

"EBONICS" AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN ENGLISH

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It is unfortunate that most of the recent and ongoing debate on "Ebonics," or African-American Vernacular English (hereafter AAVE), the term linguists use, has been so little informed by research in linguistics, the scientific study of language. Although the public at large should debate the full range of issues that concern U.S. citizens, there seems to be a particular willingness on the part of those who have no special knowledge to delve into language issues. Perhaps this is because practically everyone is a native speaker of some language, and that intimate relationship encourages a sense of expertise.

It is curious that many media gatekeepers, those who accept letters to the editor and grant access to radio and television programs, for example, seem not to have been aware or perhaps assumed that there is not a long tradition of empirical research on African-American language. Education and sociolinguistics, the branch of linguistics most associated with the study of African-American language in its social context, require expertise. Sociolinguistic knowledge, necessary for a full evaluation of the Oakland School Board resolution, clearly also requires technical and analytical expertise. Comedians, journalists, and belletrists are not qualified, by virtue of these statuses alone, to discuss the full range of associated issues, though they are

qualified, as all citizens, to talk about the nature and goals of educational systems. To continue in this candid vein, I should point out that African-American language and culture--attaching to a subordinated people--are often considered simple to understand and master, unlike some other languages and cultures. Many students in my African-American language and culture courses implicitly assume that the course will be somehow easier, less demanding, and more entertaining than their other courses. The first day I enter the classroom for even my graduate African-American courses, there prevails typically an almost carnivalesque atmosphere, never present with other courses.

The board of the Oakland Unified School District presented a resolution that sought basically to get teaching staff to use knowledge of AAVE, as a medium of communication, in order better to teach standard English. The schools' responsibility to teach standard English was never questioned, nor was it suggested that AAVE itself be taught. This last point is important because somehow a number of media pundits concluded that the board actually recommended the teaching of AAVE. Indeed, the subsequent changes of opinion and the faulty representations of what the school board had done indicate that some commentators spoke out before they had actually read (and understood) the resolution.

The resolution itself, though basically sound from a pedagogical and linguistic standpoint, contained a few infelicities--enough for raised eyebrows perhaps, but not justifying the unbridled

ridicule that followed. First, no particular language or dialect is "genetically-based," though of course the general language faculty that all humans possess is commonly believed to be biological and therefore genetically-based in an important sense. Many language scholars during the controversy graciously accepted the board's use of the term *Ebonics*, a coinage based on *ebony* and *phonics*. However, in all honesty, the term does present some problems both conceptually and in respect to the blending of the two words. *Ebony* is loosely speaking a color term that can be applied to most of the people who spoke the West African languages that provided the greatest input into AAVE, but it also applies to people who are just as "ebony" and who were totally unrelated to the genesis of AAVE, e.g., those of southeastern Africa and Dravidians in India. We must also admit, the black nationalists among us included, that AAVE has had more input from varieties of English (and to a lesser extent other European languages) than it has from West African languages. Indeed, African Americans are a creole people, *creole* in the sense of resulting from a blending of significantly different heritages. Consequently, AAVE is also a creole language--in this sense (*not in the technical linguistic sense*, however). This idea of creoleness grates against many African Americans' justified cherishing of our African heritage--and our emphasizing it for historical and political reasons. However, the historical facts of creoleness or mixed heritage must always be kept in mind. (Note that *creole* is used here in the sense it generally takes in the social sciences, not that found in many varieties of African-American English, in which it refers to light-skinned, straight- or wavy-haired individuals with a "creole" heritage who are from Louisiana.) *Ebonics* is defined as "the

linguistic and paralinguistic features which on a concentric continuum represents [*sic*] the communicative competence of the West African, Caribbean, and the United States slave descendant of African origin" (Williams 1975:vi). As such, Ebonics is not so much a language as a group of languages and associated communicative behaviors. More than anything, it should perhaps best be seen as a field of study since scholars are still groping to find precisely in what ways these languages are related, though it is well understood how they are related on a broader level. The scholars taking part in the conference on which Williams 1975 is based are to be commended for taking such a strongly holistic view of black communication in the Americas and in West Africa at such an early date.

It is to be hoped that in the aftermath of the controversy more people are aware that the scientific study of AAVE took off roughly thirty years ago with the pioneering investigations of William Labov (1972), Walt Wolfram (1969, 1991; Wolfram & Christian 1989; Wolfram & Clarke 1971), William Stewart (1967, 1968, 1969), and other scholars, who were joined in the 1970s by the first cohort of African-descent African-American English specialists, notably John Baugh (1983), John Rickford (Rickford & Green forthcoming), Geneva Smitherman (1981, 1986, 1994), and Arthur Spears (1978, 1982, forthcoming b). Their empirical research demonstrates indisputably that this variety of English, as all language varieties, is systematic, governed by its own set of grammatical rules. Its rules of grammar are simply *different* from those of standard English.

