we are in a position, in 2016, of a government that is taking a narrower 'benchmark'/functional approach to literacy and a 'heritage' line in relation to literature. In this section, we set out some of the key landmarks in standardization over the last 25-30 years in an effort to understand why regional variation in dialect and accent is still highlighted as an issue in national governmental drives towards standardization in speaking and writing.

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

Since 2008, most focus has been on reforms to the primary school curriculum in English, though there has been a re-definition of GCSE English in terms of a qualification in literature for a *élite* (the top 20%); GCSE English (including some literature) as a standard qualification; and 'functional English for the bottom 20%'. Often, those young people in the last category are offered a less rich language

curriculum, leading to (potentially) less social mobility. The examination system thus compounds the problem of an increasingly divided and inward-looking society, with an assumption that those being able to speak SE will gain an advantage over those who speak a local dialect; and, in a literary dimension, literature study being confined to a tradition of English writers, to the exclusion of American and other accessible texts from across the world. Such hegemonic assumptions and narrow literary conceptions are problematic for the majority of the population who do not speak an idealised SE and who also have a wider view of the relationship of identities to nationality.

Reforms to primary English continue to emphasize standard curricula and standard assessments. In 2011, the coalition government published *The Framework for the National Curriculum – a report by the expert panel for the National Curriculum review* (DfE 2011). This wide-ranging review concluded that oral language (speaking and listening) continued to be a highly important and integral part of learning to read and write, but that despite the continued presence of speaking and listening in programmes of study in the 1999 and 2007 versions of the National Curriculum, insufficient curricular and assessment attention had been directed to the development of speaking and listening.

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

The emphasis on SE continues through primary school (key stages 1 and 2) through to secondary school (key stage 3). Throughout, SE is assumed to apply to both speech and reading/writing (DfE 2013b). There is no recognition of variation in dialect or in the way that spoken communication varies according to context, nor of the differences between speech and writing. We consider the relationship between speech, reading and writing in the next section.

### **Speech, reading and writing**

Learning to read and write one's native language is different from learning to read and write in a foreign language, because learners generally already have a great deal of knowledge about how to speak the language. When children learn to read and write English at school, they draw upon this knowledge of the spoken language to help them (Britton et al. 1975, Tough 1977). The application of this knowledge creates some challenges, however, because the relationship between speech and writing is not straightforward (Stubbs 1980, Kress 2000).

As already noted, written language is highly standardized and conventionalized, while spoken language is not. Spelling is the most clearly standardized aspect of English. The process of standardization began in the fifteenth century, and spellings have hardly changed at all since around 1650 (Stubbs 1980, p. 70). These spellings were codified in dictionaries in the eighteenth century and are used in all publications today. Spoken English, on the other hand, has continued to evolve and change. Consequently, the English spelling system made sense in relation to the pronunciation of educated people about 600 years ago (which is why there is a 'k' in 'knee' and a 'gh' in 'night'), but it does not correspond directly to any modern accent of English.

Received Pronunciation (RP) is considered by many to be the prestige accent of English in the UK. This accent is peculiar in not being associated with any particular region (though historically its origins were in the speech of London and the surrounding area); rather it is associated with a particular social group, the upper-middle class (Wells 1982, p. 10). It is estimated that only around 3 to 5 per cent of the population speak RP (Trudgill 2002). A greater number speak some form of SE as a home dialect (around 15%), but most do so with a regional accent (around 9 to 12%) (Trudgill and Cheshire 1989, Trudgill 1999). These figures suggest that most children arrive at school speaking a regional accent. There is no *a priori* reason why this should put them at a disadvantage. All speakers of English (regardless of the accent they speak) will encounter some difficulties in learning the English spelling system. For example, RP speakers do not pronounce the <r> in words like 'work' and 'letter' (nor do speakers from Teesside, Liverpool, Hull or most other places in England). Some accents of British English do still pronounce orthographic <r> after vowels (e.g. those in some parts of the north-west and south-west of England, and in Scotland), as do most speakers of American and Irish English. Speakers who do not pronounce orthographic <r> after vowels (including those who speak RP) will make no distinction in their pronunciation of pairs of words like *caught* and *court*. These speakers will have to learn which individual words have an <r> in their spelling, and which do not (Carney 1998, p 39-40). Those who speak other accents of English will encounter different (but related) issues in learning about the relationship between standardized spellings and the sounds of English (Stubbs 1980, p. 130-1). The role of the teacher, then, is to help children understand the relationship between standard orthography and their own accent of English. The children themselves can assist in this process. Kress (2000, p. 8) makes the point that children are highly skilled at recording accurately and precisely what they have actually heard, and thus their spellings can be taken as accurate data on the variety of English spoken in a particular area. In helping children to move towards 'correct' spelling, Kress (2000, p. 8) argues that teachers should first take account of the 'accurate' spellings children produce. This will help teachers to understand children's thinking/logic, and also recognizes/rewards children's abilities in recording speech.

