Developing a sociolinguistic voice?
Students and linguistic descriptivism

Carolyn McKinney   **Joan Swann**
University of London   *Open University*
United Kingdom   *United Kingdom*

> I don't think we basically do disturb many students' fundamental perceptions
> about [linguistic prescription] . . . there is something here that bothers me
> slightly and I think we have to accept that our position is also an ideological
> one – I mean do we value these different positions?
>   (Course tutor's comment on students and linguistic prescriptivism)

The research discussed in this paper forms part of a larger project on academic
literacies in a U.K. Open University distance-taught undergraduate course on
the English language (U(ZS)210 *The English Language: past, present and future*).
The project as a whole examines: the academic literacy requirements of the
course materials; how these are mediated to students by associate lecturers who
teach the course; students' study patterns, how they approach their written
assignments, and their responses to the course and its assessment. The course is
available to a body of students characterised by diversity in terms of their
geographical location (throughout the U.K. and elsewhere in the European
Union, and in several international contexts); their social/cultural and linguistic
background; previous educational experience; and academic background. A
major concern of the project has been to identify how U.K.-produced teaching
materials on the English language are received by students with differing
experiences of English and of language.

    This paper focusses on responses from students in three broad contexts:
England, Singapore and Greece,[1] to a section of the course on 'Varieties of
English'. In our analysis of this part of our data, we became interested in a
recurrent theme: how different students responded to variation and change in
English and, in particular, how they responded to the descriptivist/relativist
values that frequently underpin research on this topic. We were also interested
in how course tutors might respond to students who chose to resist a
descriptivist perspective.

    Recent research on students' learning carried out from an 'academic
literacies' perspective has emphasized the relationship between academic
writing, and academic study more generally, and student identity. Such

research frequently points to a disjuncture between students' own experiences and 'academic' knowledge, and considers the implications of this for teaching and learning in higher education. This paper is intended partly as a contribution to debate on this issue: we felt that the appropriation of what we have termed a sociolinguistic voice might represent a significant personal shift for many students, and a questioning of their existing beliefs and values. The paper is also intended as a contribution to the continuing discussion within sociolinguistics on the status of linguistic descriptivism, and the position linguists should take in relation to prescriptive views of language. As such it complements Sally Johnson's paper in this issue of the *Journal of Sociolinguistics*.

ACADEMIC LITERACY AND STUDENT IDENTITY

Current approaches to the study of literacy, consistent with a movement often referred to as the 'new literacy studies', have seen literacy not as a series of isolated reading and writing 'skills' but as sets of social, and highly contextual-ised literacy practices. In very general terms, this is a shift from what Brian Street (1984) has termed an 'autonomous' to an 'ideological' model of literacy: seeing literacy as inherently social implies a recognition of the (often conflicting) values with which different literacy practices are imbued. (Barton 1994 and Gee 1996 provide a good overview of this position.)

Research on 'academic literacies' in higher education has, similarly, been concerned with literacy as a social practice. Problems faced by students in their academic study are seen to derive, not simply from an absence of generalized 'study skills', or inadequate socialization into the academic community, but from a gap between tutor expectations and student interpretations (e.g. Lea and Street 1998). Researchers have often focussed on the need for students to learn quite different literacy practices associated with different subject areas. Mike Baynham (2000) comments:

> From a practice perspective, we are interested in how students as novices are brought into the typical discursive practices of the discipline, whether it be literary criticism, ethnographic fieldwork or participating in laboratory experiments. (Bayn-ham 2000: 19)

Mary Lea and Brian Street (1998) note that, for students, the shift between different sets of literacy practices (in academic and other contexts, or in different academic contexts) may involve certain affective and ideological conflicts – it is not simply a matter of learning new writing conventions.