Some of AAVE's distinctive features are survivals or transformations of West African language features. Examples of survivals, communicative forms that survive with their physical form and meaning mostly intact, include cut-eye and suck-teeth (Rickford & Rickford 1976) as well as hand-cupped-over-mouth laughter.

One linguistic transformation (where form and/or meaning have undergone important changes) found in African-American English is what linguists refer to as the semi-auxiliary *come*, in sentences such as the following (standard English orthography is used):

She come telling me that trash... .

He come coming in here acting like a fool.

In the second example sentence, *come* is the semi-auxiliary, while *coming* is the more familiar motion verb. The semi-auxiliary *come*, which expresses indignation or disapproval, is found in identical functions in a number of Caribbean Creole languages (what some people call "patois," "creole," or *kweyòl*) and in at least one West African language spoken by some enslaved persons (and free persons and indentured workers too) who arrived in the Americas, namely Bambara. The semi-auxiliary *come* is an especially useful example because it clearly shows the links among the U.S., other parts of Afro-America (areas in the Americas with an especially strong African influence), and Africa. Turner (1949), an African American and the father of African-

American language study in the U.S. lists many Africanisms (i.e., linguistics survivals and transformations) that occur in Gullah, spoken in coastal South Carolina and Georgia and the off-coast Sea Islands. Gullah, as we would expect of a creole language, has more West African input than AAVE; but, AAVE itself, as well as American English in general has words of African origin such as *gumbo*, *goober*, *tote*, and *Cudjo*. With these points made, the crucial observation can be emphasized: AAVE has a grammatical system that is different from that of standard English. It must therefore be studied in its own right and, in teaching, be considered as an entity that, though distinct from standard English, is also closely related to it.

Linguistics, and more narrowly the study of grammar, is a technical field; and there is no way around the task of providing precise explanations of some basic concepts. First, let it be reiterated that the language component of Ebonics is referred to by linguists as AAVE. Contrary to much of what we have read in and heard from the media recently, some types of African-American or Black English are classified as standard. This means that they have none of the structural features--sounds, words, and word combinations--considered nonstandard by the majority of grammarians. These features can be listed and would include the use of *ain't* and multiple negatives as in

He ain't got none

He ain't never seen nary a one.

These standard African-American varieties do, however, have distinctively African-American traits, relating to speech contours, rhythm, distinctive vocabulary, and other properties.

Thus, there are two basic types of African-American English: standard and nonstandard, and each type comprises many varieties, which differ along the lines of region, age, and other factors. Linguists refer to the nonstandard kind as AAVE or Black Vernacular English.

Practically all of those who have discussed standard African-American English (SAAE) are African-descent linguists. There are many types of standard English, as there are standard African-American Englishes (hereafter SAAE). Presidents Bush and Clinton both speak different, though similar, types of English; and each one speaks a standard variety--during public appearances, if not always. Furthermore, Jesse Jackson and Bill Cosby speak standard African-American English, as linguists define it, on at least some occasions. One type of standard English is considered by many to be neutral, with respect to region and ethnicity; it is referred to as the *network standard* and is basically the kind of American English one hears on national news broadcasts. We also have the many types of Englishes in the rest of the world.

No kind of African-American English is in any way deficient; all kinds serve the communicative needs of their speakers effectively. To characterize any kind of African-American English as nothing more than slang or street language is an insult to the many grandmothers, ministers, adolescents, and others who use it--on at least some occasions. These facts were formally recognized in the Linguistic Society of America's resolution on the Ebonics issue at their 1997 annual meeting.

African-American English is not a collection of slang terms, it is not used only by teenagers who spend much time in the streets, it is not a corruption of anything--it has its own history and did not spring historically from any one kind of English. *It is a product of the historical blending of mostly English features but also some features of West African languages.* Although some vernacular and standard speakers use slang, and sometimes language unsuitable for the drawing room, this is true of virtually all English speakers in the U.S.; it is not unique to the African-American community (Spears forthcoming a). When linguists speak of particular varieties, they have in mind structural features, relating to the sound systems (pronunciation) and the matrix of rules governing the construction of words and sentences. Most of the unflattering terms that media pundits used to characterize African-American varieties of English, e.g., slang, street language, ghetto-speak, are terms defined on the basis of vocabulary, not the fundamental, grammatical structure of these languages.

Standard English's standard status is the result of accidents of politico-economic history, not any inherent superiority. This is true of English and other standard(ized) languages such as French and Spanish. Spanish is actually one of a number of related dialects and languages of Spain. However, it has taken a name based on the name of the country--Spain--because it was through force made the national language. Some people still refer to it by its original name, Castilian, after the region where it originated. The Castilian region rose to power in Spain through various accidents of history, and the language variety of Castile was imposed on the rest of the country and its dependencies--as it transformed itself into the modern nation-state we

know today as Spain. This sketch of what happened in Spain serves to underscore the crucial fact that specific forms of language came to be accorded prestige as a result of a historical process that had nothing to do with the grammatical nature of the language, but with politico-economic factors.

