

A review of John Honey, The Language Trap: race, class
and the 'standard English' issue in British schools.

(Kenton, Mddx.: National Council for Educational
Standards, 1983). Pp. iv + 38.

This is the third in a series of pamphlets published by the National Council for Educational Standards, named the Kay-Shuttleworth Papers on Education, after the nineteenth century educationist. Rhodes Boyson, introducing the series, hopes that these papers will provide a 'written statue' to the man. I have not seen the first two papers in the series, but, from what I have heard and read of Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth, he deserves a far better memorial than what we are given in Number 3.

Until recently, I had seen only the press accounts of John Honey's pamphlet, which attracted some comment from linguists, because of the bizarre picture being painted. Honey's standard reply was to complain that these critics had not read his pamphlet: for instance, in his Guardian letter replying to some comments of Dick Hudson, he modestly said, 'Published summaries obviously cannot do justice to the complexities of the case', and he felt sure that Hudson would agree that his views were 'reasonable, if only he will read the pamphlet'. I don't know what Hudson's current opinion is, but for my part, having read it, I must say I can find little in it that is reasonable. The published summaries weren't far out, really.

This pamphlet contains such a remarkable mixture of selective quotation, inaccurate evaluation, contradiction and perverse ratiocination that I really do begrudge the time it is taking to write this review. But I feel I have to, if only to provide a corrective to the grotesque account of my thinking, which it contains. And it may actually save me time, in the end. I have given several lectures to groups of teachers, in recent weeks, and the pamphlet has been cited several times, thus ruining what might otherwise have been a constructive workshop discussion. The very cause which Honey is championing, and which I too espouse, is thus at risk from the existence of this pamphlet, and the sooner its irrelevance can be made clear, the sooner we can all get on with the job.

To keep the discussion under control, I intend to restrict it largely to my own views. I think this is fair enough. I am, after all, at the top of Honey's hit-list of linguists (and collocated with Ken Livingstone, moreover, to add insult to injury), and cited at various places as one of the leaders of the 'conspiracy' Honey is intent on revealing. ('Conspiracy' is Honey's word, used in this pamphlet along with a range of other judicious items which well indicate the level of the 'reasoning' involved - items such as 'ritual incantation', 'acolytes', 'fantasies', 'fabrications'. The Guardian report was in fact somewhat more objective - though not so the Times!) My views, amongst others', are said to be 'unscientific', 'uncritical' and 'dangerously misleading'(29). What is a chap to do? I wasn't expecting to be credited with all this power, and I don't especially want to pick up the verbal cudgels on behalf of Lyons, Trudgill, Labov, and all the others implicated in the plot. The other linguists cited are all big boys and girls, and I am sure they can look after themselves, if they want to. I reckon that all I need to do is point out how fundamentally Honey has me wrong, in the course of which, readers will be able to judge the level of Honey's expertise for themselves. (I won't, incidentally, give a paraphrase of Honey's position, at all points. The pamphlet can be read quite quickly, and I can't imagine that anyone would want to read this review who hadn't read the pamphlet first.)

Let me begin with a general characterisation of the positions involved. What I am supposed to believe in, according to Honey, is such things as the following:

for schools to foster one variety of English is contrary to the findings of the science of linguistics (3)

to deny children the opportunity to learn to handle standard English, because of pseudo-scientific judgements about all varieties of language being 'equal' (24-5)

and my views are supposed to

underlie the attack on the teaching of standard English in schools (17).

