



A Language So Dear...

by Jeanette Winsor

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**JOURNEYS
IN LANGUAGE,
LEARNING AND CULTURE**

Helen Woodrow · Carmelita McGrath, Editors

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A LANGUAGE SO DEAR...

Jeanette Winsor

I have vivid memories of the language of my childhood. I enjoyed reading and being read to; I enjoyed telling stories. My father encouraged me by telling his own stories of ghosts and fairies, storms and shipwrecks, and many humorous tales.

We would sit in the kitchen, my father lying on the daybed with his arms above his head, and I perched on the end of the table with my feet on a chair, intent on his every word, questions ready for when he stopped for a breath. He was telling me the story of how he was on board of the Newfoundlander when it sank off the northern tip of Newfoundland during the spring seal hunt of 1953. His voice always started out in a "matter-of-fact" tone but quickly changed as the intensity of the story grew. My mother, reading in the rocking chair by the stove, often stopped and listened, adding her two-cents-worth from time to time.

Before he would begin his stories, my father would point out locations on a huge map of Canada tacked to the wall over the kitchen table: St. Anthony, Battle Harbour, L' Anse Au Loup, Flowers Cove, Eddie's Cove...

"I minds the time when we wus off the tip of the nardern peninsula, up dere. Dat wus me first year at the swiles, and I went out wid Captain Johnny Blackmore from Port Union. We steamed nart 'til we come into the patch and we had a good day at 'em. Had almost all we could take. I wus down in me bunk, sleep see, cause I wus tired."

"What time was it, Dad? Late in the night?"

"Mus' a been ten or 'leven o'clock. Uncle Jim come down and tole me to get me clothes on cause we 'ad to leave the ship. She was takin' on water fas'."

"But, was you 'fraid?"

"Yes maid, you knows I wus. I grabbed me boots and pulled 'em on. We wouldn't over the side of her no more than ten minutes 'fore she was gone out of sight. Under the ice, t'ats all dere was of her and all our 'ard work. We lost our bit of clothes, none of us had very much, see, and all our grub was gone. We had no other choice but to start to walk ashore."

"But was it dark? How did 'e know where to go? Was you still 'fraid, Dad?"

"Naw, t'was a beautiful night. Big moon, lots of stars. But cold! My maid, we almost froze. The further we walked the colder me left foot feeled. We stopped for a while cause some of the men wus bate out. I took off me boot to rub me foot and then I realized that I had forgot to put me left stockin' on. We dodged on 'til we seen lights on the land. We come ashore in Eddie's Cove and the people there took us in and treated us good 'til we could get a way home."

With language, my father spun a web of magic and taught me to appreciate the richness of the words we shared.

My first experience of being embarrassed by my language came in my early teens. We had moved to a neighbouring town and I had befriended two young ladies whose families were classed with the local "merchants." I was a fisherman's child. I remarked rather casually one day

that my mother couldn't buy me a hairbrush from the Avon catalogue because it was "too dear." I was questioned extensively on what the word "dear" meant. Surely I didn't mean the price was too "beloved," "cherished," or "sweet?" I recall struggling for a word to describe what I meant. Things have never been "too dear" for me since. I find many things "expensive," "costly," and even "pricy," but NEVER "too dear.

"It has been said that language, in our society, classifies us; that the language we speak is an indication of who we are, where we have been, and where we can go. Although there is no one cultural language or dialect that is acceptable over another, we often change our way of speaking with the situation, environment, and occasion in which we find ourselves. This changing of language "registers" is an important concept for the adult learner, and is especially important in outport Newfoundland where dialects are so prevalent. It is up to the adult educator to teach standard English usage, while at the same time validating and encouraging the use of the local dialect.

Through the years I have learned to say "house" and not "ouse," "going" and not "goin," and "how are you?" instead of "what 'e at?" But did I reclassify myself? Did I join the ranks of those who are considered important? educated? classy? I don't know. I do know that I have to change my language register to suit my environment. I have a register to speak at home; another at my mother's place and with my friends; and another at work.

I sit with a group of adult learners every day and listen to them talk. The dialects and the vibrant words I hear sometimes make me stop and reminisce about the language I was born and raised in. "What 'e want?" "I bes here every mornin' eight t'irty, so I think I'll bide 'ome de s 'evenin'." "I loves mat' but I 'ates English." I absorb the words and gently hold them in my thoughts because they are part of who I am. However, these adults look to me for the "right way to talk." I am the "teacher" and with that position comes many preconceptions, and misconceptions, steeped in traditions about what is "proper" English and what is not.