It is telling that the boundaries of standard English have continually shifted historically to accommodate middle- and upper-class whites, but not working-class whites or blacks of any class. Observe that even many college professors fail to follow basic rules of standard English (as opposed to trivial ones of some self-appointed grammarians), for example, ones governing pronoun case. Consequently, we hear nonstandard utterances such as *between he and I* (*between him and me* in standard English), and pleas from grammarians that such expressions be adopted as part of the standard in order to "rescue" the high-status white people who use them (Honey 1995). Of course, some linguists might state that expression such as these are part of the "informal standard" or the "colloquial standard." The real issue is still that accommodation is made for some speakers, in order to keep their speech within the standard, while other speakers are not accommodated.

African-American Vernacular English is stigmatized because its speakers are stigmatized. Most of the current Ebonics controversy is in the tradition of the frenzied black-threat-to-civilization narrative that we are fed daily by the media. It is deeply troubling that even some African-American public figures participate in it. This media frenzy can be fully understood only within the context of institutional racism and socio-economic inequality.

Some comment is necessary on the terms linguists use to talk about language varieties and their relatedness. *Variety* is the term used to refer to any distinctive kind of speaking, associated with some group or individual. Dialects are considered to be different versions of what is basically the same way of speaking. The rule of thumb is that dialects belong to the same language if they are mutually intelligible: someone speaking one can understand someone speaking the other. However, mutual intelligibility is sometimes a result of nonlinguistic factors such as attitude and frequency of contact. Sometimes mutually intelligible varieties of language are considered different languages because they are spoken in different countries (e.g., varieties of Dutch and German, and Swedish and Norwegian). So there are gray areas. But Cantonese and Navajo are certainly not dialects of the same language. Thus, some cases are clear. Likewise, everyone would consider African-American Englishes as dialects of the same language--English--as they would consider other varieties of English, in the U.S. and elsewhere.

In sum, there are gray areas in distinguishing languages and dialects, but African-American English and other American Englishes (as all other Englishes) do not fall into a gray area.

Many people appear to assume that anything distinctively black is automatically nonstandard or abnormal. Although the great majority of whites, as the great majority of all Americans, speak a nonstandard form of English, media discourse gives the impression that "white" English is always standard, and "black" English is always nonstandard. In effect, many

white students have language problems at school very similar to those of African-American students because their home language is nonstandard, sharing some nonstandard features with AAVE varieties. (An example is the use of *done* as in *She done gone*.) However, the whites' problems receive hardly any national media attention.

An important question is why a small minority of standard English speakers linguistically terrorize nonstandard speakers. We must ask, given the great diversity in standard English throughout the world, why must a line be drawn to reject the entry of some groups into the exclusive standard club? After all, standard speakers can understand their nonstandard-speaking neighbors more easily than standard speakers living far away [ambiguity intended].

The Oakland School Board's decision was fundamentally a sound one, even if it was not expressed in the best way. Virtually all research indicates that children are best taught taking their native language or dialect into account, and that includes using it as a bridge to the language or dialect they wish to acquire. This view, also, was ratified in the Linguistic Society of America's 1997 resolution on Ebonics.

That said, it should also be observed that language/dialect mismatches are not the major problem in the education of African American and white students, even though there are important grammatical differences among American varieties of English. Nations with comparatively successful public education such as Japan, Finland, and Switzerland have much more far-reaching (i.e., grammatically significant) dialect differences; yet, they have produced vastly better educational systems (Fishman 1972). The underfunding of public education in the

U.S. is a national scandal, while candid discussions of teacher preparedness are largely taboo. From personal experience we know that mixed in with superbly qualified teachers are those who were allowed to remain marginally literate during their own education. In the New York City area, as throughout the country, there are institutions where a masters degree can be "bought." (This could be and is done, for example, by taking only courses with paper requirements alone and then purchasing the papers.) In New York City as other cities in the U.S., there are school teachers who do not themselves control standard English. Though it is theoretically possible that they could do a creditable job of teaching standard English, it is not likely.

The true tragedy is that language differences are not the major problem for African-American students. In dealing with the low scholastic achievement of too many African-American students, we must confront a number of issues, both broad and narrow:

- the structure of deliberately-maintained inequality
- the manifestation of racism and internalized oppression in the "Ebonics" debate
- the nature and function of white-supremacist racism in American society
- the debilitation of educational institutions serving most African Americans in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement
- the reasons why the wealthiest nation on earth has the worst distribution of wealth and income of all the major industrialized nations

Finally, before leaping to disparage African-American Vernacular English--and indirectly African-American culture and African Americans themselves, it should be remembered that English itself was once thought unfit for institutions of learning.

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