What I actually believe in can be illustrated, conveniently, from my book on the subject, which Honey does not refer to (Child language, learning and linguistics, Arnold, 1976, esp. Ch.3) - for example:

We must by all means welcome expressiveness in children's use of spoken or written language, and encourage the use of those nonstandard forms that come naturally and powerfully to the child. On the other hand, spontaneous, informal expressiveness is not the only consideration, and the role of formal styles within dialects must not be minimised, especially in relation to the standard language.(p.71)

The children being taught now are going to have to grow up into a society where the formal standard language, in its various varieties, retains considerable prestige. Its practitioners still, in several walks of life, call the tune. And if the role of the teacher, at whatever level, is to prepare the child for normal participation in society, then he will be benefiting the child by providing him with as much command of the standard form of the language as is possible. (p.71)

A little earlier, I also remark:

The attitude of linguists has sometimes been caricatured as a view that 'Anything goes' in language use, or that 'grammar doesn't matter'. Nothing could be further from the truth. (p.70)

How can Honey possibly have arrived at such a misconstrual of a position? Was it simply ignorance of the literature? Or was there some kind of ulterior motive? Or both? I would love to know.

It should perhaps be mentioned, at this point, that the foundation of Honey's view that a 'school of linguistic thought' exists rests on his hit-list of quotations, which I head - the main linguistic ones being taken from a series of popular introductions to the subject. The three sentences he takes from me, for instance, come from a simplified little book I wrote for sixth

formers some years ago (What is Linguistics). But this does not stop him criticising this, and the other popular accounts by Lyons and Trudgill, for being 'incautious', and for failing to offer 'proofs' for their 'rulings' and 'proclamations'(5).

Really, Honey! Pick on books your own size! They do exist. Take the topic which has probably attracted more sophisticated discussion in linguistics than any other - the language/thought issue. Honey refers to his list of quotations as 'clumsy' in their handling of this issue (in a paragraph which is itself not a paragon of stylistic excellence), and it must be admitted that, in addressing my sixth-form audience, I was not as detailed as I might have been. But why then ignore the careful and considered views of, say, John Lyons (who also graces Honey's list), whose discussion of the Whorf hypothesis, and related matters, in his Semantics, anticipates ^{Honey's} blandly-expressed objections? Or the many psycholinguistic discussions of this issue, which have appeared in recent years? Why Honey does not refer to the primary technical sources in linguistics, I can only guess. He refers copiously to popularisations and secondary accounts of the subject. For instance, at one point he picks on Chomsky, but he doesn't do him the courtesy of referring directly to anything he has written - all we get is a reference to a TV interview with John Searle (7). In fact, a great deal of Honey's case rests on ideas he seems to have picked up from reviews in such academic sources as the TLS, TES, THES, Radio 4, the Sunday Times, the Observer, and New Society. I read these papers too, but I do not usually feel the need to give footnote references to them.

There are two main strands to Honey's argument. Firstly, linguistics is supposed to claim that all (varieties of) languages are equally good. And secondly, it therefore follows that for anyone to emphasise standard English in preference to the pupil's home dialect is unjustifiable, and harms the child's self-esteem. To take the first point. Honey harps on this phrase

'equally good' - though it is a phrase used only by some of the people towards the bottom of his hit-list, and not by the linguists at the top of his list. It is in fact a phrase I would never dream of using - and indeed I have only ever heard it used by non-specialists - but it is central to Honey's case.

What he does is to exploit the ambiguity of the term to his own advantage, by taking it out of context. 'Good' can relate to two states of affairs;

(i) comparably efficient, adequate, or whatever, from a linguistic point of view;

(ii) comparably efficient, adequate, or whatever, from a sociological point of view.

What Honey does, quite simply, is assume that linguists are making a sociological judgement, when they intend only a linguistic one. There is nothing inherently contradictory about the following two statements:

all (varieties of) languages are equal, from a linguistic viewpoint;

some are more equal than others, from a sociological viewpoint.

There is evidence in Honey's own account that he accepts this distinction, so why he should ignore it when criticising others is a mystery. For instance, he accepts that all languages 'are likely to have a regular and consistent grammatical structure', and 'specific ones should not be simply written off as debased' (17), and later, having given a bizarre transcription of non-standard London speech, he says 'there is clearly no doubt of the communicative adequacy of the "dialect" version ... among speakers of that self-same "dialect"' (23).

