

## Writer Raises Questions About How We Teach, Learn Language

BY SUSAN USHER  
News Editor

Is there such a thing as standard English, and if so, should our schools be teaching it? These are just a few of the provocative questions raised by educator and linguist Dwarka Ramphal in his just-published book, *Let Us Talk*.

The slim, hardbound volume looks critically at how language is taught and learned—and how, with or without intent, language education and use have been used by the ruling classes as a means of oppressing the common people, perpetuating classes of society.

The author sees the potential of using language sharing to "liberate," to encourage creativity and acceptance of differences, rather than perpetuating conformity and standardization. And he would like to see the learning process relate more closely to the world in which students live and the language they already know.

Ramphal says his first book is intended not to provide any answers, but merely to provoke discussion, to raise "pertinent" questions about how and why we teach language.

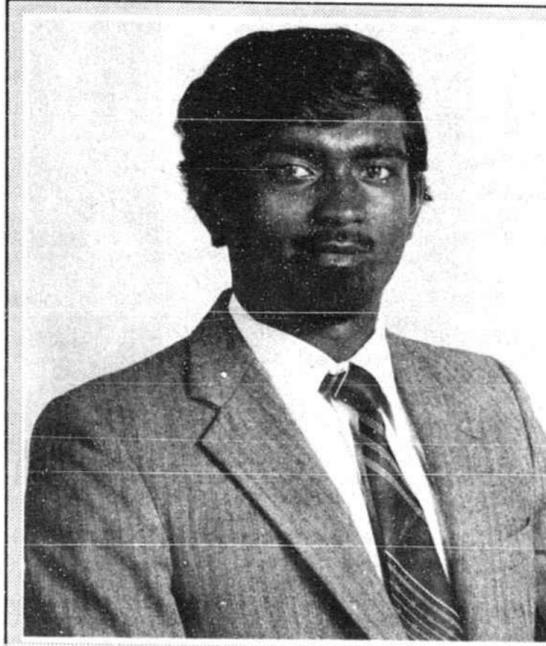
*Let Us Talk* picks up where several other linguistic studies leave off. It is the first investigation, says Ramphal, to merge the concept of "deschooling" with a specific subject matter, the teaching of language, rather than with classroom education in general. "That is what makes it unique," he said.

Deschooling is a concept developed by Ivan Illich in his 1983 book, *Deschooling Society*, and advanced by Paulo Freire in the 1988 work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Most children learn their language casually, during their early, formative years. Yet, the system is based on the "fallacy" that one has not learned language until and unless one has been schooled in it, taught the standard responses which, Illich suggests, project middle class values.

The language learned at home typically isn't the "standard" English taught in the classroom. But that "standard," maintains Ramphal, isn't standard anyway, varying from community to community and society to society. In the final assessment, he suggests, "standard" is whatever a specific classroom teacher declares standard.

Rejecting the student's own language has a "dehumanizing" effect, Ramphal argues, helping alienate the child from him or herself and inhibiting the child's use of and ability in language by imposing a "new" language. Further, a teacher's first impression of a student—often based in part on the student's use of language, forms the basis of expectations that can contribute to the student's subsequent success or failure.

Ramphal would like to see linguists and teachers create "a brand new system of language sharing and language respect and dispense with the traditional con-



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—Dwarka Ramphal

**AUTHOR DWARKA RAMPHAL is concerned that current approaches to teaching language "dehumanize" students, taking away rather than building on what they already know.**

cepts of language instruction and classroom manipulation."

"In teaching language, therefore," he continues, "it will be more beneficial for the teacher to deal with language usage and the process of communication as a whole rather than isolated issues of a preconceived notion of correctness."

Rather than opening doors of opportunity through acceptance of differences in language, he contends, language teaching today tends instead "to polarize the social differences and grades the nation of the world..."

He uses as an example the teaching of the King's English (Queen's) in Bahamian schools rather than a West Indian dialect, Anglicized Creole or Americanized English—all of which are in common use by the people in their private lives.

Citing his own classroom experiences as student and teacher, Ramphal would like to see acceptance of the concept that most language skill is learned, not taught, especially in a classroom.

In a classroom setting, he would like to see that learning become more of a partnership between students and teacher, rather than the assumption that the

teacher knows, the students learn. He welcomes more dialogue, discussion, questioning. "When a child questions is he being rude or is he learning democracy?" Ramphal asks.

The author lives with his wife and two children in Southport. Most recently he has taught part-time at Brunswick Community College and as a substitute in the Brunswick County Schools. Now, he says, "This book is my inspiration to continue writing."

A Bible teacher affiliated in the ministry with the Full Gospel Church in Georgia, he is preparing a collection of sermons for publication and seeking a publisher for that project. Ramphal is also exploring the possibility of a second book, about a man's experiences growing up in West Virginia. When he first began looking for a publisher for *Let Us Talk*, he knew nothing about the business. He ended up paying a vanity house, Vantage Press of New York City, to publish the book, which is available locally for \$10.95. Now he is looking for a regular publishing house to take up paperback rights once his two-year contract with Vantage ends.

Before coming to Brunswick County, Ramphal

worked seven years in the Bahamas. There he served as head of the English department at St. Paul's, a high school, and founded and coordinated its evening institute, which he said is evolving into something like a community college program. He also served as assistant pastor of a Methodist church in Freeport.

Ramphal first came here to work with a church in the Southport area pastored by a long-time friend, but the arrangement didn't work out as well as expected. He now serves on a "consulting" basis, he said.

While it would be easier to find permanent work in a large urban area, Ramphal would like for his family to remain in Brunswick County. His wife, Arani (Rita), teaches early childhood education at a private Christian school in Wilmington. His son, Rudha (Rudy), 13, is a ninth grade student at South Brunswick High School. Daughter Zhenya, 10, is in the sixth grade at South Brunswick Middle School.

In his writing, Ramphal draws heavily on his practical experiences as an educator in Bermuda, as well as on his research in descriptive linguistics. He earned his master's degree in linguistics from the University of Guyana in 1982, and also directed a study there of dialects of indigenous Indians of South America.

The book represents part of the dissertation he completed in 1987 as an "external" or off-campus student for his doctorate in education from Pacific Western University in California.

But the book's inspiration also stems from deeper roots, from the 35-year-old author's first-hand and painful experience with discrimination based on the way one talks.

Born in Guyana to Indian parents, his childhood was spent in the country. He faced a rude awakening when it came time to continue his schooling in the city. Fellow students and faculty treated him as an "inferior," he recalls, "because I didn't speak the way the city boys did."

"People should not be judged on the basis of how they talk any more than they should be judged on their dress," says Ramphal.

He believes, and very strongly, that all languages, all dialect, have merit, that none should be judged "inferior" or "superior" to another. "They all should be accepted as long as communication is achieved, he says."

How his book may be received by educators Ramphal doesn't know and doesn't venture to predict. What he does know is that he wants the book to leave readers—educators or not—with an openness to the basic premises of the book, and a willingness to continue investigating "the concept of language teaching and the concept of stagnant English."

"I don't claim to have all the answers," he says. "All I claim is the right to ask questions. We ask questions, but they are not always pertinent questions."

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