Within such practice-based approaches, the increasing interest in the relationship between academic writing and student identity referred to above is particularly relevant to our own concerns. For instance, Theresa Lillis's (1997) research into the experience of 'non-traditional' students has highlighted the way in which such students' voices are constrained within

academia, where they frequently find a misfit between their own experience and academic knowledge and research. Mary Lea's (1998) research, similarly, highlights the conflicts faced by many adult distance learners as they attempt to negotiate academic knowledge in relation to their knowledge and experiences in other contexts. And Roz Ivanič's (1998) work explores the representation of the self in academic writing, which she argues is itself an act of identity. In their exploration of the difficulties students experience with regard to university study in general, and academic writing in particular, Ivanič, Lea and Lillis problematise the notion that students should merely accept dominant academic ways of knowing, or simply reproduce dominant academic discourses in their writing.

Lea has argued that much research on academic writing has ignored 'the way in which issues of personhood and identity are embedded in both language use and literacy practices within the academy,' (1998: 156). In her own study, Lea identifies two approaches which the students she worked with adopted towards their learning, and revealed in their assignment writing: a 'reformulation' approach and a 'challenge' approach. 'Reformulation' refers to students seeking to reformulate course materials as closely as possible in their own writing. The 'challenge' approach involves students in challenging academic conventions, as they try to draw on their personal perspectives and interpretations of course texts. In this case, students engage with the course in terms of their own needs and contexts, rather than simply trying to reformulate the original texts. While this is a more complex task, Lea found that it often led to students failing in terms of their tutors' expectations. The reformulation approach, although it might involve 'little real engagement with epistemological issues underlying the courses being studied' (Lea 1998: 170), tended to be judged as more successful.

Lea's work suggests the need for more explicit discussion of the nature and purposes of student writing. Ivanič, similarly, suggests that '[r]ather than learning just the characteristics of powerful discourse types and attempting to reproduce them, students should explore the way in which different discourse types position them, and discuss the personal and political consequences of participating in them' (1998: 340). Lillis argues that we 'need to open up the framework for making meaning in higher education if our aim is to develop an inclusive education where new voices can be heard,' (1997: 182). Like Lea, she also considers what it may mean for students to challenge established academic ideas when both the curricula and their assessment are subject to institutional control.

Such research has informed our analysis of our own data, particularly with respect to our exploration of: the terms on which students engage with sociolinguistics as an academic area; potential discontinuities between students' personal experiences of language and language as conceptualized by professional sociolinguists; and the stances from which students may attempt to critique sociolinguistic ideas.

SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY, DESCRIPTIVISM AND PERSONAL CHANGE

Sociolinguists and social psychologists have shown continuing interest in language users' perceptions of, and beliefs about, language, and different varieties of language (see, e.g., Giles and Coupland 1991, for an overview of the social psychological study of attitudes towards language and, more generally, the salience of language in everyday activity; Preston 1989, on perceptual dialectology; and Niedzielski and Preston 2000, on the study of 'folk linguistic' perceptions of language). While of interest as objects of study, however, the beliefs of 'ordinary people' about language are sometimes regarded as problematical by linguists, including sociolinguists. Sociolinguists have frequently commented on a disjunction between 'common-sense', or 'everyday' beliefs about language and the beliefs espoused by professional linguists. This becomes problematical when linguists try to put their ideas across to the 'general public', or intervene in public debates about language. A particular point of tension between linguists and nonlinguists is seen to derive from linguists' insistence on a 'scientific', descriptive approach to language, and language varieties, and an associated adherence to linguistic relativism or linguistic equality – the notion that language varieties are, in some sense, equal (or at least that there are no linguistic grounds for regarding one variety as superior to another). This position frequently meets with lack of understanding, or outright opposition, from those non-linguists who tend towards a more evaluative, prescriptive conception of language. The consequent difficulties faced by linguists engaging in public debate about language issues are addressed by Sally Johnson in this issue of the *Journal of Sociolinguistics*; see also Heller et al. (1999) for another recent discussion in this journal.

