THE STATE OF ENGLISH IN THE ENGLISH STATE: REFLECTIONS ON THE COX REPORT

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses English teaching in relation to the rhetoric which surrounds the establishment in England and Wales of a National Curriculum. English teaching and questions of Standard English currently have a very high profile in Britain: the English language is a rallying point for both Left and Right wing in the current educational and political debates (Bourne, 1988).

My discussion concerns the *Cox Report: the Report of the National Curriculum English Working Group* (DES, 1989). The article discusses the Report in its political context, with reference to the very different ways of talking about English teaching which are evident in the Report itself and in the mass media. Much of the public debate is over cultural symbols and shibboleths, in an area where deeply emotional arguments often replace rational discussion.

The article is therefore both a case study of part of the wide ranging curriculum changes taking place in Britain, and also of the way the mass media treat such topics, and of public understanding of questions of language and English.

KEY WORDS: Cox Report, English teaching, curriculum change, mass media.

My main theme is summarized in the French equivalent to the Kingman/Cox Reports (Chevalier, 1985):

> "... chaque réformation, si modeste soit-elle, soulève des tempêtes, des campagnes de presse, des interventions d'hommes politiques plus nourries de fantasmes que de connaissances du terrain."

> [... every reform, however modest it is, raises storms, press campaigns and interventions from politicians, which are fed more by fantasies than by knowledge of the area.]

There is probably general agreement that by the mid- 1980s in the UK the postwar consensus of optimistic liberalism was at an end. The 1980s were a time of rapid social change and enormous social uncertainty. At such times, language becomes a focus of debate, because of the ways in which it symbolizes social and personal identity (Crowley, 1989). This article is therefore about the meeting point of English teaching, the formal political system and the mass media.

FROM BULLOCK TO COX

Just after the Conservative electoral victory of June 1987, a consultative document on the National Curriculum was published in July, at the beginning the school holidays, with comments requested by 30 September: two months later. The Education Reform Bill, which included detailed proposals for a curriculum, was introduced into parliament in December 1987, and received royal assent in July 1988. Assuming that the bill would be passed, working groups had already started to write the curriculum. The first recommendations (for maths and science) were published in August 1988. And the curriculum started being taught in primary schools in 1989. Events had moved very fast indeed.

In the last 15 years, English has been subject to more official inquiries, reports and personal ministerial interest than any other school subject. It is widely reported in the press that Margaret Thatcher herself has taken a close personal interest in the revision of the school curriculum. She was Secretary of State for Education from 1970 to 1973, when the Bullock Committee was set up.

The *Bullock Report* (DES, 1975) was widely accepted by English teachers as a humane and progressive document on language and learning, and is still widely cited. But between the 1970s and the 1980s, the educational climate in the UK had changed sharply. In 1984, an HMI document, *English from 5 to 16* (DES, 1984), was published. This set out lists of objectives for 7, 11 and 16 year-olds. It was widely criticized by English teachers and advisors. Around 1,000 responses, mainly hostile, were sent to the DES. The document was very substantially rewritten, and a second version (DES, 1986), much more acceptable to many English teachers, was published. In both documents, most disagreement centred on the fourth stated aim of the English curriculum: knowledge about language. (The other three aims were the use of the spoken word, reading and writing.) It was argued that there were "such deep divisions upon matters of principle, practice and content" regarding "knowledge about language", that a national enquiry was needed to resolve the matter (p.19). The Secretary of State accepted this recommendation, and set up the Kingman Inquiry, which began in January 1987, and published on 29 April 1988.

On the same day, the Cox Committee was announced: the National Curriculum English Working Group. This group was instructed to "build on" Kingman (DES, 1988), but it had an essentially different brief: to advise on the content of the whole English curriculum across the whole of compulsory schooling. The Committee reported in June 1989 (DES, 1989).

THE COX REPORT: PRINCIPLES AND CONSENSUS

Given the fears which preceded its publication, the *Cox Report* was well received by English teachers (eg see NCC, 1989). It certainly contains errors of emphasis, as well as omissions and contradictions, having been pulled this way and that by incompatible pressures.