Perhaps by choosing sixth-form books to criticise, Honey misses the subtleties of the linguistic position. In particular, he ignores the synchronic perspective within which such statements are made. For instance, he concludes that linguists who hold the view that all languages are equally adequate for their speakers' needs would have to say that the speakers of the less 'advanced' languages do not need commodities such as medicine. But this absurd position is of Honey's own devising, due to his taking a synchronic statement and applying it to the diachronic domain, when contact situations develop. His whole argument on p.11 actually relates to what happens in contact situations.

And yet, at other times, he seems well aware of the linguist's position. For instance, on p.17 he allows that 'the adequacy of all languages and dialects to their speakers is only demonstrable in terms of a static and limited conception of those speakers' needs'. Which is, of course, exactly what a linguist might say, though not so dismissively.

Let us consider further Honey's beliefs on this point, as expressed in his summary evaluation of over 70 years work in anthropological linguistics: 'there is, in fact, absolutely no evidence that languages keep pace with the social development of their users'(6). One could riposte: there is no evidence that they do not. Or say: go look in IJAL, AnL, and elsewhere. But what is the point of accumulating details when Honey contradicts himself immediately: 'Certainly they [languages] may stay abreast of the general needs of the speakers to discuss current aspects of their environment'(6). Ah, this little word, general, italicised by Honey, but nowhere defined. It is, as I heard a Frenchman say last week, 'le cop-out'! Honey tries to excuse his contradiction by citing two types of exception. He says there is a time-lag before new concepts are given names and incorporated into the vocabulary of the language. An astute observation. Certainly true. He refers to the post-sputnik era at one point (7), which makes me recall that it must have taken a good 12 hours for the word sputnik to have incorporated itself into the vocabulary of the world's languages, when its launch was announced on 4 October 1957. But one cannot really discuss this class of 'exception', for Honey gives not a single example - nor of his other class of 'exception' either (of certain individuals lacking vocabulary). For someone who keeps clamouring for 'hard evidence', this is a bit much.

Honey's misinterpretation of the linguist's position goes on and on. At the end of his criticism of the 'theory of functional optimism', as he calls it (3), he says: 'So it is simply not true that all languages and dialects are

equally "good"(11-12), referring again to the teachers' characterisation of the linguistic arguments, and continues, 'At best it is an open question'(12). I do believe he really thinks he is the first person to spot this. Again, I have not the time to go back through the history of linguistics to find the many references which antedate Honey. Let me simply quote from myself again: in the context of a discussion of language functions, I say:

For what are functions, in the final analysis? How many are there? How great are the differences between one function and the other? ... The regrettable answer is that no one knows. No one has yet worked out a comprehensive classification of language varieties... (76)

and go on in this vein at some length. In the light of this kind of thing, it will be evident that Honey's claim that 'few [linguists] have stopped to ask the necessary awkward questions'(6) is no more than wishful thinking. Indeed, it is on the basis of my attitude above that I have been attacked as an anti-functionalist, and set up as someone opposed to several of the people whom Honey believes to belong to the same 'school' (though in fact my aim is to achieve an integration of functional and formal approaches). I have spent several pages, in various books and articles, pondering these problems, and whole sections of my work on assessing the (standard and non-standard) English of language handicapped children are devoted to questions of modelling psycholinguistic complexity. And I am among the least of the chosen ones in psycholinguistics. Honey therefore again displays only his ignorance when he writes his footnote 19: 'The functional significance of different kinds of grammatical complexity is a poorly explored area among the linguistic theorists discussed here' - though it must be noted that he has read Bodmer on the point.

By now, it should be clear what Honey's technique is. He attributes extreme and absurd views to linguists, and then demolishes the absurdity, thus thinking he has made progress. He then cites reasonable views, but fails to provide the quotations, from these same linguists, to show that they have

thought of them first. There is indeed a school of thought in this pamphlet, but it is not the one Honey thinks is there; it is, rather, a school of imaginary linguistics. And it becomes particularly obnoxious in the second strand of the argument, referred to above, when the question of the teaching of standard English is addressed.