  Linguistic descriptivism, and the descriptive/prescriptive divide, have themselves been subject to critical interrogation within certain areas of sociolinguistics. There has been increasing interest in language ideologies as a field of enquiry – in seeking to understand, and theorize, both linguists' and nonlinguists' beliefs about, and struggles over, language, rather than simply dismissing certain (popular) beliefs as misguided or wrong (see, e.g., the papers in Blommaert 1999; and in Schieffelin et al. 1998; for examples of linguists' ideological activity see Crowley 1989; and the papers in Joseph and Taylor 1990). From this perspective, linguistic descriptivism is no longer seen as a 'neutral' scientific activity: both descriptivism and prescriptivism come to be viewed as inherently ideological. David Graddol and Joan Swann (1988), for instance, have suggested that linguists' very insistence on the scientific nature of their descriptive observations (in contrast to nonlinguistic prescriptive beliefs) constitutes an act in an ideological struggle. And Deborah Cameron's (1995) wide-ranging critique of linguists' refusal to engage seriously with prescriptivism argues, more generally, that the descriptivism of linguists and the prescriptivism of nonlinguists may be seen as aspects of a

single normative activity: 'a struggle to control language by defining its nature' (1995: 8).[2]

Despite such internal debate, however, we would suggest that descriptivism, along with relativism, remains as a mainstream value within contemporary sociolinguistics, particularly within the variationist strand of the discipline. Descriptivism has also continued to be a face that is often presented to the outside world as an agreed linguistic principle that may be contrasted with erroneous 'common-sense' beliefs and attitudes. For a recent example, see Laurie Bauer and Peter Trudgill's (1998) attempt to explode popular 'language myths', many of which are based on prescriptive or purist views of language that may be challenged by objective linguistic description (Bauer and Trudgill is discussed by Sally Johnson in this issue). While we know of little research on the teaching of sociolinguistics, descriptivism would seem to be a potentially problematical concept for beginning students: in learning to engage 'appropriately' with the study of language variation and change, many students may need to make a significant shift in their conception of language and to question their existing beliefs and values.

SOCIOLINGUISTICS AND DESCRIPTIVISM IN THE 'ENGLISH LANGUAGE' COURSE

While much of the research represented in the English language course materials embodies a broadly descriptivist stance (e.g. accounts of English accents and dialects, social and stylistic variation, contemporary linguistic change) the materials themselves do not explicitly exhort students to take up a descriptivist, or a relativist approach to language. Other research (e.g. on language choice and codeswitching, on speakers' perceptions of different language varieties) also goes beyond a purely descriptive approach, emphasising the importance of the social meanings attributed to language. The materials attempt to give a sense of debate between sociolinguists (e.g. contrasting quantitative/variationist and qualitative/interactional approaches to the study of language use). And a section on 'good' and 'bad' English, written by a philosopher, provides an alternative (non-linguistic) perspective on language and a critique of some sociolinguistic ideas from outside the discipline, albeit one that turns out to have greater sympathy with linguistic relativism than with purism or prescription.

Throughout their study, students are encouraged to take a critical approach to sociolinguistic research and to the course materials themselves. Students are also asked to draw on their own experiences of (varieties of) English, although there is clearly a tension here between acknowledging the validity of personal experience and conventional notions of academic enquiry and academic evidence. Interestingly, course tutors emphasized descriptivism much more overtly than did the course materials. All tutors referred to a disjunction between students' (prescriptive) beliefs about language and sociolinguistic descriptivism.

Concerns about the prescriptive approach to language that some students might bring with them to the course, and the potential mismatch between this and the course's teaching, emerged consistently as an issue in our tutor data. Most tutors stated that they expected students to leave aside prescriptivism and take on a descriptive voice as part of their study. This was felt strongly as something students 'needed' to do, or as the main point of the 'Varieties' block – for instance:

Students need . . .
 . . . an objective approach to language – a way of looking at it analytically and seeing their own biases.   (Tutor A, London: tuition diary 2)

. . . understanding that Standard English and RP are one dialect and accent among many – I've encountered less resistance to this so far than in previous years. [. . .] Even so, it's a big change of mindset to really take this one on.
                                        (Tutor B, north of England: tuition diary 2)

I feel that the main purpose of ['Varieties of English'] is to challenge students' perceptions about correct English. Nearly all my students come to the course with very definite views about what constitutes 'good' English. I want to make it clear from the outset that linguists have a different view of language based on a systematic study of language.
                                      (Tutor C, south-east England: tuition diary 2)

I [. . .] want to encourage a *tolerant* awareness of other varieties of English.
                                             (Tutor D, Greece: tuition diary 2)

