Ludlings Teach Language Diversity and Change: From Pig Latin to Ubby Dubby

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Difficulties of Discussing Prescription with Elementary Students
The whole process of language acquisition by children involves gradually modifying rules and processes to match an adult version, so to directly discuss with children that "many varieties are acceptable", "they can be used for different purposes", "that one is not linguistically better than another" and so on, is challenging.

When children go through the "natural" process of language acquisition, modification is encouraged; adults expect certain modifications by particular ages and these modifications happen without any/much direct intervention. For example, most/all children modify from *mouses* to *mice*, from *goed* to *went*, and maybe later from *deers* to *deer*, *tooken* to *taken*. This process continues in the classroom, at home, and with peer groups.

Children are firmly of a mind that one is right and the other is wrong, so to try to talk to them about dialect variation and the equality of variation is challenging. Rather than talk about linguistic diversity and equality directly, I think it's more effective to expose them to linguistic variation and linguistic diversity in a variety of other ways, thereby expanding their **language awareness** and setting the stage for more direct discussion of these issues later.

It can be useful to abstract away from English itself to get them to understand that linguistic variation is a natural and across-the-board process. It happens with all languages and is the same process that results in language change. When enough people have adopted some variation, we say that the language has changed. However, using other languages is challenging for different reasons—too much is unfamiliar. They need to have a more concrete experience to relate to.

I have introduced awareness of **linguistic diversity and language variation** in a 1st-5th grade school I work in in a variety of ways.

- Through discussion of Old English, Middle English, Early Modern English (including seeing it in print and listening to it).
- Through discussion of lots of different languages from all over the world.
- Through discussion of how languages begin (creoles).
- Through discussion of language games.

The lesson I'll discuss here is about what have been called **language games** or **ludlings.** Discussion of them is a concrete way to use students' unconscious knowledge about language structure to address linguistic diversity, language variation, and language attitudes—and more generally, language awareness.

Introduction to Ludlings
Children all over the world invent and/or pass on **ludlings** (from Latin *ludus* 'game' and *lingua* 'language'). These ludlings (also called language games or secret languages) distort the native language in some way, usually to prevent understanding by those who have not learned the language game; they are thus used primarily by groups attempting to conceal their conversations from others. Some common examples are Pig Latin, which is used all over the globe, the Gibberish family, prevalent in the United States and Sweden, and Verlan, spoken in France, and numerous others.

Pig Latin
Pig Latin is a common language game of English.

(1) *cat* at-cay

So the way to speak Pig Latin is to take off the first sound and put *–ay* at the end of the word.

It turns out the Pig Latin has dialects. When words start with vowels, there are several ways to form the PL word. Here are three of them:

		Dialect 1	Dialect 2	Dialect 3
(2)	*eat*	eat-may	eat-hay	eat-ay
(3)	*art*	art-may	art-hay	art-ay
(4)	*honest*	onest-may	onest-hay	onest-ay

Dialect 1: If the word begins with a vowel, use /m/ as the default consonant before /ay/.
Dialect 2: If the word begins with a vowel, use /h/ as the default consonant before /ay/.
Dialect 3: If the word begins with a vowel, simply say /ay/ at the end of the word.

So , Pig Latin, like "real" languages, has dialects. The speakers of a language, or a Pig Latin dialect, often guard their own as the "best" and "right" way, though those attitudes are determined socially, not linguistically. Each dialect's linguistic rules are equally logical, equally systematic, and equally effective. The variations in Pig Latin illustrate that one dialect is not linguistically better or worse than another.

A comparison of the kinds of variation that exist in other children's language games also help illustrate the fine line between dialect and language and the ways in which attitudes about variation in dialect can come about.

Comparing two common ludlings, **Ubby Dubby** (or Ubbi Dubbi) and **Obbish** (or Abbish or Oppish), illustrates children's sophisticated knowledge of language.

How to speak Obbish: Insert "obb" (/ab/) after the first consonant in each syllable. (It's actually between what's called the **onset** and the **rime** of each syllable. So if a syllable starts with a cluster of consonants like *str-* in *string*, you insert /ab/ after the whole cluster. It works the same way in Pig Latin. It's a manipulation of phonology, not spelling.) You also stress the initial syllable.

(5)
My name is Morgan. = M-**obb**-y n-**obb**-ame **obb**-is m-**obb**-or g-**obb**-an.