Accent variation is only one kind of variation in speech. Other variations are due to the simplification processes that occur as part of connected speech. For example, there is a tendency when we speak to increase the ease of articulation in order to make the production of speech more efficient. In doing so, we tend to make adjacent sounds more like each other. For instance, when we say 'good night' as part of normal speech, 'good' is likely to be pronounced /gʊn/ rather than /gʊd/. The final sound is articulated as /n/ because the tongue is already getting ready to pronounce the first sound of 'night'. Sometimes we leave a sound out completely. Vowels in unstressed syllables are often elided (e.g. 'police' may be pronounced /pli:s/). The phonemes /t/ and /d/ are often elided when they occur as part of complex consonant clusters (e.g. 'tactful' becomes /takful/ not /taktful/) and across word boundaries (for examples of assimilation, elision and other phonological processes at work in children's writing, see Kress 2000, p. 199-205).

It is clear that the English spelling system does not consistently represent the sounds of words, but this is not to suggest that the spelling system is entirely random. Spelling is sometimes predictable from the pronunciation (e.g. 'bat', 'pin' and 'ten'). In other cases, spelling is regulated by a set of rules or principles. Venezky (1967, p. 89) points out that the position of a letter or sequence of letters in a word may determine the pronunciation of a spelling unit. For example, at the start of words 'gh' always corresponds to /g/ (e.g. 'ghost', 'ghetto', 'gherkin'), but at the middle and end of words it is never pronounced as /g/ (it is often /f/ in these contexts). It is outside the scope of this article to give a comprehensive account of the principles of English spelling (see Carney 1998 for a brief accessible overview; also Venezky 1967, 1970; Stubbs 1980, ch. 3), but it is important to note that not all these principles relate letters to sounds. It is now well recognized that English spelling is not only phonemic (i.e. based on relating spelling units to sounds or 'phonemes'); it is 'morphophonemic' (Venezky 1995).

Morphemes are the smallest units of grammar and of meaning in a language. Some words (e.g. 'cat') represent only one morpheme; but most words have more than one meaningful part. For example, 'cats' has two meaningful parts: 'cat' + 's'. The 's' ending has grammatical meaning: it signals plurality. This spelling unit is used to represent plurality regardless of the pronunciation. It is realized as /s/ in 'cats', but as /z/ in 'dogs' and as /ɪz/ in 'horses'. The advantage is having a regular spelling to indicate plural meanings. The disadvantage is that this spelling does not relate to a consistent pronunciation. Similarly the '-ed' ending is used to represent the simple past tense in English whether or not the pronunciation is /t/ as in 'looked' or /d/ as in 'thrilled' or /ɪd/ as in 'wanted'. To say that the English spelling system is morphophonemic, then, is to say that it represents not only the sounds of English but also the structures of English (in terms of its meaningful component parts) (Nunes and Bryant 2011:, p.141). It has been shown that children have difficulties when phonological rules clash with morphological spelling; for example they often spell regular verbs in the past tense by representing the end sounds, /t/ or /d/, rather than using the '-ed' ending (Nunes and Bryant 2011, p. 143-145; see also Nunes and Bryant 2006).