Tutors recognise, then, that sociolinguistic description represents a new approach to language, and one that may challenge students' existing beliefs. Rather than being simply a set of skills, they emphasize that a descriptive approach requires 'a change of mindset' – a significant shift in students' commonsense views of language. The specific articulations of this differ between tutors – from greater objectivity to a moral shift, in this case to become more tolerant of different linguistic varieties. Interestingly, the two Singaporean tutors were more ambivalent in relation to the need for students to make this shift. Neither mentioned this in their tuition diaries, and in follow-up electronic discussion they commented:

About encouraging students to take a descriptive approach – I did try to do that as far as possible, not because it's PC or because I necessarily agree with descriptivist philosophy, but because I feel it's good intellectual exercise for them to think along unconventional paths and challenge what seems to be a 'given'. Speaking strictly for myself, I think I'd call myself a prescriptivist, not in a judgemental sense, but in the sense of achieving educational objectives and giving students the kinds of skills and knowledge that they'll need in the real world. [. . .] I must add, however, that I mean this in connection with the 'non-standard' varieties, not the local standard forms that are intelligible worldwide.
                                    (Tutor E, Singapore: e-mail correspondence)

Personally, I am ambivalent about students adopting 'sociolinguistic descriptivism', mainly because some tend not to strive beyond the Singlish level especially in group

presentations during tutorials. Sorry to sound so pedantic, but it is an uphill task breaking away from old habits, for some students at least.

<div align="right">(Tutor F, Singapore: e-mail correspondence)</div>

It is significant that the tutors relate their views to the Singaporean linguistic environment, and to the need to encourage students to develop competency in standard English which they see as necessary for success in their studies and 'in the real world'. Tutor E speaks of 'achieving educational objectives', while tutor F speaks of a desire for students to 'strive beyond the Singlish level'. In this context, the tutors' own ambivalence about descriptivism is understandable. Although the teaching context is clearly different, this position is not dissimilar to the strong instrumental argument which Bent Preisler (1999) makes for the privileging of standard varieties of English (in this case, British or American) in countries in which English is taught as a 'foreign' language. Of course the tutors' own scepticism about descriptivism may well be reflected in their approach to this issue with their students.

STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE COURSE

In all, 54 students (in most cases, four or five per tutor group) completed study diaries for the material on 'Varieties of English', setting out their responses to this topic, how they worked through the material and how they dealt with assignments. In responding to language variation as a topic (e.g. the course's discussion of English accents and dialects, or 'good' and 'bad' English), a relatively large number (37/54) wrote about some aspect of change in relation to their perceptions of language. There was some difference here between students in England and Greece and students in Singapore. In the case of England and Greece over three-quarters of the students mentioned change (32/42 students), and this pattern was consistent across all groups. In Singapore, however, under half (5/12) students referred to this issue. It is difficult to interpret an absence of responses, and the numbers involved are, at any rate, rather small. This may, however, bear some relationship to the Singaporean context – and to the Singaporean tutors' own ambivalence about the value of descriptivism in an environment where they felt it was important for students to develop their own use of a standard variety of English.

Of those students who wrote about change, there were no clear differences in the types of response that came from students in different regions or in different tutor groups. Students reported greater awareness of language variation, and an increased tendency to observe language use (e.g. Students A, B and D below). In one or two cases (Student C is an example) students who were teachers were able to relate their study to their professional practice. Students also mentioned changes in their perceptions of their own language use (Students D, E and F below).

<div align="right">© Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 2001</div>

I have become more aware of how language (accent) conveys a 'social' message in relationships.   (Student A, London)

I have found since reading Block 2 and studying examples of other English – I am much more aware of accents and notice any phrases as typical of, e.g. – Irish English or other dialects!   (Student B, south of England)

What this block did make me realise was that the prescriptive form of English I teach is not what my students are going to meet if they travel abroad.   (Student C, Greece)

My experience of English has been limited. I used to think my accent was relatively close to RP, but now I'm not so sure. I have started to listen to how and what people say more closely.   (Student D, south-east England)