Some of the more coherent press commentary (a very small percentage) points out that the Report is a compromise, trying to please everyone. This is probably true: the Committee could not risk completely alienating any one large group, since they were committed to making the curriculum work. It is clear that the Report systematically prefers to phrase things in terms of consensus, where conflict might be more obvious. For example, chapter 2 presents five approaches to English teaching, which are said to be compatible and not mutually exclusive (2.20):

1. personal growth: emphasising the importance of language in the development of the individual child.

2. cross-curricular: emphasising the importance of English for all school subjects.

3. adult needs: emphasising the need for competent use of English in the workplace.

4. cultural heritage: emphasising the importance of studying the literary canon.

5. cultural analysis: emphasising children's critical understanding of the society in which they live.

A more obvious view is that these approaches are often in conflict, in competition for curriculum time, and that some are more influential than others. They have very different relations to the current social order and different power bases. The Report itself helps to legitimate a critical "cultural analysis" view, in the face of the more traditionally influential "cultural heritage" position. Throughout, the Report uses a discourse of consensus and conciliation, trying to draw people in, rather than exclude whole groups. But it also tries to shift the dominant discourse. The cultural analysis view is the Trojan Horse, which questions the status quo of the dominant cultural heritage view. (Hewitt, 1989, gives a detailed analysis of

the Cox Report's view of oracy, and how it reconciles views from the Left and Right.)

THE (RE)DEFINITION OF ENGLISH

The *Cox Report* makes an explicit bid to define English. As a subject at schools and universities, English has quite a short history. It is not a natural subject division, but one which has been constructed relatively recently. "English" as a subject is contested at present: most primary school teachers would prefer "Language" as a curriculum area; and the concept of "English as a mother tongue" makes little sense in bilingual classes where pupils have other mother tongues.

The main quote in the Report is possibly the one in chapter 2 from Raymond Williams (1965):

> "... the content of education ... is subject to great historical variation ... what is thought of as an 'education' (is) in fact a particular selection, a particular set of emphases and omissions."

The Report emphasises that no position on English teaching is neutral (2.4).

The number of themes which English could cover is very wide: the subject therefore needs an intellectual framework to delimit the questions asked. The recent history of English teaching, from Bullock via Kingman to Cox, has been characterized by fundamental disagreements over the central aims of English teaching: not only amongst professionals, but between professionals and public. Nevertheless, these disagreements have often been exaggerated and stereotyped by people who have not read the Report. (I will return to Prince Charles in more detail below ...)

There is also research evidence that both pupils and teachers are uncertain what English is trying to achieve. Austin-Ward (1986) gave a questionnaire to 487 students entering further education from comprehensive schools in Scotland, England and Wales. He found the majority critical of English lessons, and unable to see any core in the subject. It is arguable that the anti-intellectualism which has been ascendant in English teaching has left many English teachers unwilling to make explicit just what they think the core of the subject is, and therefore vulnerable to the demands of the New Right in education.

The *Cox Report* (eg chapter 2) is concerned very explicitly with constructing the subject. It takes the intellectual foundations of English as a school subject seriously, and sees English as deserving as good an intellectual basis as any other subject on the curriculum.

It takes a semiotic view of English teaching, emphasizing the variety of texts and genres which children should be familiar with, and the different ways they can be read. The concept of texts is expanded to include media texts, and also the changing canon of literature in English, with recommendations that it include literature from different countries and cultures. A social semiotic view of language (Halliday, 1976) emphasizes that the ways in which people interpret social experience are open to analysis and change. The concept that pupils should understand the different points of view from which texts are written and interpreted is central to all the programmes of study. So are the codes and conventions by which meanings are represented.

The Report also contains quite radical ideas: on the changed balance between spoken and written language in the curriculum; on the centrality of English to equal opportunities policies, to teaching about information technology, to critical and cultural analysis of society, and to social and cultural identity. It emphasises the relation of English to other languages in school and community, although the chapter on bilingual children is severely constrained by what was politically acceptable (see below). This depth of discussion was completely missed by the media.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE ENGLISH CURRICULUM

The Report then attempts a structuralist analysis of the English curriculum. The essential argument is that English in schools is very broad and includes language use in speech and writing, language study, literature, drama, and media education (2.2). Therefore the internal relations must be made explicit, if English is not to remain a mere list of topics. The analysis rests mainly on the five approaches to English cited above.