At work I speak "correctly;" I give directions, present lessons, ask questions, and reply in formal English. Yet, I often find myself slipping into the local dialect when I know a student is having a difficult time, or is uncomfortable or just plain frustrated with some area of work. I NEVER respond in formal English when a student is discussing a personal problem with me; that "teacher" English is too stark, too cold, too intimidating. I become a local; my replies would send English teachers running — "yes bye, I knows," "well maid, you can't 'elp dat." So what do students think?

I have interviewed 25 former and current students and I have found an interesting pattern. Many students who have gone outside the province to work have said that they are no longer ashamed of their dialect; those who have had little or no experience outside the province say their language is "terrible" and that they are "ashamed" to speak in front of tourists and other non-locals. Some of the latter seem to want to change their registers to suit the situation, while the former have already learned from experience how to do this. All want to know how to speak in standard English for certain situations, but at the same time they know that in other situations (i.e. with their friends and relatives) this standard form will not be appropriate or comfortable. Those who have travelled outside the province have had the chance to practice their formal registers; they have had time to use them successfully and build their confidence. They can switch from one register to another with ease.

An unfortunate situation arises when people have no concept of language registers, and the appropriateness of changing from one register to another as the situation demands. They may drop their cultural language entirely. They feel too ashamed of their language and then get caught being the "outsider" when they come back to the community and do not (or are unable to) change their register.

This notion of "shame" for our cultural language stems from the fact that our language has been, and often still is, ridiculed. The richness of our vocabulary was swept aside as teachers struggled to improve students' formal registers in overcrowded classrooms with discipline problems, time constraints, and teaching to the "mean." Yet, this way of teaching is what helps us achieve in the academic world, and in the world of employment. There is a delicate balance here that needs to be reached; the academic world does not need to cancel out the cultural world. Educators need to promote the maintenance of the cultural language by having students understand that theirs is not an "incorrect" form of English. At the same time, they need to encourage the use of standard English in its spoken and written forms so that students can work and achieve in the academic and business world.

Consider Randy, for example, an Adult Basic Education Level III student who spent nine years in the Canadian Armed Forces; when he went through boot camp, he was the only Newfoundlander among 120 soldiers. During all the time he spent in boot camp none of the other regiment members ever knew his home province. Randy speaks the local dialect so well that there is no doubt of his connection to this community; however, he had the ability and skills necessary to change his register to suit his situation.

How do we encourage adults to think about their dialect in a positive way and at the same time teach them standard English? We start by teaching students (and in many cases educators) that one should not confuse language variations with learning or cognitive deficiencies. Students have often indicated that because they have not mastered the variation of English used by many mainland Canadians, they are in some way inferior intellectually. This myth is so well entrenched in our society that it will take much time and effort to dispel (if indeed we are ever able to dispel it).

We have seen a fishery come to the brink of extinction because the fisher people, with their nonstandard English, were not perceived intelligent enough to know what was happening, or how best to deal with a resource with which they have unquestionable expertise. They have their professional "jargon," just as all other professions, yet they often get caught up in the old economic power struggles. We look back to our past and we know that the language of the fisherperson was not (and still is not) the language of the merchant. The merchant, seen as an authority figure with ties to politics and government officials, has the power. Today the merchant (large companies) is still there, but now there is an even bigger power with a more authoritative language — government bureaucracy. Although many changes have been made in the fishery over the past few decades, the language of the merchant still has power and the language of the fisherperson still plays a role in keeping him or her powerless.

I often try to explain how we sometimes perpetuate the myth by assuming a certain inferiority. I recall a visit with a relative in Ontario back in the 1980s. Her neighbour (a native of London, Ontario) asked if there were icebergs around Newfoundland now (this was in June) and what the temperature was. I said, "Oh yes, lots of icebergs and so cold you almost need to wear your vamps to bed."

"Your WHAT??" I felt the blood rush to my face and I quickly tried to cover the slip of the tongue with a more fitting term — "Aah, socks, WARM socks."

Today I look back and ask why I should have felt embarrassed — she was the one who did not know the meaning of the word I had used. In my culture it is a common, widely used and understood word. On the other hand, if she had said "The hedge is growing fantastically well this year," I (not having seen many hedges) would have been embarrassed for not knowing that word. Why do we have such a low opinion of our language that we sometimes need to psychologically flail ourselves when we use a dialect word that someone doesn't understand?