First, some examples of statements which Honey appears to think I, inter alia, would disagree with:

'the whole of our educational system ... presupposes the ability to handle standard English' (19)

the social conventions, whereby Royal Society Fellows use standard English, is 'a sociolinguistic fact' (20)

'we can make a start [sic] on reasserting the importance to all pupils ... of achieving a ready facility in standard English' (28)

'to foster the use of non-standard varieties ..., at the expense of standard English' (my ital.) is not to benefit the disadvantaged speakers this would put him 'at an unfair disadvantage'(20) ... 'in any situation where authority, respectability or credibility are at issue' (21)

'the adequacy for [dialect] communication outside the limited community of speakers of this non-standard variety ... is strictly limited; and the consequence of promoting the use of such language varieties in our school system, at the expense of standard English ... must also disadvantage them outside it' (23-4). (my ital.)

Buzz, buzz, as Hamlet said to Polonius. But note that phrase, 'at the expense of standard English'. Honey really seems to believe that many schools are not just 'fostering' non-standard varieties (true), but that they are doing so at the expense of standard English (by no means true). This is what he sees as his 'language trap' - persuading children 'that their particular non-standard variety of English is in no way inferior, nor less efficient for purposes of communication, but simply different'(21#2). This, he says, 'is

to play a cruel trick'(22). I wish he would cite some 'hard evidence'. For my part, I have given talks, workshops, courses, and the like to groups of teachers at all levels over the past 12 years, and I do not recall any case where a teacher was actually working to a policy which attacked standard English, while fostering non-standard communication. I allow there may be the odd case - there are extremists in all fields - but I do not suppose the odd case to be justification for the massive piece of scaremongering which Honey has dreamed up in this pamphlet.

The reality of the situation, as I have repeatedly tried to argue in my own work, is this. Linguists are not against standard English. Rather, they are against intolerance of a child's (or adult's) home dialect. Honey thinks that to be for the latter is to be against the former. In fact, we are for both - or, to be precise, we are for both in the context of an applied sociolinguistic study (in a 'pure' sociolinguistic study, of course, the notion of for vs. against is irrelevant). Honey's own position on this issue is ambivalent. He apparently allows that we are entitled to attack social and aesthetic prejudice (22), though he seems to suggest that because it is a 'formidable' task, it should not be attempted. (Formidable it is, but as it took only 100 years or so to establish the form of English prescriptivism in the first place, I would hope that it might take only 100 or so to see it go.) Honey has been impressed by the failure of the Chinese government to alter its citizen's taste in matters of feminine beauty, and seems to think that linguistic taste in Britain is similarly unalterable. But it is difficult to be sure, for he immediately allows that 'gradual change' is taking place these days (I would hope, thanks largely to the work of twentieth century linguists). This is exactly what I and others want, of course - gradual change, and not the 'quantum leap' which is in Honey's mind (23).

In moving towards his own 'solution', Honey hits out at the widely-held sociolinguistic view of 'bidialectalism', implying en route that this 'compromise' does not satisfy us either (i.e. does not satisfy those who want 'the whole edifice [of standard English] to come tumbling down')(30). He quotes Trudgill's 'Who is to say what is "acceptable"', and comments, 'Since society has already answered that question in ways which Dr Trudgill and others are apparently unable to recognise...'(31). But, as should now be clear, it is not that we cannot recognise these issues: it is simply that Honey cannot recognise his own lack of awareness of what has already been said on the matter. Moreover, there is indeed a really difficult question here, which Trudgill for one recognises, and which cannot be airily dismissed. It is being thoroughly discussed, at present, in various books on language and social psychology.

