

Participating in Policy Debates about Language

Language Planning and Policy issues often become the focus of heated public discussion and debate. Sometimes it is triggered by a government action or decision, like the release of a new primary school syllabus in 1975 by the Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Education that was misinterpreted as encouraging “bad English” (i.e. creole English), and triggered a flood of letters to the local press (Carrington and Borely 1977). Reactions to the Oakland, California School Board’s 1996 proposal to take African American Vernacular English into account in teaching Standard English were similar, sparking the “Ebonics controversy.” It commanded national and international attention for months, including US Senate hearings, widespread public online commentary, and extensive newspaper, radio and TV coverage (Rickford and Rickford 2000). Sometimes the triggering event is a publication or speech by a celebrity who castigates the local vernacular, like singer Georges Dor’s 1996 book critiquing spoken French in Québec (Laforest 1999) or historian/broadcaster David Starkey’s 2011 inflammatory claim on BBC TV that riots in England were due to the nefarious spread of Jamaican patois among youth, black and white (Pullum 2011, but cf. also Snell 2013).

In these and similar situations, linguists should—indeed must—respond, to contribute the expertise of our discipline, and perhaps influence the opinions of decision makers. But participating in policy debates is not something we’re trained to do, so I would like to share some lessons I and others have learned in recent years:

1. *Respond quickly.* If a reporter contacts you about a response, they need to hear from you almost immediately, since they are working on deadlines, and the topic may not be “trending” in a day or two, much less a week or two. Similarly, if you want to write a blog or op-ed, it has to be timely, or made to appear so, e.g. slanted to yesterday’s remark by the mayor, not to the two-week old proposal itself. Think of yourself as a newspaper writer with a 5 pm deadline, not an academic with a one year deadline.
2. *Write simply, engagingly.* Obvious enough, but not easy to do. When I was co-authoring *Spoken Soul*, intended for a general audience, I kept slipping into linguistic jargon; luckily my co-author, a reporter at the time, would spot and modify these lapses. Similarly, my (1997) article in *Discover* was initially rejected for not being accessible enough to non-linguists. As noted in Rickford (1999:271) I “studied previous *Discover* articles to see how writers managed to cover complex subjects in simple and lively ways,” and my second attempt was successful. The writing of Stanford biologist Robert Sapolsky (e.g. 1994) was particularly helpful. More generally, see Kendall-Tackett 2007. And remember, when writing for newspapers, paragraphs are often no more than a sentence or two long.
3. *Create a website.* A colleague, Ewart Thomas, suggested I start my own website (www.johnrickford.com) in 1996 after I told him about my frustrations with reporters who often misrepresent in print what I said about

- the Ebonics controversy in phone interviews. Once I started putting my main ideas online, and referring the reporters to that source, their reports became more accurate, and the phone interviews shorter.
4. *Craft sound-bites*. Laforest (1999:278) notes that, “In the media, the rules of debate are not the ones we’re used to. You are given very little time to speak, too little to make an argument.” I discovered this in one of my first radio “debates” with my former student, John McWhorter. I was rattling off the results of studies by one academic after another when John, sitting in a studio somewhere else in the US, said, “Using Ebonics to solve the Oakland public school problems is like trying to put out a forest fire with an eye-dropper!” Of course I disagreed, but I had no equally snappy or memorable retort. One cannot argue a case completely in sound bites, but it helps to have one or two up your sleeve for radio and tv appearances.
 5. *Use electronic news and social media*. Facebook, Twitter, individual blogs, linguistics blogs (like *Language Log*), general blogs (like *SpeakOut.com*), and online news media like *The Huffington Post*, *Colorlines* and so on are enormously important and influential these days, especially for young adults and others who rarely consult traditional newsprint, radio or TV. If you are not hip to the use of these media, ask your students. Students first taught me to tweet, and to include hashtags like #Jeantel or #Zimmermancase in my *Twitter* messages to help them get picked up by people searching for new contributions on those subjects.
 6. *Get help from your college’s news service*. Unbeknownst to most of us, the news service or communications offices at many of our colleges and universities (typically staffed by people who have extensive media experience and contacts) can help to arrange interviews with or coverage by local or national news media, to edit our opinion pieces, and in other ways. For instance, the TV crews present at the January 1997 Linguistic Society of America meeting – at which we passed resolutions supporting the Oakland Ebonics resolutions – were arranged by the Stanford news service. And in July 2013, after seeing my frustration at not getting my commentaries on Rachel Jeantel’s vernacular published by mainstream media, they offered me a slot on Stanford’s *Open Office Hours*, a Facebook video feature that reached a wide audience.
 7. *Repeat, repeat, repeat*. Linguists often express annoyance when members of the public make uninformed remarks (for instance about vernacular or non-standard varieties having no “rules”) that they debunked (perhaps in their introductory linguistics class, or in a previous public debate) long ago. But as I have said elsewhere, we have to be like advertisers, prepared to say that “Colgate is good for your teeth,” again and again even though we have said it in countless ways before. Remember that the message may be old to us, but it is new (or long-forgotten) to many of the people we address.
 8. *Dale Carnegie the opposition*. Dale Carnegie’s (1936) classic, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, may be outdated and out-of-vogue to some but some of its principles (e.g. “Try honestly to see things from the other person’s point of view”) are still respected and followed in business communication