Now, I don't feel so embarrassed of my accent when I speak English because I am more aware that it is unique to my culture.   (Student E, Singapore)

I thought about my own language use, and reviewed how my coming to England had 'forced' me to speak differently; how I have lost my S'pore accent etc. . . . It made me think about some of the issues raised in the block e.g. one's identity, values, view of English (standard Eng-Eng!) as more prestigious etc.   (Student F, London)

Increased awareness and/or observation of language use may itself indicate that students are beginning to take on a (broadly) sociolinguistic perspective, but the comments also suggest that they are not acting simply as detached observers: students are able to use sociolinguistics as a lens through which to review their own experiences and arrive at new understandings of these.

    Students also responded more directly to the issue of prescriptivism, or 'good' and 'bad' English. One or two indicated that their views on this had not actually changed because they were already aware of, and concerned about, prescriptivism – amongst others or in themselves. This disrupts the idea of a simple dichotomy between the views expressed by 'ordinary people' and linguists (which Johnson, in this issue, also critiques). In most cases, however, students did indicate that they had begun to reconsider earlier prescriptive approaches to language varieties:

I was used to relating good with standard English and bad with any other variety. But, after reading I realised that it is not as simple as that. There are so many factors affecting a way of speaking that each case is different and needs to be analysed according to factors affecting it.   (Student I, south of England)

Since starting this block, I've become much more aware of how people speak and the specific words they use; indeed just this week I found myself defending a colleague, against another, for the use of what the latter said was 'bad' English – I said 'who says it was bad English? That's quite acceptable in certain circles!!'. (Previously I would have agreed it was 'bad' English!) I'm also now very conscious of how I speak in different situations.   (Student J, south of England)

I think in the past I've been very judgmental, especially regarding certain pronunciations and ungrammatical language – this course is making me consider if these are 'wrong' or just different.   (Student K, south-east England)

I'm not so proud of my 'RP' accent now and have a different perspective of dialects. Have always felt spelling and grammar important – now confused.

(Student L, Greece)

In Singapore, there are varieties of English, and I used to listen to them with a certain amount of disdain. I am trying to be more 'understanding', after having read the chapters in relation to [the assignment].   (Student M, Singapore)

I am pleased to say that I have also tempered my views about good and bad English which were imposed by a prescriptive form of teaching in primary school.

(Student N, south of England)

We are not suggesting here that these students have experienced a wholesale Damascene conversion to linguistic relativism. Clearly, they are 'writing themselves' for a certain audience, whom they would expect to share relativist views (this expectation seems more explicit in the final example, where the respondent notes that she is 'pleased to say' her earlier views have been tempered). What we do claim is that these students are aware of alternative ways of thinking about language – they are able to draw on an alternative (relativist) discourse about language and the values associated with this. They have added relativism, or descriptivism, to their repertoire of ways of talking/ writing about language – which is probably all that most sociolinguists can aspire to.

 Occasionally, students slip between prescriptive and descriptive discourses, producing a response that from a linguistic point of view may seem incoherent, or at least internally contradictory:

My opinion of 'northern' accents has changed. I used to think they were just 'wrong' but I now understand why they speak the way they do.

My biggest 'gripe' about the English language is why so many intelligent people say 'somethink or nothink'.   (Student O, south of England)

Observation and listening have become more acute. I listen to myself. I listen to people in shops. I am not so dismissive of strong, local dialects, try to 'place' strange ones.

Bad English, particularly in the young, makes me angry at the 'educators'. Strangely, neighbours now approach me with cuttings, stories, questions. This is entirely new – no communication previously. Have become more sharply aware of own language use.   (Student P, south of England)

This is consistent, however, with current models of personal identity and with evidence from social psychology that, in accounting for themselves, people commonly draw on discourses that embody different, and often conflicting, sets of values. Margaret Wetherell and Jonathon Potter point out that '[p]eople in lay talk have access to a compendium of different interpretive resources which they blend together to produce a wide variety of different effects'. In the analysis of ordinary (as opposed to academic) discourse, therefore, we do not find 'the neat organisation which might be expected

from a person working from a consistent set of beliefs and attributes or a single model of the world' (Wetherell and Potter 1992: 92). The students above are managing a blend of academic/descriptive and everyday/prescriptive discourses that, in this case, jar because of their close proximity. However it is likely that we all, whether academic linguists or lay commentators, harbour conflicting perceptions of how language is, and how it should be. In Deborah Cameron's words, 'We are all of us closet prescriptivists – or, as I prefer to put it, verbal hygienists' (1995: 9).