This list is then analysed in various ways: into functions of English which are: inward vs outward looking; individual, personal, cognitive vs social; utilitarian vs imaginative; intellectual vs aesthetic; passing on vs understanding the culture. For example, some aspects of English teaching look inward: either to the development of the individual child or to uses of English in other subjects within the school. Other aspects look outward: either to uses of English in the world of work, or to pupils' understanding of the society in which they live. These contrasts are not intended as watertight classifications, but to show the underlying structure of the curriculum.

A further rationale for the five approaches to English teaching is that they correspond to and therefore support five approaches to teaching Standard English:

1. respecting the pupil's home language
2. teaching SE for wider communication inside school
3. teaching SE for wider communication outside school

4. teaching the relation of SE to the literary heritage

5. teaching the relation of SE to cultural power.

DIFFERENT DISCOURSES

There is a very wide gap between this kind of analysis and much of the press discussion of such issues. For example, Norman Tebbit (ex-chairman and influential member of the right wing of the Conservative party) claims a causal connection between the decline in grammar teaching and the rise in football hooliganism (Tebbit, speaking on Radio 4, November 1985, cited by Graddol & Swann, 1988):

> "... we've allowed so many standards to slip ... teachers weren't bothering to teach kids to spell and to punctuate properly ... If you allow standards to slip to the stage where good English is no better than bad English, where people turn up filthy ... at school ... all those things tend to cause people to have no standards at all, and once you lose standards then there's no imperative to stay out of crime."

This is a claim about linked events: standards of language are indicative of standards in general, and if you allow standards to slip, then people slip into crime. What Tebbit is doing here is weaving a seamless web of associations: "all those things" are evidence of a breakdown of respect for authority. Grammar, discipline, authority, hierarchy: they are all related. He is not wrong about the symbolic meaning of "all those things". Grammar was dropped from many English syllabuses as one part of a child-centred movement in teaching, which also had as an explicit part of its aims to change teacher-pupil relations in schools. Tebbit's interpretation makes perfect sense within a particular discourse. But he offers only a very partial interpretation, as though it was comprehensive. His absurd logic is not spelled out.

Such statements show very clearly that the debate over Standard English and grammar are part of a much larger ideological debate. This discourse is familiar from the way other topics are treated in the British media: a moral panic is created (standards have fallen), and blamed on folk devils (trendy teachers). (Gurevitch et al, 1982:301.) All societies attend to some kinds of dangers and not others. They make only some kinds of judgements and attribute only some kinds of blame.

THE DISSEMINATION OF IDEAS

What is at issue is a battle over ideas which are very deeply entrenched in British society (Thornton, 1986).

A very different kind of discourse again is used by Halliday (1976): knowledge about language (he is actually talking about linguistics) is "threatening, uncomfortable and subversive", because it questions some of people's deepest prejudices. If you look at language as an institution you come face to face with very unpalatable truths about society: "language reflects and reveals the inequalities that are enshrined in the social process".

The essential point is that some ideas about language change people's views of the world: once you have had the idea, there is no way back. Tebbit knows what is at stake, even if he is unable (or unwilling) to formulate it explicitly.

Phrases such as *catchy tune* and *catch phrase* recognise that it is not only diseases which can infect people. Some ideas "catch on": they are self-propagating; they "infect" people. Ideas cause ideas: they help evolve new ideas. Ideas breed: like organisms. Someone gets a good idea, they pass it on, and it spreads from brain to brain. Some ideas gain great stability and penetrate the cultural environment; though, like organisms, they may be subject to distortion and variation as they reproduce. This is what Popper (1972) refers to by objective knowledge or World 3: the world of interacting ideas, which take on a life of their own independently of the people who originally thought of them.