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

When learning to read and write, children therefore have to grapple with complex correspondences between English orthography and the sounds and structures of English. They also have to recognize that spoken and written language differ in their grammar and vocabulary too (for detailed descriptions see Biber et al.1999; Carter and McCarthy 1997; Cheshire 1999). Many of these differences are due to the different functions that speech and writing serve (see Stubbs 1980, ch. 5), and to the fact that speech is directly interactive and is usually produced spontaneously, with words and grammatical constructions being chosen on the spot. In the final part of this article, we discuss the extent to which children's use of regional dialect grammar and vocabulary in their speech has an impact on their writing.

### **Regional Dialects and SE in UK Schools**

Relatively few UK-based studies have examined the relationship between regional dialects and SE in writing, but pockets of research conducted in the 1980s and 90s suggest that the current emphasis on limiting regional variation in children's speech may be misplaced. In what follows, we review this research, drawing out the key findings and suggesting some areas for further development.

Williamson (1990, 1995) investigated the influence of Tyneside dialect forms on the writing of Year 6 (i.e. 10 to 11 years) and Year 11 (i.e. 15 to 16 years) pupils in an inner-city, working class area of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. For both groups, he found that the influence of the Tyneside dialect on pupils' SE performance in writing was relatively minor when compared with other aspects of non-standard usage. First, most of the errors that occurred in their writing (between 76% and 79%) related to spelling, punctuation and other orthographic features, errors that cannot be attributed to regional variation in dialect and accent. As already highlighted, the complex relationship between English orthography and pronunciation means that problems related to spelling are equivalent (though not identical) for all children, regardless of their accent. Second, while the use of non-standard grammatical features accounted for the next highest category of error, no more than 20 to

25 per cent of these errors could be clearly ascribed to the influence of the local dialect. Viewed globally, this meant that, for both groups of children, non-standard dialect grammatical features accounted for just 3 per cent of the total number of non-standard usages. By far the most common type of grammatical error arose instead from issues with 'handling the complexities of written structure' (1990, p. 258) and 'from unfamiliarity with written as opposed to spoken styles' (1990, p. 259). For example, significant sources of error lay in 'the use of relatively complex verb phrases, often indicating some uncertainty over the expression, in writing, of concepts such as conditionality or aspect' (1995, p. 8) and in 'handling subordination, a feature which is typically both more prevalent and more sophisticated in writing than in speech' (1995, p. 9). A key issue for pupils, then, was negotiating the complex relationship between spoken and written grammar (see also Winch and Gringell 1994 for similar findings in the Caribbean, where children made more 'errors' as they became more ambitious in their writing).

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

In a later study, Williamson extended this work to include a larger sample of pupils based on writing obtained from an archive produced by the Assessment of Performance Unit (APU) in 1988 (just prior to the inauguration of the National Curriculum in English). The APU survey was a national survey of 11 year-olds and 15 year-olds from different socio-economic backgrounds and from metropolitan and non-metropolitan counties. Williamson and Hardman (1997a, 1997b) selected a total of 362 scripts from across each age range in each of four dialect areas: Merseyside, Tyneside, the South-West and London. Their analyses of these scripts confirmed Williamson's earlier findings. Overall, 127 of the children (35% of the written sample) used some non-standard dialect features, but 89 (70%) of these children did so on only one occasion and only 9 (7%) used more than two *different* dialect features, suggesting once again that 'the use of non-standard dialect [in writing is] a relatively rare phenomenon and one which shrinks into insignificance when compared, for example, with errors of spelling or punctuation' (Williamson and Hardman 1997b, p. 298). In addition, the nature of the writing task was found to have an impact, with pupils of both age groups using fewer non-standard dialect forms in writing tasks classified as 'expository' by the APU team and requiring a more impersonal response than, for example, a personal anecdote or piece of imaginative writing. Williamson and Hardman (1997b, p. 296) suggest that these genre-based differences indicate that the children 'may be capable of writing in standard English to an even greater extent than is suggested by our overall figures' (cf. Winch and Gringell 1994).