/mábaj nábem ábɪz mábɔrgábn̩/

Ubby Dubby is very similar to Obbish, but has a different vowel inserted and a different stress pattern.

How to speak Ubby Dubby: Insert "ub" (/əb/) after the first consonant in each syllable. (Again, this is more accurately described as insertion between the onset and and the rime.) Stress is on syllable following insertion point.

(6)My name is Morgan. = M**u-b**y n**u-b**ame **u-b**is M**u-b**or g**u-b**an.

/məbáj nəbém əbíz məbɔ́rgəbʌ́n/

Simply examining the rules of any ludling illustrates the incredible command that children have over language. They are able to manipulate syllables and stress effortlessly. They are able to acquire one of these languages very quickly and easily without consciously knowing the "rules".

What happens when Ubby Dubby and Obbish come together?
In the school where I work, some children were speakers of Obbish and others of Ubby Dubby, though they all called the language Obbish. The Ubby Dubby speakers—who were also several years younger than the Obbish speakers—thought that they were just "bad" speakers of Obbish, saying that they didn't know it very well, that their version was different, that certain speakers knew it better. All of the children were able to understand each other.

We together listened to the two languages and described the "rules" of each—the generalizations about how to speak them. When they realized that these were two *different* varieties, almost like two languages, they all got very excited. They were not "bad" speakers of Obbish; rather, they spoke a different variety, Ubby Dubby. We discussed how they were like two dialects of the same language.

This activity helps students know that:

- languages are rule-governed
- knowledge of language is largely unconscious
- no language variety is "better" than another
- they they are the experts

- that language variation is a natural process
- that language study is fun

This kind of language study moves away from a judgmental approach to language variation.

Language Change: In the school I'm working in, it looks as if Obbish may be winning out over Ubby Dubby. The speakers of Obbish are more numerous, more confident in their speaking abilities, and older (i.e., more powerful), so their language variety may become the dominant variety (though perhaps it will have been influenced in some ways by Ubby Dubby). This is precisely the way that language change happens in the "real world." It is such external, non-linguistic factors that drive language change—who has the power—not anything about the linguistic features of the language. (Perhaps there is a linguistic component involved here, however. Obbish is a bit more difficult for English speakers to understand due to the divergence in the stress pattern, compared to English. Because it is a code language, such divergence is viewed as a good thing, so this linguistic feature of the language may be a driving force in its adoption as the primary ludling.)

Extensions

1) **Ludlings and Writing**: This topic provides an excellent forum for discussion of the differences between spoken and written discourse. Kids find that it is difficult to convey in writing how these languages should be pronounced. The spoken ludlings manipulate pieces of the language that may not be represented by the spelling system; for example, our writing system does not indicate stress (and they may not know how to even identify this, but they use it and know it). Kids in this school talked about how it was pretty easy to write it (they themselves could read it), but others couldn't read it well. But they could all speak it.

2) **Relating the difficulties of writing it to the history of written English**: Discussion of the kinds of problems one encounters when trying to write the language could be related to how this happened in the history of English, how the spelling system became standardized, the kinds of choices writers/spellers made and why (and how such choices have led to some "odd" spellings in modern day English).

3) **Syllables**: Almost all ludlings make use of syllables, so any discussion of syllables could use these games as evidence for our sophisticated but unconscious knowledge of syllable and their structure.

4) **Universality of ludlings**: Nearly all languages have ludlings. To describe ludlings alongside "real" languages illustrates our universal ability to manipulate unconscious rules in language play.

Results

This sort of language study **addresses language variation in a non-discriminatory way** without having to discuss Standard English (though it can later be a great analogy for that). It **empowers the kids** since the data comes from them and they are the experts. It **shows an awareness of unconscious knowledge of language** – syllables, stress patterns, morphological patterns. It shows that they **don't have to consciously know the rules** to be speakers; they can pick them up just by being exposed to the language and being involved in the communication. It **shows how easily and quickly they can invent and learn such languages** (partly because it's based on English (or whichever native language) and partly because kids are really **good** at language).

And extensions of this material could address nearly all aspects of **language awareness** as defined by the NCTE:

> "**Language awareness** includes examining how language varies in a range of social and cultural settings; examining how people's attitudes vary towards language across culture, class, gender, and generation; examining how oral and written language affects listeners and readers; examining how 'correctness' in language reflects social-political-economic values; examining how the structure of language works from a descriptive perspective; and examining how first and second languages are acquired."

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