However, ideas do not pass directly from brain to brain. Nor do they float around in a social vacuum: they travel along channels in the social world. In a lecture on the *Kingman Report*, Rosen (1988) wrote:

> "The (Kingman) Committee should have taken a long cool look at the means by which its own utterances become privileged not by virtue of their intrinsic merits but their recruitment to a government role."

Rosen intended this comment negatively: as a criticism of the Committee, who were thought to be naively ignorant of the power politics going on. It does seem that some of the Kingman Committee (eg Kavanagh, 1988) were startled by the public interest and politicization of English teaching.

I can't speak for the Kingman Committee. However, I am sure that the Cox Committee was very aware of Rosen's point. After all, it was tied very tightly into a series of statutory stages: from the Committee's recommendations, to the NCC's revisions, to the Statutory Orders, to the construction of Standard Assessment Tasks by the development agencies.

Furthermore, I am sure that the Cox Committee was very aware that ideas which managed to infect them had the facilities of a very powerful host: a government department, printing press, and distribution service, which would turn its ideas into a training package, compulsory reading for very large number of teachers. This was recognised by many people, of course. The evidence which was sent in to the Cox Committee was attempting to

secure its own reproduction. No text is original; every text is full of intertextual references. But the *Cox Report* is (intentionally) a collage of quotes and plagiarized ideas. Presumably people giving evidence were happy to be plagiarized. And it was part of the Committee's job to try and reflect the evidence.

The important point has to do with the means and effects of dissemination of ideas about language. As a thought experiment: suppose that everyone in Britain really believed and understood this proposition, the social world would be very different place.

> "On purely linguistic grounds, (Standard English) is not inherently superior to other non-standards dialects of English, but it clearly has social prestige" (DES, 1989: 5.42.)

This is a version of the linguistic equality principle. It is a truly viral sentence: a sentence which will try to secure its own reproduction. Because of its potential social consequences, if you believe it, you will feel obliged to try and spread it, to try and change the way in which people think. For this reason, viral sentences are often found in the political and religious domains. And in education. (Hofstadter, 1985.)

EXPERT KNOWLEDGE AND COMMON SENSE

> "When experts are unanimous in holding a particular opinion, the contrary view cannot be regarded as certain." (P. Medawar (1984) *The Limits of Science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p.19.)

Most public discussion of language in the mass media is fundamentally trivial, despite a great deal of talk about "the basics". It is in the interests of some groups to keep the discussion trivial, and to deny the complexity of the issues. The frequent accusations of complexity, jargon and education-speak are a central aspect of the public debate. (See, for example, explicitly right-wing publications such as Lawlor, 1988, and Letwin, 1988.)

There is a general assumption, central to the background ideology, that anyone who speaks English knows what is meant by "good English", and knows how to teach it: no special expertise is required, and supposed educational experts are charlatans. The key ideological move is to endorse a common sense position which requires no analysis, because everyone knows what the truth is.

Six days after the Cox Report was published, Prince Charles initiated an ideologically revealing exchange. As *The Daily Telegraph* put it, he "launched a scathing attack on standards of English teaching" and "sharply criticised" the *Cox Report*. The Prince made his comments, apparently off the cuff, at a seminar with business people. Selected news reporters were at

the seminar, and they relayed his brief remarks via the Press Association all over the country. They were reported verbatim in most papers the following day (29 June 1989). It is not possible to retrieve exactly what he said, but a reconstruction from several papers gives this:

> "We've got to produce people who can write proper English. It's a fundamental problem. All the people I have in my office, they can't speak English properly, they can't write English properly. All the letters sent from my office I have to correct myself, and that is because English is taught so bloody badly. That is the problem. If we want people who write good English and write plays for the future, it cannot be done with the present system, and all the nonsense academics come up with. It is a fundamental problem. We must educate for character. That's the trouble with schools. They don't educate for character. This matters a great deal. The whole way schools are operating is not right. I do not believe English is being taught properly. You cannot educate people properly unless you do it on a basic framework and drilling system."