The wider survey revealed a significant difference between the two age groups, demonstrating 'a progressive decrease in the incidence of non-standard dialect features [in writing] as pupils matured' (Williamson and Hardman 1997b, p. 298). This finding is replicated in Williams' (1989a, 1989b) research in Reading (Berkshire). Williams collected approximately 1000 written texts from 120 school children aged between 9 and 14 and quantified the occurrence in these texts of features of the Reading dialect. Her results show that working class children in Reading do include regional dialect forms in their writing, but the incidence decreases as they move up through secondary school. It is not clear from these studies whether the decrease is attributable to direct teacher intervention or to more general processes of maturation, though it is potentially significant that the

Newcastle and Reading studies were based on data collected prior to the introduction of the National Curriculum and its official policy on the teaching of SE.

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

All the studies cited so far in this section have highlighted a difference between children's use of regional dialect forms in their speech and in their writing (see also Cheshire 1982b). For example, in Reading, Williams found that *ain't* was widely used by all working class participants in their speech, but was not present in any of the written texts. This form was clearly identified by young people as a feature only of speech. Similarly, the non-standard present tense suffix *-s* (e.g. 'I writes to my pen-pal') was ubiquitous in the spoken texts of the working class children, but occurred in the written texts of only 38% of the same group. As pupils progress through secondary school, most use fewer non-standard forms in their writing, even where they maintain (or even increase) these forms in their speech. This suggests that by the end of compulsory education, adolescents are able to switch to standard forms in their school writing (Williams 2007). Young people are also capable of switching between standard and non-standard forms in their speech. Crinson and Williamson (2004) studied the use of non-standard English in the formal and informal speech of 15-year-olds from two schools in Tyneside in catchment areas of markedly different socio-economic class. They found that the middle-class students used almost no non-standard grammar in their speech in formal contexts. The incidence of non-standard forms in the formal speech of students from less privileged backgrounds was also very low (an average of 3.5 non-standard grammatical features per 30 minutes of conversation). In informal contexts, this increased to around 8 or 9 features. The key point, therefore, is that these pupils 'are capable of modifying their use of non-standard dialect when they feel that the situation demands it' (Crinson and Williamson 2004, p. 213). Snell's Teesside study (2010, 2013, 2015) demonstrates that children have developed this ability to style-shift by the age of nine. The working-class children in her study had both standard and non-standard grammatical forms in their linguistic repertoires. Some non-standard forms, such as possessive 'me' (e.g. 'Me pencil's up me jumper') and singular 'us' (e.g. 'Give us my shoe back'), conveyed social and pragmatic meanings not carried by the standard forms. Snell's analyses demonstrate that children are strategic in their language use, selecting the forms/meanings that fulfil immediate interactional and relational goals. Other researchers have shown that young speakers manipulate language variation in the projection of different identities. For example, in Cheshire's (1982b) study of adolescent boys in Reading, she found that most boys used a lower frequency of non-standard forms when talking to their teacher than they did when interacting with peers in an adventure playground. In formal classroom contexts they accommodated to the standard speech of their teacher, an adult with whom they had a good relationship. Boys who disliked the teacher, however, did not do this. One boy even increased his use of non-standard dialect forms when talking to this teacher as a deliberate act of defiance (see also Edwards 1989; Austin 2014; Rampton 1995, 2006; and Ioannidou 2009 for similar phenomena in Cypriot classrooms).

UK-based studies that have examined the impact of non-standard dialect on children's performance in written English appear therefore to have 'established grounds for believing that non-standard English is not a Cerberus barring the gate to literacy for our pupils' (Williamson and Hardman 1997b, p. 298). Most young people are able to switch between standard and non-standard forms in their

