Perception of Interviewees with Less-Than-Perfect English: Implications for Newspaper Citations

By Paul Isom, Edward Johnson, James McCollum, and Dolf Zillmann

This study explored how people perceive the intelligence of a source in relationship to the style of English used. Male and female research participants read a newspaper article that cited a private or public, male or female source on a political issue. Citations were (a) in correct English, (b) in regional dialect, or (c) in incorrect, flawed English. Readers assigned higher intelligence to those individuals cited in correct English. The authors discuss the implications for verbatim or corrected citing of sources.

"The cruelest thing you can do to anybody is to quote him literally," Arnold Gingrich, former editor-in-chief of *Esquire* magazine, once said.[1] Quoting literally, whether from a speech, press conference, town meeting, or one-on-one interview, constitutes an integral part of reporting. Editors and media writing textbooks are quick to point out the advantages of direct quotations, the starting point for stories with interviews.[2] Direct quotes are said to inject human interest, help make writing sound more natural, break up the dry facts of the story,[3] and make the page look more eye-pleasing and thus improve readability.[4] In addition, direct quotes are thought to bring credibility to a story.[5]

But what if the literally quoted material is less than perfect? Print journalists confront this issue every day. People rarely speak in complete sentences and often mispronounce or misarticulate words.[6] Furthermore, when sources do speak grammatically, they often sprinkle their sentences with distinct regionalisms. Killenberg and Anderson provide a typology of eleven problematic quotations presenting journalists with dilemmas.[7] Confounding this is the journalists' difficulty in capturing their sources' words accurately. Research shows that the words between journalists' quotation marks differ significantly from the words spoken by sources.[8]

Journalists traditionally have had broad discretion in determining the dialectic and grammatical content of direct quotes. Previous guidelines have been based on good intentions rather than on knowledge of implications and, especially, consequences for the source. Moreover, unambiguous guidelines have not been formulated. Media-writing textbooks offer somewhat arbitrary and inconsistent recommendations for the cleaning up of interviewees' imperfect grammar. Although one textbook argues that it is not only permissible but necessary to clean up quotes because people fail to speak concisely,[9] another stresses that a journalist's policy invariably should

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be to place only the exact words of the speaker inside quotation marks.[10] Some textbooks advise budding journalists to take the honest approach by precisely quoting sources when the words are clear and to paraphrase when they are not.[11] One textbook suggests that grammatical mistakes of sources who are unaccustomed to speaking with journalists should be corrected.[12] Yet another says that doctoring errors is acceptable if the person quoted would recognize spoken errors in the printed version.[13] The textbooks say very little, meanwhile, about dealing with dialects.

McManus provides four options for the journalist deliberating how to handle a problematic quote: (1) paraphrase the direct quote and therefore avoid using quotation marks; (2) clean up the "ums," grammatical errors, and fractured syntax; (3) add a word or two to complete a speaker's thought or to make it clearer; and (4) shape quotes for stylistic purposes or narrative flow.[14] The Supreme Court, in *Masson v. New Yorker Magazine*, acknowledged the demands of reporting imperfect language when Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote, "Writers and reporters by necessity alter what people say, at the very least to eliminate grammatical and syntactical infelicities," and ruled that deliberately altering quotes does not necessitate libel.[15]

The *Associated Press Stylebook* leaves room for subjectivity in whether or not to correct what Preston called eye-dialect forms: "Do not routinely use abnormal spellings such as 'gonna' in attempts to convey regional dialects or mispronunciations.[16] Such spellings are appropriate, however, when relevant or help to convey a desired touch in a feature."[17] What "abnormal" is to mean is left for the writer to decide. However, AP recently has made an about-face regarding grammatical dilemmas. The 1984 stylebook recommended that quotes "normally should be corrected" to remove spoken errors that, if printed, would embarrass a source,[18] whereas the 1990 version urges journalists never to change quotes "even to correct minor grammatical errors or word usage. Casual minor tongue slips may be removed by using ellipses, but even that should be done with extreme caution. If there is a question about the quote, either don't use it or ask the speaker to clarify."[19]