Some of the papers had fun reporting counter attacks on the Prince's swearing, and the fact that most of his secretarial staff went to public schools. But more serious are the unanalysed cliches in his statements:

> that there is an unproblematic good, "proper" English
> that English is taught badly
> that strength of character is related to good English
> that "proper" education requires drilling.

If regarded rationally, the statements are a hardly intelligible mixture of nonsense and non-sequiturs. It simply does not make sense to think that everyone who speaks good/standard(?) English has a strong character. (Though remember Tebbit on dialect and criminality.) But the statements do not operate at this level. They call up a set of linked symbols and beliefs about schools, language and the nation. They depend on a set of premises, which are unstated and probably unconscious. The utterances just generate a "recognition effect" (Hall, 1982:74). Readers know what sort of thing is being said, what position is being adopted. It is a confirmation of the obvious. The effect would be disturbed by an overtly rational argument, since to draw attention to the premises would be to admit that other premises are possible. The Prince's outburst shows rather clearly how ideologies work.

Ideas gain stability when they fit into a schema. Many everyday ideas about language fit very firmly into a schema, which contains terms such as *standard, standards, grammar, correct, accurate, precise*. For linguists, the same terms mean something quite different because they fit into an entirely different schema, which contains terms such as *dialect, language planning, high prestige language, social variation*.

These schemas are systems of meaning, which use particular vocabulary, definitions and premises, take particular things for granted, appeal to different states of knowledge (eg lay and professional), and therefore allow only particular argumentative moves. Much of the public debate is a struggle over competing definitions. *Bilingual* is often a euphemism for "Black", "immigrant", or "poor working class". *Equality* (as in "all languages are potentially equal") is often read as a slogan of the political left: and linguists are classed along with trendy teachers. *Trendy* is a code term for "left wing". (Graddol & Swann, 1988.) *Grammar* has a wide range of connotations: discipline, rules, authority. (Cameron & Bourne, 1989.)

Some of this struggle over the connotations of terms goes on within the *Cox Report* itself. The term *grammar* is contested, for example. The press several times accused the Committee of using the term *linguistic terminology* as a mere euphemism for grammar, although chapter 5, on linguistic terminology, argues that grammar (sentence syntax) is only one area of language where terminology is needed. The Report also points out (5.46, 5.48) that *dialect* has quite different connotations in everyday and academic discussion. In everyday discourse, *dialect* means "distortion, deviation from Standard English, sub-standard English", etc.

The Committee's Terms of Reference talked of the *English literary heritage* and *English literature*. The Report uses the term *literature in English*, which is less ambiguous, and shifts the connotations away from identifying language, literature and national identity, and towards an interpretation of the literary canon as contingent on particular historical and changing conditions. This is a small textual trace of a social struggle.

LANGUAGE AWARENESS COURSES: KNOWLEDGE ABOUT
    LANGUAGE

> "... any new doctrine, in practice, is bound to be subject to some extravagance and excess. This, however, does not matter so much as might be thought, because the faults of what is new are so much more easily seen than those of what is traditional." (B Russell (1945) *A History of Western Philosophy*. NY: Simon & Shuster. p.819.)

One of the main problems the Cox Committee faced with knowledge about language was its place on a curriculum where there are too many subjects fighting for time. So there is an attempt to present knowledge about language as a reinterpretation of more familiar aspects of English. (The discourse of consensus again.)

The Committee took the decision not to propose a separate profile component for knowledge about language, on the grounds that this would be too different from present practice. There were questions of practicality:

time and resources, the expertise of teachers, and the signals which could be given to publishers. There are tolerable rates of change in education, and the Committee hedged its bets: it might be possible in future to have a separate profile component on knowledge about language (6.3).

However, the danger of not having a separate profile component is that knowledge about language is not cumulative or coherent. The central problem is that the potential material is infinite: any instance of language use, literary or non-literary, in the mass media, in the language of social groups, etc, or topics such as language acquisition or the languages of the world. Sense must be made of this endless material. An informal permeation model is not enough. You cannot say everything at once. Therefore a framework or model is needed to provide focus and a principled selection.