Honey's own proposal is for 'bilectalism', which he claims is different from bidialectalism, because it does not make any assumptions about 'equal goodness', etc. (31). But as the equal goodness issue is a myth, his proposal reduces to the bidialectalism one. There is nothing new in this pamphlet at all.

Or is there? Tucked away on p.31 is the only hint we are given of Honey's underlying attitude. He wants the underprivileged to 'achieve a ready facility in standard English, even at the expense of their development in their original non-standard variety. Even at the expense, I am tempted to add, of their self-esteem...' (31). So there it is. Just a little step away from the 'straightforward suppression' (30) of the traditional approaches to non-standard language. It is sad, that someone who calls himself, amongst other things, a sociolinguist, could say this. Equally sad, that he could say it a few lines after acknowledging, in a footnote, his personal debt to the marvellous Barbara Strang.

So what else is there to say? Perhaps three further comments. First, about Labov, who is panned here for providing 'a minimum of hard evidence' in his seminal 1969 article. I have some reservations about Labov's approach, as it happens, and I would not wish to associate myself with the extreme views of some of those influenced by him. But let us be fair. It is true that Labov's paper these days looks somewhat extreme. But it was written 15 years ago. It was the first of its kind, and, as so often when new directions come into a subject, it presented a more black-and-white picture than we have learned to see since. Personally, I think Labov's conclusion about BEV being superior was indeed going too far (15). The contrast between 'precision' and 'empty pretension' cannot be generalised, as Honey says. These days, I think we can all see this - but it is thanks to Labov that we can see it. Labov did more than anyone else to establish a climate in which scientific investigation of non-standard English could proceed. Before Labov, no one gave non-standard varieties the attention they deserved. Now they do. Honey takes a 15-year-old paper out of its historical context, evaluates it in terms of today's climate of opinion, and then has the gall to dub it 'a travesty of scientific method' (15). He ignores the fact that all the issues he raises about this field of research - issues of representativeness, semantic interpretation, context, interview conditions, and so on - have been raised since, and dealt with responsibly, in such journals as Language in Society. There are now several studies of the factors governing acceptability (22). But you can't win, with this man. When linguists do start on the more detailed studies of BEV, Honey criticises them anyway, saying, 'It is unfortunate that not all linguists agree on what these rules are' (16).

Secondly, a comment about innateness, and related matters. Honey is very muddled about Chomsky, and his supposed influence on the members of the hit-list. He seems to think that the 'powerful group of academics', 'supporters of extreme egalitarian and "progressive" notions in the social sciences'

(viz. yours truly, inter alia) have 'swallowed' Chomsky's innateness theory. He cites Sampson, as a noble exception, a linguist who 'dare[s] to challenge the Chomskyan position' - but why didn't he cite, say, Crystal? Compare:

Honey: 'Chomsky offers no firm empirical evidence for his theory of the innate basis of all human linguistic behaviour' (8)

Crystal: 'there is a long way to go before such ideas ... become convincing. The precise nature of any innate principle needs to be much more precisely defined, and it is difficult to see how this might be done ... ', etc. etc.

(ibid., p.36)

The 'equally good' issue raises its head again at this point, of course, in its psycholinguistic form. Here is Honey's comment:

'we have not been given any evidence that all languages or dialects have a grammatical structure of equal complexity' (17).

Of course not, as anyone knows who has investigated the vast literature on linguistic complexity. It may indeed be the case that some (varieties of) languages are 'less well equipped as vehicles of certain kinds of intellectual activity than others' (9), that 'the use of different types of language can entail differential intellectual consequences and this could surely affect educational progress' (12). All of this is indeed possible, and I know of no linguist who would deny the possibility. Providing evidence on the point is the tricky thing, in view of the methodological problems which take up so much space in current psycholinguistic journals. But wait! Honey says he has evidence on the matter: 'there is mounting evidence that certain types of complexity of language may reflect corresponding complexity of thought' (17). One waits, expectantly. There is a footnote - possibly to contain a host of psycholinguistic references? No. We are given a reference to a book on scientific English by one Lee Kok Cheong, published by Singapore University Press in 1978, to which is added, 'This important book has not been given the attention it deserves'. I look forward to reading it, therefore, but I think we will need a little more by way of hard evidence before Honey's view becomes plausible.