Such ambiguous style rules help explain why so many publications deal with this issue in different ways. Most newspapers have adopted a policy, if unofficially, of cleaning up a source's grammar errors or speech patterns unless they are important to the story.[20] The *Philadelphia Inquirer* has a lengthy statement in its policy manual that discourages the changing of quotes unless they are unnecessarily demeaning – apparently as judged by a writer or editor. *Sports Illustrated* acknowledges that it cleans up grammar regularly to prevent exposing athletes to ridicule. The *New York Times*, meanwhile, has written that it would be unethical to doctor a quote. The *Washington Post*, although not having written guidelines, allows reporters to use ellipses and brackets, and sometimes to correct grammar; editors consider quote-manipulations on a case-by-case basis.

Despite the indeterminate approach of many newspapers to the use of verbatim grammar, the credibility and perception of the source is at stake. According to Chartprasert,[21] communication researchers attribute the credibility of sources in large measure to their media-created public perception of traits and characteristics manifest in their "images." Broad components of source credibility include such traits as expertness and trustworthiness, as well as attractiveness and dynamism.[22] Stable qualities such as intelligence and status are assumed to be inferred from quotes. Speech communication researchers have determined, in fact, that audiences can identify the social standing of a speaker from just a short segment of speech – mostly from what

has been said, but also from how it has been said.[23] Similarly, dialects can shape the perception of relevant features of cited sources. Noelle-Neumann noted that this perceptual process is greatly facilitated by existing stereotypes: "Stereotypes spread quickly in conversation and immediately convey negative or, in some cases, positive associations."[24]

Grammatical forms that make up dialects are often, but not always, socially disfavored. The social values of speech are derived from the social positions of their community of speakers. This applies, of course, to their community of readers as well. Milroy and Milroy state: "Although spoken language is diverse in its forms and functions, the norms of written grammar, spelling and vocabulary are much more uniform."[25] This concept is understood not only by linguists and socio-dialectologists, but by newspaper style-rule writers who warn against embarrassing and demeaning quoted speech.

Attempts have been made to identify and enforce usage of "correct" or "proper" English.[26] Speakers of certain dialects – vernacular black English, for example – are often encouraged to alter their speech to improve their social status. As Montgomery notes, Southerners consider their speech a proud badge, yet acknowledge that it is often caricatured by people from other regions.[27]

The inference is that directly quoting forms of speech that are identified as nonstandard, informal, careless, sloppy, or plain incorrect, and hence as potentially stigmatizing, affects the way a speaker is perceived;[28] moreover, the influence of less-than-perfect utterances, as compared to their perfect-English denotative equivalent, tends to be detrimental to the perception of a source of information. Such possibility raises the question of validation. Is there evidence supporting the presumed effects? A search of the pertinent literature came up empty.

This investigation seeks to fill the apparent void by examining the implications of direct quotation of grammatical imperfections in the form of errors or dialect, compared to perfect English in a control condition, for the perception of relevant traits of sources. Focus is on the perception of intelligence, because this trait is likely to be a particularly strong mediator of credence given to the source's message.

In linguistic terms, the experimental variation involves potentially stigmatized erroneous morphological and syntactical expression, as well as potentially stigmatized nonstandard morphological and grammatical expression. Morphology is defined as the way in which morphemes are combined in words, and syntactical use is the organization of words into sentences. Both modes of expression are often tied to regions. A difference of note is that erroneous expression may be generally stigmatized, whereas nonstandard forms of English may be stigmatized in some regions or linguistic communities, but not in others.[29] This is to say that users of Boston dialect, for instance, may be well received by Bostonians, but suffer stigmatization outside their particular dialectical community.

It is conceivable, moreover, that audiences place different demands on speakers in private and public roles. Shoppers and parents whose views on bargains or child care are cited may well be "forgiven" for imperfect utterances. Public figures, such as politicians or educators, may not. At the very least, persons in public roles, perhaps because they are expected to have received superior education and to have shed any linguistically defined "provinciality," are held to somewhat higher standards and, hence, suffer the effects of linguistic stigmatization more strongly.