- and we could benefit from following them in public debates too. For instance, I often emphasized in discussing the Ebonics issue that the Oakland School Board shared with its critics the *goal* of helping their students master Standard English, and that the only debate was about the *means*. Once this was established, there was usually more common ground with such critics, and we could go on to discuss how existing strategies had failed, and what the evidence was for alternative strategies like contrastive analysis.
9. *Expect frustration, even hate mail.* Linguists' positions on language are often so different from those of the general public, whose ideologies have been drilled into them by teachers and parents and other sources, that we can expect considerable resistance, criticism, and even hate mail when we voice them. Laforest (1999) and Rickford (1999) both talk about this, and I can only say that we have to be convinced enough of the importance of the issues for the speech communities we serve to press on regardless. In the summer of 2013, I became extremely frustrated by my inability to get more than a dozen op-eds I wrote about Rachel Jeantel's vernacular in the George Zimmerman trial published in newspapers or electronic media. Eventually, I got two of them placed (one on *Language Log*, one on *Speakout.com*), put others on my website, and started writing conference papers to develop the themes at greater length.
 10. *Be prepared to grow.* In the course of writing about Rachel Jeantel's testimony in the Zimmerman trial and one juror's admission that she found it both unintelligible and incredible, I got feedback from linguists and others that exposed me to literature in speech perception, and language and the law that I had been unaware of before. I am still actively pursuing this, but I find myself growing intellectually in the process, a wonderful theoretical result for what began as a distinctly "applied" endeavor. In this regard, consider Snell (2013) who suggests, provocatively, that our strategy of stressing the systematicity of vernacular dialects in public debate may not be effective or (in some situations) even accurate.

There are other minor points that I could make, but these will suffice for a start, and I hope that others will use a public forum (perhaps *Language Log*?) to add others.

References

- Carnegie, Dale. 1936. *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. New York: Simon and Shuster.
- Carrington, Lawrence D., and Clive B. Borely. The Language Arts Syllabus 1975: Comment and Counter Comment. School of Education, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad.
- Kendall-Tackett, Kathleen A. 2007. *How to Write for a General Audience: A Guide for Academics who Want to Share Their Knowledge with the World and Have Fun Doing it*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Laforest, Marty. 1999. Can a sociolinguist venture outside the university? *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 3.2:276-82.

- Pullum, Geoffrey K. 2011. David Starkey on rioting and Jamaican language. Language Log, Aug. 14, 2011. <http://languagelog ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=3365>
- Rickford, John R. 1997. Commentary: Suite for Ebony and Phonics. *Discover* 18.12 (December):82-7.
- _____. 1999. The Ebonics controversy in my backyard: A Sociolinguist's experiences and reflections. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 3.2:267-75.
- Rickford, John R. Rickford, John, and Russell J. Rickford. 2000. *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English*. New York: Wiley.
- Sapolsky, Robert. 1994. *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*. New York: Holt.
- Snell, Julia. 2013. Dialect, interaction and class positioning at school: From deficit to difference to repertoire. 27.2:110-128. *Language and Education*