Some language awareness courses already in existence have tended to be about language in society, with no descriptive base: eg no grammar. Conversely, politicians want grammar: not language in society. The *Cox Report* attempts to combine these different legitimate aims.

A very simple and powerful way of organizing a syllabus is proposed (6.17), but very briefly and not as explicitly as would have been useful. The essential principle is to find a balance between the narrowly linguistic and the broadly social. A framework is proposed, such that any topic can and must be tackled from three points of view:

> language forms and meanings
> language variation
> language in social institutions.

For example, a good understanding of the nature of Standard English depends on being able to describe lexical and grammatical variation between standard and non-standard dialects, and also on analysing the prestige of Standard English which derives from its uses in social institutions such as education and commerce.

Another principle proposed in the Report is to start from children's own experience by using a fieldwork approach, based on resource materials, and on the language data which are all around in everyday life. Pupils should observe, collect, sort, classify, analyse, interpret and present information about language.

A comparative stance is also central to the view of knowledge about language proposed in the Report. A major theme is language diversity, and hence language change. This is discussed (though certainly not consistently) with reference to languages other than English, to standard and non-standard dialects of English, and to different genres of written and spoken English. The basic position in the Report is that language diversity has important

social and communicative functions in maintaining social and cultural identity and in a speaker's linguistic repertoire.

Certainly, qualitatively different types of knowledge may result from different types of presentation. The thought of an age is an outcome of its means of production. And the danger of such an approach is that it leads to a "life's rich tapestry" view of language diversity: all diversity is equally wonderful. Yet such diversity is often the locus of conflict. Teachers should be able to use such material to open up, if they wish to, issues of language and group conflict. A cultural analysis view of English teaching needs evidence, facts and data as a basis.

For a more explicit and formal version of the organization of a possible syllabus, which remains very implicit in the Cox Report, see Stubbs (1986, 1987, 1990).

LANGUAGE DIVERSITY: VARIETIES OF ENGLISH AND OTHER LANGUAGES

But contradictions abound. The most extraordinary, and contradictory, expression of the official position is in the Committee's Terms of Reference and Supplementary Guidance. The Terms of Reference (para 2) draw attention to ethnic diversity. But in the Supplementary Guidance, in a paragraph on equal opportunities(!), is this:

> "the cardinal point [is] that English should be the first language and medium of instruction for all pupils in England".

This explicitly rules out languages other than English as a medium of instruction (except for Welsh in Wales). But further, it appears to recommend not merely an explicit policy of monolingualism, but a policy of language loss. Other languages are presumably to be confined to the home. On a continuum which goes from prohibition of minority mother tongues in school, through toleration and permission, to encouragement and support, this statement is as near as makes no difference to prohibition. References to ethnic diversity in the Terms of Reference are empty liberal rhetoric. English is evidently not "the first language" of many children in England.

In possibly the biggest compromise in the Report, this is interpreted with a politically pragmatic gloss. What is meant is: English is the first language in the education system (10.2). And learning English must be additive, not replacive. But the Report says nothing about mother tongue maintenance: it was outside the Terms of Reference, and had resource implications about which the Committee could do nothing. The Committee was unwilling to move into this area. The topic met with incomprehension from the civil servants. The Report got no further than making a few encouraging noises

about language maintenance, with no recommendations about resources or precise plans.

My view is that the Committee clearly failed on this topic. They never collectively realised the importance of the topic, and never analysed the background assumptions, which have to do with national heritage and unity, the view that education is a major way to achieve consensus and unity in a stratified society, and the view that monolingualism is the norm. The Report was destined inevitably to be read against a background where linguistic and cultural homogeneity are officially valued, where an assimilationist policy is taken for granted, though never explicitly stated, where language diversity highlights social and cultural diversity which would rather be denied, and where discrimination against language diversity is all the more powerful because it is hidden (perhaps even to the perpetrator) in an empty liberal rhetoric.