These considerations lead to the following hypotheses about the effect of imperfect or dialectical English in newspaper citations on the perception of the sources' intelligence.

H1: Sources cited in incorrect English are perceived as less intelligent than sources cited in correct English.

H2: Sources cited in dialectical English are perceived as less intelligent than sources cited in correct English. This effect is stronger for nonspeakers of the dialect than for its users.

H3: The effects predicted in H1 and H2 are stronger for cited sources in public roles than for cited sources in private roles.

Method

A 3 x 2 x 2 x 2 independent-measures design was used. The factors were (1) cited expression (correct, dialectical, incorrect); (2) social role (private, public); (3) gender of interviewee; and (4) gender of reader.

Two similar stories about educational reform were created. On this subject, either a parent (private role) or a state education commissioner (public role) were interviewed. Direct citation from the interview was presented in one of the three morphological/syntactical expressive forms. Citation was attributed to either a male or a female interviewee. Thus, there were twelve story versions.

All experimental participants read two unrelated news stories. A first story was used to prevent focus on the second, experimental story and to mask the objective of the investigation. After reading the first story, respondents were asked their perceptions of the story's subject. The participants then read one of the twelve versions of the experimental story and were asked their perceptions of the source cited in it.

Respondents came from two introductory communication classes, with 195 students participating in the sessions. There were 91 males and 104 females. Respondents received extra credit for participation.

Procedure. Experimental booklets containing the news stories and questionnaires were distributed. The booklets had been arranged so that the twelve versions appeared in random order. The session administrator directed respondents through the procedure, one segment at a time.

The experimental booklet started with a questionnaire collecting demographic data. The questions were followed by the first story. It concerned outdoor trails and was titled "Hikers and bikers find trials on their trails." The story was attributed to the Associated Press and was made to appear as a feature story from a state newspaper. Following the questionnaire about this story, the experimental story was presented. With the attribution "From staff reports," it was made to appear as a news story from a daily newspaper.

News-Story Variation. The manipulated, experimental story dealt with a news source's reactions to the defeat in the state legislature of a formula that would equitably fund both rich and poor public schools in the state.

Social Role. Six of the twelve versions reported the reactions of a fictitious president of a fictitious Parents' Forum and were titled "Parents demand action on education reform." The other six reported the reactions of

a fictitious state education commissioner and were titled "Culpepper calls for action on education reform."

Gender of Interviewee. In half the stories, the parent or the education commissioner was presented as male; in the other half, as female. This was accomplished by using gender-defining first names (Lee, Jane) and personal pronouns (he, she).

Cited Expression. Five manipulations each were used to create the two versions of imperfect speech. Dialect was accomplished by transforming correct utterances, such as "want to," to their dialectical equivalent, "wanna." Analogously, incorrect utterances were accomplished by transforming correct utterances, such as "we were," to their incorrect equivalent "us were." The following transformations exemplify the manipulations. (1) Correct: Right now, they don't have any money to do anything. Dialectical: Right now, they don't have any money to do a dang thing. Incorrect: Right now, they ain't got no money to do anything. (2) Correct: If you had any common sense, you could figure out the difference between ... Dialectical: If y'all have a lick of common sense, you could figure out the difference between ... Incorrect: If you have any common sense, you might could figure out the difference between ... (3) Correct: I think Folsom is really facing an uphill battle now. Dialectical: I reckon Folsom is really facing an uphill battle now. Incorrect: I think Folsom, he's really facing an uphill battle now.

Demographics. Prior to exposure to the news stories, respondents were asked about their first language, in which state they had spent the most time growing up, gender, and news consumption habits. Nearly all (97%) cited English as their first language. Twenty-three different states were cited as where they grew up, with 89% coming from Southern states. Respondents claimed to have read, on average, a newspaper three times during a week.