In contrast to the examples above, one or two students indicated strong resistance to the idea of linguistic equality – for instance:

> The block is quite enlightening. Unfortunately, I strongly disagree with the idea that mistakes (in my opinion) made by speakers, whose mother tongue is not English, should be given so much status. I am referring here to Indian English in particular. In my essay I have tried to show why I think IE should not be treated like British Standard English. (Student R, south of England)

Student R is careful in how she phrases her disagreement with what she clearly sees as the course line ('Unfortunately . . .'), but nevertheless she explicitly rejects this. Because we collected information from students about their assignments, and tutors' comments on assignments, we also have a longer dialogue between Student R and her tutor which confronted some of the difficulties encountered in arguing a counter view to those presented in the course materials. In this case the tutor was one of us – Joan Swann. We run into pronominal difficulties here! We shall switch temporarily to the first person to avoid the awkwardness of writing about personal responses in the third person.

On writing her essay, Student R noted:

> The [assignment] had gone through four drafts, because I didn't think I could make my point clear. Also, I was not very sure whether it was appropriate to argue that Indian English or rather its distinctive features, are mistakes, as far as I am concerned.

My (Joan Swann) comments on this essay begin:

> [Student's name] – a good attempt at this essay. You've taken issue with the stance taken by linguists such as Verma, and constructed a counter-argument. This is fine, you don't need to agree with everything in the course, and as you say, there are linguists who take different views . . .

I then pointed to ideas the student might consider further – e.g. the relationship between 'learner errors' and systematic features of 'non-native' varieties of English. The student responded to her assignment grading, and to the comments she had received, as follows:

> . . . It seems to me it's a good idea to take on and support the argument of the authors of a Block. They clearly state their opinions and substantiate them. Arguing against them does not appear to be penalised, still not everyone can present their argument in a favourable light. This is what might have happened in my case.

In commenting on Student R's essay I was aware that she was a second language speaker of English and that she had learnt English initially through formal education. I wondered whether the attention usually paid to correctness in such contexts might be associated with her resistance to linguistic relativism. The student might also have had first hand experience of the value of proficiency in standard English and the way in which both non-standard varieties and second language 'errors' are evaluated socially. However, she did not draw explicitly on this experience in her essay, and made only minimal general reference to the differential social evaluation of varieties and the effect this may have on speakers' life chances. In my comments, I tried to be sensitive to Student R's position. I also adhered to the course's own position that students should be able to take issue with the course materials. There are difficulties here, however: the materials themselves do not provide adequate resources to critique a descriptivist/relativist linguistic view, precisely because most of them are written (very broadly) within this framework. It is thus inevitable that there are going to be weaknesses, from the point of view of linguists at least, in a 'resistant' student's argument, and the student in this case is left with the sense of not having presented her argument 'in a favourable light'. These comments raise important issues for how we respond to students who attempt a critical reading of course materials from a position that large numbers of professional linguists would find untenable.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We suggested above that linguistic descriptivism may be a problematical concept for beginning students since this represents a challenge to commonly accepted, everyday conceptions of language. Our own anecdotal evidence from teaching about language variation and change to earlier groups of U.K. adult students had also suggested that such students were resistant to descriptivism. Evidence from the 'English language' course confirmed that there was a mismatch between students' common-sense understandings of language and the sociolinguistic ideas embodied in the course materials. However, at least for many students, this was not experienced as a problem. Many students were able to make a shift in their conception of language. As might be expected, this shift did not entail simply becoming more 'scientific' or 'objective' about language – it often had an affective or ideological component. Context is clearly an important factor here. In their study diaries, students are writing *as students* for an academic audience who would be expected to take a broadly descriptivist/ relativist line. But what is of interest is that students are not adopting this type of sociolinguistic voice just in relation to sociolinguistic research. There is a degree of interpenetration between 'academic' and 'everyday' discourses. Whereas Mary Lea (1998) found that some students drew on personal experiences and interpretations to challenge academic texts, we found students

drawing on sociolinguistic descriptivist/relativist discourses to reinterpret their
language experiences and revalue their own language use. Sociolinguistics, in
this sense, was able to 'act back' on personal experience, and this could be
regarded as transformatory.