Ten days after the *Cox Report* was published, and three days after Prince Charles' outburst, Kenneth Baker (then still Secretary of State for Education) published an article in the *Sunday Express* (2 July 1989), which contains many blatant examples of the background ideology, and which therefore merits close study. Here are some brief extracts from a long article:

> "When the Prince of Wales' said that English is taught badly ... he was echoing the concerns of parents and employers. ... It has been fashionable to use 'socio-economic' factors to excuse poor standards. The bleaters were always looking for excuses. ... [This was] the argument trotted out for so long by the glib fashion designers of education ... [The National Curriculum] means clear standards for reading, writing, spelling, punctuation, grammar and handwriting. ... Common sense is winning out. Common sense is back in fashion. Standards of English must improve. ... We must not let our children down for they are the future of our nation".

Common sense is contrasted with expertise. Expertise is identified with fashion. And ad hominem remarks replace rational argument.

Baker's theory of educational success, as expressed in the article, is simple and naive. Only two factors count: a good school, and individual motivation. This displays overweening confidence in the education system. It is interesting, and unusual, that the victim is here not blamed for his/her own failure (unless, of course, s/he is lazy, unmotivated, etc). "Bad schools" are squarely blamed, though there is no discussion of what good schools are. Many of the other key symbols in the discourse are packed into the article: the basics, grammar, new standards, common sense, "our children ... are the future of our nation". But they are unanalysed. It is often said that Thatcherism has no theory of the public or social world, only of individuals.

But the ideology is deeply contradictory. Behind the rhetoric of meritocracy and equality of opportunity, the status quo is maintained. Language is still a central part of the symbolic domination. And Mr Baker will have long left the DES when the effects of the National Curriculum are visible. (He left in July 1989 to take up the Chair of the Conservative Party.) Further in the background, and not explicitly mentioned at all, are other assumptions of cultural heritage and assimilationism (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1989): monolingual policies must be all right because they got us where we are; many languages divide a nation; and overt class conflict and discrimination have almost disappeared.

On 19 December 1989, Prince Charles delivered a full speech on the English language, based mainly on the view that the King James Bible and the Book of Common Prayer represent the high point of English and that things have been declining since. The structure of the speech is simple, familiar, and flawed. It falls squarely within the complaints tradition (Milroy & Milroy, 1985). Prince Charles admits that complaints about falling standards of English stretch back into the last century (so his argument is invalid), but he is going to use it anyway. No evidence of decline is presented, beyond a few examples of earlier and more recent Biblical translations, and a stated preference for the King James versions. There is merely a claim that a consensus about such decline exists, and an artificially constructed comparison between Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" soliloquy in the original, and Prince Charles' own parody of it in what is said to be modern English. The whole speech is based on the confusion that the English language as such has become "impoverished, sloppy and limited", rather than some uses of it (ie some users of it) having become sloppy. Otherwise, the speech is simply based on the familiar key symbols: the British heritage, learning poetry by heart, grammar, the need for higher standards in a competitive world, the Bible and Shakespeare.

The full text was printed on the following day in *The Daily Telegraph*, which also devoted a front page article, the leading editorial, and two other articles to the speech. Every other daily newspaper also reported the speech, sometimes at length: *The Sun* gave it a complete page.

THE MEDIA RESPONSE

There is an enormous gulf between what the *Cox Report* says, and what the media said it says. The British press is not noted for its cogent discussion of ideas. But often the Report was not read at all, but misquoted. It was nevertheless reported in ways which showed very clearly how it was being interpreted.

Commentaries and criticism recontextualize an original text. It is impossible to recover the *Cox Report* from the mass media. It was appropriated and placed in a different discourse. And whilst there were reasonably clear

criteria which the *Cox Report* itself had to meet, there are few criteria which the recontextualizers have to meet. They may see themselves as the guardians of the old, use highly selective quotes, treat a very small part as the whole, or produce a wholly imaginary text. (Bernstein, in press.)

Some widespread factors in journalism came into play. The headlines were designed to dramatize: they talked of clashes, rows and storms between the Secretary of State, the Committee and teachers, characters in a modern morality play. As often, bad news is regarded as more newsworthy than good: standards are falling, folk devils are to blame. And journalists have to meet deadlines. Some rushed into print, without reading the Report at all, but depending on brief DES press releases, or simply guessing what was said.