Measures of Interviewee Perception. After being presented with the experimental story, respondents were asked to rate the cited source on a set of sixty-four adjective scales listed in alphabetical order. The scales ranged from 0 (absence of trait) to 10 (extreme manifestation of trait). The traits were as follows: aggressive, angry, articulate, authoritative, believable, bright, callous, caring, charismatic, charming, cheerful, cold, compassionate, competent, concerned, conservative, convincing, correct, cosmopolitan, deceitful, dedicated, dependable, dull, energetic, flexible, friendly, generous, good, happy, helpful, honest, ignorant, informed, insightful, intelligent, interesting, irritating, kind, lazy, logical, loyal, mean, moralistic, neighborly, obnoxious, old-fashioned, peaceful, perceptive, pessimistic, powerful, pretentious, proud, righteous, romantic, rude, sleazy, slow, sophisticated, spiteful, tolerant, stupid, trustworthy, truthful, and understanding.

Results

Responses were received from 195 students. A principal component analysis, followed by varimax rotation, reduced the ratings on the sixty-four scales to four factors of interest. The first factor loaded heaviest on evaluative terms,[30] such as "good." To obtain a composite measure of perceived *Goodness*, six traits showing factor one loadings greater than |.65| were combined with unity weight for each. The scales were: good, honest, loyal, moralistic, trustworthy, and truthful. For this composite, Cronbach's alpha = .90.

The second factor loaded heaviest on "intelligent." Analogous to the treatment of factor one, a composite was formed, including all scales with a factor two loading of |.65|. The scales were: articulate, bright, intelligent, and ignorant. Because "ignorant" loaded negatively, the ratings on this scale

TABLE 1

Perceived Intelligence of Persons Cited in a Newspaper Article as a Function of Social Role and Use of Language

Social role	Cited expression			Combined
	Correct	*Dialect*	*Incorrect*	
Public	7.46[a]	4.73[b]	4.77[b]	5.70*
Private	5.70[a]	3.84[b]	1.93[c]	3.82*
Combined	6.60[a]	4.33[b]	3.28[c]	

Note: Comparisons between means are within social role or social role combined (horizontal). Mean scores with different letter superscripts differ significantly ($p < .05$) by Tukey's test. Mean scores marked by asterisk differ significantly ($p < .05$) by F test. All public-private differences (within correct, dialect, and incorrect cited expression) are significant ($p < .05$) by Tukey's test.

were reverse-scored. For the perceived *Intelligence* composite, Cronbach's alpha = .90.

The remaining two factors loaded highly on the concepts of *Friendliness* and *Meanness*. The third factor was defined by "cheerful" and "friendly," the fourth by "mean," "rude," and "spiteful." For the composites, Cronbach's alpha was .75 and .81, respectively.

The analysis of variance performed on the *Goodness* composite yielded a main effects of social role, with $F(1,171) = 19.40$, $p < .001$, and an interaction between role and cited expression, with $F(2,171) = 3.62$, $p < .05$. Irrespective of citation, the education commissioner (M = 6.67) received more favorable *Goodness* ratings than the parent (M = 5.55). The interaction suggests, inexplicably so, somewhat less favorable *Goodness* ratings for the parent when using less-than-perfect English (M = 6.12 for correct, M = 5.73 for dialectical, and M = 4.83 for incorrect), but not for the commissioner (M = 6.82 for correct, M = 6.31 for dialectical, and M = 6.93 for incorrect). There were no other effects.

Intelligence. Analysis of this theoretically most significant composite yielded various effects: main effects of cited expression, with $F(2,171) = 38.39$, $p < .001$, and social role, with $F(1,171) = 32.65$, $p < .001$, and an interaction between these two variables, with $F(2,171) = 32.65$, $p < .001$. All associated means are displayed in Table 1. There were no other effects.

As can be seen from the table, perceived intelligence was significantly reduced for the education commissioner by his/her use of imperfect English, whether dialectical or incorrect. It was also reduced for the parent; but interestingly, most strongly so when he/she used incorrect English. The use of dialect, nonetheless, did prove detrimental as well.

Irrespective of the social role of the interviewee, compared against correct English the use of dialect diminished perceived intelligence, and the use of incorrect, flawed English diminished it yet further. Irrespective of language use, the education commissioner was granted a higher level of intelligence than the parent.