We found some differences between tutors and students in different teaching
contexts. Tutors in Singapore were more ambivalent in their response to
descriptivism and Singapore students made fewer references to personal
change. Open University students are meant to receive the same course
wherever they study, though in the 'English language' course we did try to
build in some flexibility to allow students to draw on their diverse experiences of
English. The increasing globalization of knowledge and the globalization, in
some cases, of Higher Education teaching, raise issues for how international
'knowledge providers' can build in space for localized diversity and critique,
including challenges to the assumptions that underpin 'western' knowledge
bases. Although rather beyond the scope of this paper, we also need further
debate about the (still) heavily unidirectional flow of academic knowledge, and
the implications of this for disciplines and individual researchers in different
parts of the world.

The provision of critical space is also an issue for individual students,
whatever their learning context. We documented the difficulties experienced
by one student who chose to resist the broadly relativist position adopted in
the 'English language' course materials. The course encourages critical
reading in that it makes explicit the sources of evidence drawn on by
different sociolinguists and exemplifies critical appraisal of sociolinguistic
methodologies and approaches. Less well supported at this (early) stage in
the course is a more radical critique that would question some of the bases
of the discipline, including the limitations of certain sociolinguistic models of
language and society. A student who took up such a critical position in
their own writing, however (e.g. who referred to the inadequacy of socio-
linguistic approaches that do not do enough to explore *why* some people
have a vested interest in devaluing the speech of others), would normally be
given credit for this. It is much harder to find an acceptable way to critique
the discipline from a prescriptivist position – the difficulty that Student R
ran into in her writing. In Student R's case a model, within the course
materials, of a more radical critique of sociolinguistics would not have been
particularly helpful.

Prescriptivism is sometimes based on errors that need to be corrected (e.g.
the suggestion that, because of differences in tense and aspect, Indian English
speakers would have difficulty in differentiating between past and present
events). However the real difference between Student R and the course
material is better seen as an ideological one. There is evidence from other
(related) academic areas of occasions where teachers and students come into
ideological conflict. For instance, Hilary Janks (1995) and Carolyn McKinney
and Ermien van Pletzen (2000) have discussed student opposition to critical

language awareness, and Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) and Kathleen Weiler (1991) have considered opposition to critical pedagogy. Such research high-lights the fact that people are often invested in particular social positions in complex ways and that these investments are not lightly given up. As McKinney and van Pletzen (2000: 7) point out, '[m]aking an effort to understand students' positions as shaped by particular social experiences may be key to [helping them develop] new ways of interpreting the world and their complex positioning in relation to it'.

Clearly the objective here is still to shift students' positions. In our own teaching we need to consider the extent to which, and the ways in which, a greater understanding of prescriptivism and descriptivism/relativism as ideo-logical processes (as discussed above) affects our responses to students' arguments about language that we may find, at least, uncongenial if not unacceptable. Any weaknesses in a student's position could be talked through, challenged, or simply dismissed as evidence of a weak argument, but the tutor also has the option of suggesting how, in its own terms, the argument could be improved. If we acknowledge that sociolinguistic positions are necessarily ideological, to what extent are we willing to support those students who choose to take up an alternative ideological position?

NOTES

1. The data on which this paper is based derive, in the main, from tuition diaries completed by 11 associate lecturers from England, Singapore and Greece, who acted as course tutors to their own local groups of students and who were also co-researchers in the project, and from study diaries completed by volunteer students in these local groups. The research design and sampling procedures are discussed further in Goodman, Lea and Swann (2000). Researchers who contributed to the development of the project (in the main project team and as co-researchers) were: Kerry Doyle, Kay Foster, Sharon Goodman, Mike Hughes, Hilary Kyriazis, Mary Lea, Rosalie Leong, Patricia Muggleston, Helen Peters, Glenda Singh, Joan Swann and Simon Williams.
2. See also debates about prescriptivism on the LINGUIST electronic discussion list – e.g. May–August 1994 and November–January 1997/8 (Vol-8-1627; Vol-8-1657; Vol-8-1721; Vol-8-1748; Vol-9-60).

