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‘That path won’t lead nowhere’: non-standard English in UK students’ writing over time

Conference Paper Abstract

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Abstract

Non-standard language varieties have received considerable research attention in the field of education internationally, with a substantial number of studies examining the use of non-standard features in students' speaking and/or writing (Cheshire, Edwards, Münstermann & Weltens, 1989; de Kleine, 2006; Williamson, 1990, 1995; Williamson & Hardman, 1997). This study focused on the use of non-standard English in 16-year-old students' writing in the UK. Unlike previous studies which examined this issue synchronically (i.e. by focusing on a single point in time) (e.g. Williamson, 1990, 1995; Williamson & Hardman, 1997), this study investigated the use of non-standard English diachronically by analysing students' writing at two points in time, namely, in 2004 and 2014.

The study was driven mainly by three questions:

1. Did students' texts contain more or less non-standard features in 2014 compared to 2004?
2. Which non-standard features were *most* commonly used in students' texts in 2014? How do these compare to the non-standard features most commonly used in students' texts in 2004?
3. How were the non-standard features distributed geographically in 2014? How does this geographical distribution compare to that observed in 2004?

For the investigation of these questions, 858 extracts of students' writing were analysed. These were obtained from essays written by two cohorts of 16-year-old students as part of a government-regulated high-stakes English Language examination taken in 2004 (403 extracts) and 2014 (455 extracts). The students came from different parts of the UK and from a wide range of schools both fee-paying and state-funded. They were sampled in a stratified manner based on their gender and overall grade in the English Language qualification.

The extracts of writing analysed came from texts which the students produced in response to a narrative task. In 2004, the students were presented with the beginning of a story and were asked to continue it. In 2014, the students were invited to write a story in response to one of two prompts: (a) Write a story called 'The path that led to nowhere', and (b) Write a story that involves your attempt to cook a meal for others.

To define non-standard English, this study drew mainly on the typology of non-standard English developed by Hudson and Holmes (1995). Twenty-one features were classified as non-standard English in this investigation. Examples include past tense and past participle forms of irregular verbs (e.g. 'I *had saw* a small alley', 'I *heard* an old lady calling', 'the midwife *done* an ultrasound'), lack of subject-verb agreement (e.g. '*we was* so hungry', '*the trees was* blowing'), adjectives used as adverbs (e.g. 'she handled everything *good*'), use of multiple negation (e.g. 'that path *won't lead nowhere*'), use of 'what' as a relative pronoun (e.g. 'the match *what* was on the big screen'), and regularisation of reflexive pronouns (e.g. 'he needed support for *hissself* and his family').

The analysis showed an increase in the use of non-standard English in students' writing from 2004 to 2014. This increase affected mainly low-attaining students. A number of findings will be shared and discussed in this presentation including: (a) a list of the most commonly used non-standard features in 2014 indicating the non-standard English forms that should be prioritised in teaching, and (b) information about their geographical distribution.

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Full paper

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