In her article "Whose Standard? Teaching Standard English," Linda Christensen suggests that educators "...need to equip [students] to question an education system that devalues their life and their knowledge." When we teach adults, isn't it our ultimate goal to get them to think critically about all areas of their lives? We struggle daily to encourage them to go beyond a mindless acceptance of the status quo; we should do no less with regard to their language. Before going into lessons on formal and standard English, we need to ask students: who made the rules for this English? who is enforcing the rules? who gains or loses from the rules? and who uses the rules to keep some "out" and others "in?" As we teach the standard, students need to be aware that this formal English is another "tool" in their repertoire that they will need to bring out in certain situations; they also need to know that their local dialect is just as acceptable in other situations. Language is like clothing. Just as we need to wear formal clothing to formal gatherings, we need to use formal English in specific situations.

I approach teaching English in several ways: I teach the formal, standardized English required by the Department of Education. I feel that this standard is a basis for all of the formal writing a student will do, and can serve as a guideline for their informal writing. They need rules to guide them, but this does not mean they have to adhere strictly to these rules. For example, when we write in our journals we want to write quickly to get our impressions and ideas on paper as soon as possible. We do not need to be caught up with punctuation, capitalization and subject-verb agreement. This "first draft" type of writing suits the situation just fine. On the other hand, the formal writing used in term papers at post-secondary institutions, and in reports and business letters in the world of work, requires several revisions and adherence to a set of rules.

Learners also need to discover the kinds of spoken language they need to deal with job interviews and workplace communications, and for other situations (speaking with a doctor or a child's teacher, giving a public presentation etc.). But I also encourage them to look at their dialect and the many uses it has in their lives. They deal with their families and neighbours in this language; they are able to use it comfortably and as a result communicate clearly. One cannot hope to capture and record the specific language of a community unless the people in that community are given an opportunity to understand the importance of their language and dialect as a valid and essential language register.

When we use the word "dialect" it is often seen in a pejorative way, but this should not be the case. Scholars of Black English in the United States have said that students can be "bidialectal." Using their knowledge of both standard English and their local dialects, students can extend their range of expressibility. We can see how well this has worked over the years when we consider the contributions of our Newfoundland language and dialects to literature, film and music.

I recall a conversation when I was encouraging a student to read Cassie Brown's *Death On The Ice*. I explained the significance of the story and proudly showed her some examples of her own dialect in this novel. She looked at me with great surprise and said, "Oh my! Suppose someone from St. John's picked this up; they'd never understand it. Or worse yet, suppose it ever got to the mainland; sure we'd we made fools of."

With this student, as with many others, I have to examine the use of language in terms of where it stands socially; this can often mean starting at the very basics of what language registers are, how we use them, and how important they are for our communication in an ever-changing world. I have to pose questions: who owns books and writing anyway? Are they the property of only the highly educated, "the powerful" in other words? Are they foreign and out of reach for those who do not "talk the talk" of the learned of society?

All learners need to know that their language, writing, and books are an expression of their world. When we give them an opportunity to read and write in multiple registers, we open up a whole new world of the printed word to them. Traditionally, educators encouraged the use of

standard English in both the spoken and written form in the classroom, often castigating those who dared to use their own dialect. This was effective in training them to use language in the academic setting; however, it rarely had meaning in their everyday lives. Along with having the unfortunate effect of "classifying" individuals and groups, it also sent the message that books and writing were the property and actions of the upper classes. When learners use their own words and the words of their peers in the classroom and in writing, they take ownership of the world of books and find the power in their own words.

I often introduce a course by having learners read a piece of writing in their own dialect. This helps break the ice, especially when they are about to tackle what they perceive to be a difficult communications course. Two pieces that I use frequently — because they are so close to the dialect of the Bonavista Bay area — are Harold Paddock's "Keep Up The Fince" and Georgiana Cooper's "The Boy and The Piggin." The first time I used Paddock's poem, I was working with a group of three Level II students. I wanted to impress on them the richness of the dialect used in this piece of work and I had hoped they would enjoy it. As I started to read the third paragraph, one of five Level III students, working at a table in the same room, interrupted me and asked if I would start over from the beginning. I did. We all enjoyed the poem and had a great discussion about dialect and language usage in general. Cooper's work (a shorter piece) is also full of a culture and language that students can identify with, and by which many are encouraged.

As communications instructors we constantly correct our students in an effort to prepare them for the job market and for their dealings with work, business and bureaucracy. In any communications course there is room to look at and encourage both standard and non-standard forms of English. There must also be a place in our curriculum where we can address the issues of language and power; ownership of books and writing; the standards and who sets them; and the myth of tying language variations to learning or cognitive deficiencies. When we pay more attention to correcting the way students express themselves than to what they have to say, we, unfortunately, send the message that their thoughts and ideas are of little value. When we value what is said, we celebrate our language and our culture.

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