Making space for vernacular voices: implications of the ”expert”/”lay” divide on language issues in mainstream British news media

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Even a brief review of British news media will show that language-related stories figure frequently and for a variety of reasons, suggesting that interest in language and its implications for everyday life extends well beyond the sphere of academic sociolinguistics. Yet, to judge from the data to be discussed here, such a review will be unlikely to find any guidance on the issues involved, or indeed any attempt to raise the level of popular language debate above that of vernacular ”common sense”. Instead, the news is usually bad: a picture not of increasing diversity and speaker resourcefulness, but of chaotic change, loss of standards and the disruption of authentic British speech communities, threatening rational communication, if not the integrity of the nation.

This deep, sometimes antagonistic divide between “expert” and “lay” perspectives calls for closer attention. If sociolinguists understand the concept of identity in late modernity as inevitably ”accented” (cf. Blommaert & Varis 2011: 12), and willingly jettison terms like ”native speaker” or ”mother tongue” from the ”sociolinguistic toolkit” (Blommaert and Rampton 2011: 5), this view is not shared in the British media where such terms, or close equivalents, are treated not only as self-evident, but as natural justification for actions, beliefs, and attitudes.

Through close analysis of news stories and readers’ online responses collected during spring 2013 as part of a study of mainstream British news coverage of language issues, this paper will examine the implications of the ”expert”/”lay” divide. Findings serve to highlight the role of publicly authoritative news coverage in mediating popular, often problematic, language ideologies, and in providing a space in which they are shaped and naturalized.

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