There are very deep seated sources of disagreement about English teaching, and a long history is necessary to understand the virulence of the debate. But media coverage inevitably neglects the background: everything is presented as being sudden, and having simple explanations and solutions: eg sloppy teachers who can be shaken up by the bold Education Minister. Yet the complaints tradition in Britain about "bad English" goes back hundreds of years (Milroy & Milroy, 1985): much further than Prince Charles half admits.

In common with much media commentary, the media coverage of the *Cox Report* had a very narrow focus: all the newspapers commented almost exclusively on Standard English (the topic of one out of 17 chapters, although central to its general theme). In different newspapers, attitudes to Standard English differed slightly: but the main significance was in their agreement on what the issue is. The coverage was very repetitive: everything was slotted into a reassuringly familiar framework. Using incompatible discourses, "Cox" and "the media" talked past each other. With rare exceptions, there was no genuine debate at all.

A study of the media response to Cox leads to an interpretation of the media as having an agenda setting function (Gurevitch et all, 1982:241). With rare exceptions, they argued by repetition, confirming existing views, rather than trying to shape or change those views, talking to people with their minds already made up, merely reproducing dominant views of a "crisis" in education, endorsing primary views of politicians by claiming to express public opinion. But the selection of the point of view is concealed: it is presented as common sense. And the discussion of alternative interpretations is therefore excluded. The discourse is closed.

SHIFTING THE DISCOURSE

All this could be viewed pessimistically and cynically, or more optimistically.

The pessimistic view would be that all the discussion in the *Cox Report* of Standard English, the subtle distinctions between grammar and linguistic terminology, etc, is nothing but "gardening in a gale" (Hawkins, 1984). The curriculum has really been set up in order to introduce assessment.

In a longer term perspective, however, what really matters is how discourses can be shifted: whether people can be infected with better ideas. And, despite the apparent stranglehold of the media, some ideas are changing. The late 1980s represented a considerable upheaval, but they were part of a long historical process, a centuries old debate between vocational training and a liberal and liberating education of the human spirit (Williams, 1965).

Probably most societies want to believe that they are or should be unified and free of contradictions, and that their beliefs are natural, obvious and objectively true. In the ideological debates behind the National Curriculum are large-scale changes in attitudes to knowledge, authority and social cohesion. (Brumfit, 1985:148.) The debate is also a small part of the long struggle over the authority for different sources of knowledge, which was brought to a head in a different way in the early C17th by Galileo, Descartes and Bacon. A more local debate about what counts as knowledge was opened up by British sociologists of education in the early 1970s.

There is much incoherence, misunderstanding and triviality in the press commentary. On the other hand, there is also a great deal of citing of arguments about Standard English. Sometimes an idea has jumped aboard the national press and is given a free ride, and this is a more powerful distribution system than the DES. For example, *The Sun* (16 November 1988) wrote:

> "Kids will have to learn how to read, write and speak correct English ... but no one will be forced to talk 'posh'..."

This is very simplified, but an essentially correct summary. *The Daily Mirror* (16 November 1988) quoted points about the relation between language and identity. There was a serious summary in *The Independent*. Examples of children's writing leapt aboard *The Daily Telegraph*.

In the long term, the essential thing is to change the ways in which language and literature are talked about. One of my favourite quotes from Cox is this:

> "The resolution of difficult issues of language in an increasingly multi-cultural society requires informed citizens. This may be the strongest rationale for knowledge about language in schools." (2.10).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

At the end of David Lodge's novel *Small World* (Lodge, 1984), Persse McGarrigle is attending a megaconference of structuralists, literary theorists, et al. He asks a question of the eminent panel of experts: "What follows if everybody agrees with you?" People don't understand his question. He repeats it: "What do you *do* if everybody agrees with you?" Suddenly the chairperson gets the point: "I do not remember that question being asked before."

What would happen if people in Britain were just a little less profoundly monolingual, a little more knowledgeable about language diversity and able to discuss it a little more rationally?

NOTES

I was a member of the Cox Committee.

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