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

Researchers have considered the potential impact of teachers' corrections of regional dialect on children's development of written SE. The work of Cheshire (1982a, 1982b) and Williams (1989a, 1989b, 2007) in Reading indicated that teachers did not have a clear concept of what constituted local dialect in Reading nor a 'consistent policy for dealing with non-standard forms that occurred in children's work' (Williams 1989a, p 194). Differences in approach were noted not just between teachers but also within a single teacher's marking practices: non-standard dialect forms were corrected in some cases but not others, thus leading to confusion for children. Williams (1989a, p 196) also calls into question the efficacy of teacher corrections, which in some cases led to 'hypercorrection' on the part of pupils, as in the following example from nine-year-old Jackie: 'When we had ~~done~~ did some housework' (Jackie's own correction). In the Reading dialect, two variable forms are used to represent the past tense: 'done' and 'did'. The teacher had corrected Jackie's use of 'done' for the past tense in previous written work, but without explanation. In the example presented here, the pupil assumes (erroneously) that 'did' rather than 'done' must also be the 'correct' form in this context. Without adequate explanation, children are less likely to develop an understanding of the conventions of SE or how these relate to their own ways of speaking. They may become uncertain, even anxious, about which form to use, as indicated in another example from Williams' Reading data: 'We ~~was were~~ was in the park' (Williams 1989a, p 196). Williams (2007) argues that on the basis of such examples, insisting on SE in the early stages of writing development may put children who speak a regional dialect at home at a disadvantage. Cheshire (1982b, p. 63) further argues that 'children who realize that their language is not appropriate in school, but who do not know the reason for this, nor the ways in which it should be changed, will inevitably become less motivated to use language in school than their standard-English speaking peers' (see also Snell 2013, p. 122).

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

Much of the research on the relationship between non-standard dialect and reading ability has been conducted in the United States, focusing on African American Vernacular English (see, for example, Rystrom 1969; Wolfram 1970; Hunt 1974; Cunningham 1977; Labov 2003; Kirkland and Jackson 2009). There has been much less research on non-standard dialect speakers and reading in the UK.

Our review found only one relevant study (Edwards 1976). Edwards (1976) set out to understand the role of language in the underachievement of West Indian-heritage children in British schools. She used a standard test of reading and comprehension to calculate a comprehension age relative to the reading age of 40 West Indian-heritage and 40 Caucasian British children (matched as far as possible for age, social class and reading ability). The West Indian-heritage children scored significantly lower for reading comprehension. Edwards concludes that the most probable explanation is that interference from Creole vocabulary and structures causes difficulties in understanding British English. She also acknowledges, however, that the attitude of the teacher may be of critical importance.

In summary, in the early stages, the writing of all children closely resembles 'talk written down' (Kroll and Vann 1981), which means that it is likely to incorporate many features of speech, including features of regional dialect. UK-based studies, albeit limited in number, have indicated that the impact of regional dialect on writing is relatively minor (especially when compared with errors in spelling, punctuation and other aspects of orthography) and decreases as children progress through the school system. Nevertheless, for a small minority of pupils, difficulties in understanding the relationship between standard and non-standard forms can persist throughout school and into adult educational settings, and inhibit the development of writing (Harris 1995).

There is currently little agreement over what constitutes an appropriate pedagogical response to the use of regional dialect forms in writing, which causes problems both for the teacher (Harris 1995) and for the learner (Cheshire 1982b, Williams 1989b). Since the 1970s, sociolinguists in the UK have attempted to bring linguistic concepts and research to bear on educational issues related to language, and in particular to help teachers understand the grammatical structure of regional varieties of British English (Trudgill 1975, Milroy and Milroy 1993, Bauer and Trudgill 1999; see Cheshire 2005 for a review). Sociolinguists have also designed materials on language variation and awareness for use in the classroom (e.g. Cheshire and Edwards 1991, 1998; Thomas and Maybin 1998; see Harris 1979 and ILEA Afro-Caribbean Language and Literacy Project in Further Adult Education 1990 for materials specific to Creole-speaking Caribbean immigrants in the UK and to multilingual and multiethnic classrooms), and some have proposed curriculum development which might start to enable learners to gain control over the conscious manipulation of both their own dialect and SE in writing (e.g. Harris 1995, pp. 139-143; Crinson and Williamson 2004, pp. 216-18). Further research is required, however, to consider how best to disseminate sociolinguistic knowledge to those involved in teaching reading and writing and how to evaluate its use in education (Cheshire 2007).

## **Conclusions**

In concluding, we aim to draw out the key findings of this review and their implications for educational policy, practice and research.

There is a need for policy makers to understand two fundamental points: first, the concept of a 'standard' is far from straightforward when it comes to spoken language, and thus attempts at standardisation should be confined to writing/reading, as in standard written English (a relatively stable worldwide currency); second, any spoken grammar is different from a written grammar in a number of respects, and cannot be equated with writing/reading in a direct relationship.

