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# Foreword

This is a long overdue and tremendously welcome book. Linguists have argued, at least since the 1960s, that teachers could help speakers of vernacular varieties master Standard English more successfully if they pinpointed the contrasts between the vernacular and the standard and taught their students to bridge them. Some linguists and educators even created detailed manuals to help teachers do this. But these manuals were never published and made available to the general public in the way that Wheeler and Swords's excellent *Code-Switching* is now about to be. In the meantime, speakers of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and other vernaculars have continued to be misunderstood, misdiagnosed, underrespected, and underassisted in their efforts to add Standard English to their linguistic repertoire. And they've also been limited in their school success and occupational mobility. This book will, I think, help to dismantle these barriers, enabling teachers to "reach out to the students of urban America" in ways they weren't able to do before.

One of the great features of this book is that it was jointly authored by an academic linguist (Rebecca Wheeler) and a classroom teacher (Rachel Swords). Teachers sometimes complain that while linguists have potentially valuable insights and suggestions for them, they don't convey them in sufficiently nontechnical language, and they don't have sufficient classroom experience to translate them into effective practice. Wheeler and Swords's collaboration helps to solve this problem. And the fact that the authors have successfully implemented the strategies they present in this book in classrooms and teacher training workshops augments the book's authority. The writing style is clear and conversational throughout, making it accessible to teachers, administrators, and parents.

The division of the book into two parts, one theoretical and the other practical, is appealing. The theoretical part (approximately the first third of the book) is devoted to a survey of relevant research on dialect variation, language attitudes, and contrastive analysis. Among other things, it indicates that the haphazard correction of student "errors" (the *modus operandi* of most teachers) generally fails to help students become effective users of Standard English, while teaching contrastive analysis and code-switching (virtually unknown among teachers) has been shown to be effective in several research studies. Of the informal varieties of English considered in this book, AAVE occupies a central place, as it does

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in research on American dialects over the past half century. But the book's approach—including its “scientific method” of discovering grammar patterns in students' speech and writing—is applicable to a wide range of dialects, including international ones. The essential insight here is that students who use nonstandard structures are behaving rationally and regularly, in accordance with the rules of their native vernacular. The importance of recognizing and respecting the integrity of students' language, and through it their families, their identities, and their culture, comes through loud and clear. Readers interested in learning more about any of the theoretical issues covered in the first part can follow up by consulting the works of linguists and educators cited therein.

The second and lengthier part of the book is devoted to classroom practice—and the ten chapters in this section will quickly become dog-eared as teachers turn to them again and again. Wheeler and Swords provide initial exercises for helping students recognize that varying one's self-presentation between formal and informal contexts (through conduct and dress, for instance) is normal, and the authors then provide tools for helping students master formal language (Standard English) by systematic contrasts with the more familiar patterns of informal language (vernacular English). Successive chapters focus on informal features that tend to show up in students' formal writing (possessives, plural nouns, and third-person singular present tense verbs without the -s suffix, for instance, or the use of *gonna* instead of *going to*). Appendix A summarizes the contrasts involved in the ten most common “informal” features (structures that are common in AAVE, but some also in other dialects), and Chapter 13 provides strategies for dealing with new patterns. Alternative analyses for some of the features discussed are certainly possible; what matters is that the analyses are accurate and that they work to help students develop linguistic versatility.

Chapter 12 (“Code-Switching in the Reading and Writing Classroom”) and its related Appendix B (“A Literary Grammatical Concordance”) will, I think, be a favorite of teachers interested in an integrated language and literature curriculum. Both segments of the book demonstrate how existing literary works can be used to enhance contrastive analysis lessons, and vice versa, and how students' personal journals and stories can contribute to their linguistic and literary development. Appendix B provides a list of children's books that employ the informal features discussed in *Code-Switching*, with specific examples and page numbers. One way in which this fine list could be expanded even further would be for teachers and other readers to send in to the authors information on other books that exemplify the key features, with the steadily

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expanding list being made available on a publicly accessible Web site. Interested readers can contact Rebecca Wheeler at [rwheeler@odu.edu](mailto:rwheeler@odu.edu).

I also liked the authors' concluding chapter, which explores how to talk about code-switching with fellow teachers, parents, and administrators. Among the several good points in this chapter was their advice to start small and talk in general ways, as well as their observation that "with code-switching, the dynamics of the whole classroom change, from teacher as grammar police, to teacher as co-participant in the enterprise of crafting writing that fits the setting."

I have been asked many times for a book like this, by teachers and others. My belief and fervent hope is that this book will succeed in improving not only the dynamics of English language and literature classrooms, but also the performance of the students who pass through them, instilling in them a love of and excitement about the subject.

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