Lastly, Honey makes a lot of his requirement of 'hard evidence', and this has impressed his series editors to the extent that they give special typographical prominence to the point in an introductory summary (iii): the pamphlet 'shows how these theories have no basis whatever in proven fact'. But, just in case the status of Honey's own 'evidence' hasn't emerged clearly in the above pages, here are a few more observations, taken at random, which we are presumably to accept as factual:

'the prejudices against non-standard [English] [are becoming] stronger' (23) (someone should warn the Australian, Liverpudlian, Scots and other humourists, before their TV programmes get too successful)

'most children take these [sc. the embarrassments and new social situations which they encounter as they move away from their underprivileged origins] in their stride' (31) (someone should tell the school remedial service) that there's nothing to be worried about)

'there are almost no 'pure' dialect speakers left in Britain' (18) (someone should tell the Leeds Dialect Survey) they're wasting their time)

'the inability of our schools to turn out pupils with satisfactory standards of English' (3) (so what is the stuff that most of my students speak and write called, then?)

'many teachers claim that [the sociolinguist (sic) Basil Bernstein's] proposed analysis [of elaborated vs. restricted] helps' (19) (these I would really like to meet, to discover why; for my experience is that the original distinction proposed by Bernstein hindered rather than helped - which I suppose is why it was replaced in due course by something better)

'we have seen how a great industry has grown up, dedicated to disparaging standard English'(28), a 'powerful school of linguistic thought'(5)

In fact, of course, there is no industry, no school here at all, except in Honey's imagination. What we have is a spectrum of opinions, ranging from an extreme radical position to a fairly conservative one. In relation to

the standard English question, I like to think I am somewhere right of centre. In relation to questions of linguistic theory, I differ from the other linguists in his list in so many ways, and they amongst each other, that I doubt whether the metaphor of a continuum of views is even appropriate.

Towards the end of the pamphlet, Honey professes to see a paradox in the world: 'how can we seek to promote awareness among our pupils of how language works when the "experts" in linguistics to whom they turn for guidance show themselves to be, on specific issues, so unscientific, so uncritical, and so dangerously misleading' (29). He then cites me, Lord preserve us. The real paradox is how Honey has managed to persuade the Kay-Shuttleworth editors that his paper was worth publishing, and how he has managed in recent weeks to attract so much publicity, when it is in fact his own work which is unscientific and misleading. The NCES ought to look to its own standards. The shame of it is that, by adopting such an extreme line, and setting a polemic tone for the discussion which must ensue, he has now obscured a whole set of real issues. There are indeed extremists in the field of sociolinguistics whose views need to be set in perspective; there are ambiguities and vaguenesses and naive educational philosophies. Honey will be used to this, for he is a professor of education. There is real work to be done, on the question of how standard and non-standard English is to be integrated within the curriculum, and a lot of people, including those on his hit-list, are doing it. I would like to have been doing it this week, now largely taken up by this commentary. But what is particularly sad about this whole business is that many of the motivations which have led Honey to write his pamphlet, I too share. I have been as busy as anyone in working on syllabuses for teacher training (3,29), or in providing text-books for use in schools on the way language works (29), or in writing teaching materials (all in standard English, be it noted) for use at both primary and secondary levels. All of this is well-known, for anyone who wishes to see. And I am by no means the only one. So at the end of this exercise, I remain profoundly confused as to Honey's real motivations, as to why he should

be so ready to see black where there is white - or at least, various shades of grey. Perhaps one day he will write at a scholarly level on the matter.

David Crystal

University of Reading