It should be noted that the reported effects were uniform for gender of interviewee and gender of respondent.

Friendliness and Meanness. For these composites, the analysis of variance failed to reveal any significant effects.

Discussion

The findings strongly support the first and second hypothesis. As predicted, the use of imperfect English expression, whether incorrect (H1) or dialectical (H2), diminished the perceived intelligence of a cited source. This detrimental effect materialized irrespective of gender of the interviewed person and gender of the reader. Moreover, it materialized irrespective of the private or public status of the interviewed person.

The corollary of H2, namely that the detrimental effect of cited dialect would be stronger for nondialect-speaking than for dialect-speaking readers, could not be evaluated. The majority of respondents grew up in regions known for their dialectical English, and persons likely to frown upon such dialect were too few to allow a comparison. Interestingly, the majority of persons familiar with dialect – although not necessarily users of it – saw fit to downgrade users of dialect. This would seem to cast some doubt on the proposal that those thoroughly familiar with a dialect grant comparatively high intelligence to users of that dialect. It appears that, at least among students in pursuit of good English, persons growing up with a dialect deem it a stigma.

The third hypothesis receives little support, if any. Persons in a private role suffered the consequence of using imperfect English as much as persons in a public role. The only exception is that, although dialect usage diminished the perceived intelligence of persons in either social role, dialect use seems to have hurt the parent somewhat less than the education commissioner. Therefore, it does appear that, concerning dialect use specifically, a public figure is held to higher standards than a private person.

The fact that the education commissioner was perceived as more intelligent than the parent is not surprising – given that the position signals a commitment to education. This apparent commitment can also explain why the commissioner was judged higher than the parent on the measure of goodness.

Although the present findings leave many questions unanswered, they demonstrate that imperfect English, common dialect, or flawed speech, is definitely detrimental to the perception of the intelligence of persons cited in newspaper reports. Knowledge of this effect grants manipulatory power to those faced with the decision to cite verbatim or to perfect an interviewed person's utterances. Citing verbatim a source who uses less-than-perfect speech amounts to making this source "look stupid," comparatively speaking. Put another way, writers and editors are placed in a position to make a source appear less intelligent by citing his or her imperfect speech – or to exercise their prerogative to remove any imperfections, thereby making the source seem more intelligent than he or she otherwise would appear.

In terms of ethics, an argument can be made for either choice. Uncorrected speech may accurately reflect the speaker's intelligence. On the other hand, one might argue that the speaker's intelligence should be judged on what he or she says, not on how she says it – usually under conditions that allow or invite speech imperfections. Although it avoids the issue rather than speaking to it, the writer's dilemma is perhaps best resolved by paraphrasing especially imperfect portions of relevant speech.

This paper focused on the implications of less-than-perfect English, uttered in interviews and featured in newspaper reports, for the perception

of interviewees' intelligence. Such focus should not be misconstrued as suggesting that the indicated consequences are specific to print or limited to this medium. On the contrary. Speakers using less-than-perfect English are likely to find radio or television coverage of their interviews particularly unforgiving. Unlike printed citations, radio and television present every sputter and stutter, as well as every hesitation and potentially embarrassing pause. Some research suggests that just failing to react promptly can destroy carefully built media images of political savvy and prowess.[31] A presidential hopeful's momentary empty face, for instance, might nullify the impression of superior intellect conferred by a Rhodes scholarship on the resume.

The power to maliciously include or benevolently exclude nonstandard English resides with producers and newscasters. Any trend toward sensational news content increases the chances for malicious inclusion of humbling incidents. Because television interview sound-bites average a mere nine seconds,[32] the news composer's choices may profoundly influence the perception of interviewees presented in the news. Further, in campaign advertising, linguistic and paralinguistic blunders by the opposing candidate are bound to be used in attack spots.[33] Especially in regional elections, where a candidate's image is developed in a matter of media seconds, and where corrective, discounting information is unavailable, such inclusion is likely to have significant consequences.

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