The research reviewed in this study makes clear that there is no straightforward relationship between children's language background and their achievement in school literacy. UK-based studies have indicated that the current emphasis by the media, policy makers and practitioners on regional variation in dialect and accent as a barrier to the acquisition of SE literacy is misplaced. The use of

dialect grammar and vocabulary in writing is a relatively rare phenomenon in UK schools, and one which shrinks into insignificance when compared with the difficulties children face in coping with the complexities of written structure and with errors in spelling and punctuation. Errors in spelling cannot be attributed to the use of regional accents. The complex relationship between English orthography and pronunciation means that all children, regardless of their accent, will experience some difficulty in acquiring standard English orthography, and thus they need specific guidance from their teachers about the relationship between standardized spellings and their own pronunciations.

Research in Cyprus and the Caribbean, as well as in the UK, has shown that regional dialects and creoles will emerge in children's talk in the classroom regardless of policy proscriptions. The incidence of non-standard dialect features in writing, however, declines as children progress through the educational system. By the end of compulsory schooling, most adolescents are able to switch to standard forms in their writing while maintaining their own distinctive dialect and identity in their speech. Further, children as young as nine can manipulate language variation in speech for strategic effect, using non-standard dialect to index social and pragmatic meanings or to mark acts of identity. Attempts to erase the use of non-standard dialect in speech are therefore futile and may have unintended negative consequences, potentially damaging children's sense of self, as well as causing anxiety and thus discouraging their active participation in classroom discussion.

The extent to which teachers should focus on regional dialect forms in writing is a decision to be made by an individual teacher, taking into account the needs of the pupils he or she is working with. Where teachers do focus on non-standard dialect, the verb phrase is likely to be the most profitable area in which to invest their time, because this is where most 'errors' related to non-standard dialect occur. It is best to develop a consistent and transparent strategy in dealing with the use of non-standard dialect in writing in order to avoid creating unintended confusion and anxiety for the learner. When it comes to errors in orthography, teachers must recognise that command of the English spelling system is dependent not only on 'phonics' (i.e. the grapho-phonemic system in English) but is also informed and aided by morphological considerations. Furthermore, some aspects of English spelling are only learnt through visual memory and/or by the meaning that is being conveyed, as they follow neither phonological nor morphological rules. It is therefore necessary for teachers of the language, whether they are specialists (literacy, English teachers) or use language as a key medium for the expression of their subject (e.g. Geography or Physics specialists) to know about the many levels at which language works.

Our review uncovered gaps in the current research literature that have implications for further research. Insufficient work has been done and published on the relationship between regional accents/dialects and standard written English literacy in England, and yet such work is important as it will help to define the specific problems that some young people may encounter in developing proficiency in written SE by the time they leave full-time education. Existing studies are based on data collected prior to the introduction of the National Curriculum and its official policy on the teaching of SE. Future research might usefully test whether the establishment of the National Curriculum has effected any change on pupils' use of non-standard dialect in writing. Further research should also focus on the issue of what constitutes an appropriate pedagogic response to the use of non-standard dialect forms in writing. There is currently little agreement on this issue between researchers, educational practitioners and policy makers.

There is also a need for more comparative studies between the situation in England and the rest of the UK, and between England and other comparator countries around the world. None of the extensive research into African American Vernacular English made reference to the UK. Nor does the

more limited amount of research in England generally refer to AAVE studies. Yet there is much to learn from common problems that are faced globally. The more the world moves to three or four world languages (English, Mandarin Chinese, Spanish and possibly Arabic), the more the relationship between local dialect, national languages and world languages will become critical to personal and social/economic advancement.

Finally, our review suggests a need for further research into *attitudes* towards regional accents and dialects in educational contexts. Too often, assumptions are made by learners and teachers that a regional dialect or accent will impede progress towards fully-fledged literacy; or that a regional accent or dialect is an impediment to social mobility and employment. These assumptions are often shared by employers and others in positions of power. These are social, political and economic issues that need to be addressed to make sure that accent, dialect and SE are appreciated for what they are; that their relationship to literacy is understood; and to ensure that equity is applied when it comes to educational opportunities and other key aspects of social advancement, like applying for and appointing to jobs.

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