REFERENCES

Barton, David. 1994. *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Bauer, Laurie and Peter Trudgill (eds.). 1998. *Language Myths*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
Baynham, Michael. 2000. Academic writing in new and emergent discipline areas. In Mary R. Lea and Barry Stierer (eds.) *Student Writing in Higher Education: New Contexts*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Blommaert, Jan. (ed.). 1999. *Language Ideological Debates*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Cameron, Deborah. 1995. *Verbal Hygiene*. London: Routledge.

Crowley, Tony. 1989. *The Politics of Discourse: The Standard Language Question in British Cultural Debates*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Ellsworth, Elizabeth. 1989. Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy. *Harvard Educational Review* 59: 297–324.

Gee, J. 1996. *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideologies in Discourse* (2nd edn.). Basingstoke: Falmer Press.

Giles, Howard and Nikolas Coupland. 1991. *Language: Contexts and Consequences*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Goodman, Sharon, Mary R. Lea and Joan Swann. 2000. *Academic Literacies in a Distance-taught English Language Course: Project Report*. Milton Keynes, United Kingdom: Centre for Language and Communications, Faculty of Education and Language Studies, Open University.

Graddol, David and Joan Swann. 1988. Trapping linguists: An analysis of linguists' responses to John Honey's pamphlet: *The Language Trap*. *Language and Education* 2: 95–111.

Heller, Monica, John Rickord, Marty Laforest and Danielle Cyr. 1999. Sociolinguistics and public debate. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 3: 260–288.

Ivanič, Roz. 1998. *Writing and Identity: The Discoursal Construction of Identity in Academic Writing*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Janks, Hilary. 1995. The research and development of Critical Language Awareness materials for use in South African secondary schools. Unpublished PhD thesis: Lancaster University, United Kingdom.

Joseph, John E. and Talbot J. Taylor (eds.). 1990. *Ideologies of Language*. London/New York: Routledge.

Lea, Mary R. 1998. Academic literacies and learning in higher education: Constructing knowledge through texts and experience. *Studies in the Education of Adults* 30: 156–171.

Lea, Mary R. and Brian Street. 1998. Student writing in Higher Education: An academic literacies approach. *Studies in Higher Education* 23: 157–172.

Lillis, Theresa. 1997. New voices in academia? The regulative nature of academic writing conventions. *Language and Education* 11: 182–199.

McKinney, Carolyn and Ermien van Pletzen. 2000. Student Identity and Critical Language Study in an English Studies Course. Paper presented at the CALSSA Applied Language Studies and Services into the Millenium Conference, December 2000: University of Cape Town.

Niedzielski, Nancy A. and Dennis R. Preston. 2000. *Folk Linguistics*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Preisler, Bent. 1999. Functions and forms of English in a European EFL country. In Tony Bex and Richard J. Watts (eds.) *Standard English: The Widening Debate*. London/New York: Routledge.

Preston, Dennis R. 1989. *Perceptual Dialectology: Nonlinguists' Views of Areal Linguistics*. Dordrecht, Holland/Providence, Rhode Island, U.S.A.: Foris Publications.

Schieffelin, Bambi B., Kathryn A. Woolard and P. V. Kroskrity (eds.). 1998. *Language Ideologies: Practice and Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Street, Brian. 1984. *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Weiler, Kathleen. 1991. Freire and a feminist pedagogy of difference. *Harvard Educational Review* 61: 449–474.

Wetherell, Margaret and Jonathan Potter. 1992. *Mapping the Language of Racism: Discourse and the Legitimation of Exploitation*. New York/London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Address correspondence to:

Joan Swann
Faculty of Education and Language Studies
Open University
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes
MK7 6AA
United Kingdom

j.swann@open.ac.uk