DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 083 655 CS 500 442

AUTHOR Davis, France A.
TITLE Black English: A Community Language.
PUB DATE Nov 73
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Speech Communication Assn. (November 19-21, 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *African American Studies; Biculturalism; *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Cross Cultural Studies; Cultural Interrelationships; Language Styles; *Language Usage; Negro Culture; *Negro Dialects; Negroes; Verbal Communication
IDENTIFIERS *Afro American Communication

ABSTRACT

Black English, the particular variation of the English language used by many American Negroes, is frequently condemned as inferior to standard English by arbiters of language usage, but many Negroes find the structures and style of black English satisfactory for their communication needs. Black English is the result of a complex, developmental history, emerging from the primarily verbal intercommunication prevalent in the early culture of English-speaking Negroes. Because of its history and its usefulness, black English has earned a legitimate place in the American culture and educational system. The author argues that since black English is the usage most frequently practiced by the largest racial minority group in the United States and since it has a consistent linguistic structure, such language usage can no longer be ignored in academic studies of American language or in the curricula of American schools. (CH)

Title: BLACK ENGLISH: A COMMUNITY LANGUAGE

Author: FRANCE A. DAVIS

Address: Department of Communication

University of Utah

Salt Lake City, Utah 84112

For: Western Speech Communication Association

Date: November 19-21, 1973

Title: BLACK ENGLISH: A Community Language

Author: France A. Davis

Affiliation: Instructor, Department of Communication

University of Utah

Abstract:

The language spoken primarily by Black Americans has been learned through verbal communication. The historical development of this "Black English" can easily be traced through a steady growing past to the present. However, this usage has long been condemned. Although defined as inferior and negative by others, Blacks find the structures consistent and the styles operational. In short, "Black English" has earned a legitimate place in the American culture and educational system, for it functions for this country's largest racial minority group.

This article should be of interest to the study of cross-culture communication, language, and innovative educational policies.

BLACK ENGLISH: A Community Language

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to show that the language or English herein referred to as "Black English" is in fact an operational language agreed upon and used by a defined community. This paper contends that as long as this unique usage of English works for the community using it, it is just as pure and just as good as any other English, including general American English, Western American English, Central American English, Southern American English, and any other variety of English spoken in this country.

The terms most often used in documentary references to Black English, standard and non-standard, are inadequate, misleading, and unacceptable in the discussion of this paper. These terms tend to give a more negative connotation to the community labelled "non-standard" and a more positive connotation to that called "standard." Thus one becomes more acceptable and "in place" when employing the latter rather than the first. In addition, crucial to understanding this paper is some agreement between you as reader and I as writer on what the terms "general American English" and "Black English" mean.

General American English is that English spoken and used most constantly in communication by the formally educated, white, middle-class Americans. Schools strive to have their pupils reach the level, and it can be identified as the English used by most national radio and television commentators. On the other hand, Black English is the English spoken and understood primarily by Americans of African descent. It brings various usages, forms, and structures to other kinds of American English.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

When Black people were brought to the United States primarily from Africa's West Coast Bulge, Gabon, and Angola, there was no one common language spoken among them. Rather, they spoke hundreds of tribal languages which, although different, possessed phonological and syntactic similarities. In order to communicate with each other and with the white captors who spoke still another language, they developed a common language by adapting one language to another. The process is called pidginization. This process of utilizing vocabulary from one language (usually the dominant one) began very informally, consisting of regular but "simplified" sentences, syntax, and numerous gestures. As the newly adapted language continued and developed into the native language of the Black Americans, it was said to now be creolized. Just as other creole languages do, this language reflects more syntactic complexity than does pidgin language.

Black Africans adapted Portuguese as part of their first creole. They used the language to trade with traders arriving on the West Coast of Africa. Captive African workers brought it to the new world during the sixteenth century. This Black Portuguese flourished for about two centuries and today is virtually extinct except in Brazil. After the Portuguese, the Dutch introduced Dutch vocabulary to the African phonology and syntax. Black Dutch replaced the Black Portuguese, and can be readily heard in the Virgin Islands to this day. Black French began developing about the same time, during the 1630's and 1640's, as did the Dutch. It survives today in the Caribbean, Louisiana, South America, the East Coast of Africa, and other places. (Dillard 1972)

The mid-seventeenth century ushered in the development of Black English, too. Unlike the above-mentioned Black languages, Black English mantled Africa and was widely established in the new world by the end of the eighteenth century. Today, Black English survives well in Jamaica, Guyana in South America, the coastal areas where Blacks live. It is very easy for one to recognize African features in almost all levels of language spoken by almost all contemporary Black Americans.

This historical perspective suggests that Black linguistic patterns differ from those of white because of different cultural backgrounds. Acknowledging that other variables such as age, sex, family ties, exposure to whites, degree of assimilation, etc., contribute to the way in which particular Blacks speak, there is a distinct Black culture and linguistic behavior. Unfortunately, along with America's negative definitions of Blackness are the negative terms which make many Blacks want to deny their culture and language. Contrary to white America's claim, ". . . the Black child is not the non-verbal, uncommunicative, linguistically deprived person he is often made out to be." (Taylor 1971:22)

EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Black babies were born into their communities and grew through the most critical years of their childhood learning and communicating effectively with their parents and other community members. They functioned well and comparable to any other group of their peers. They answered their elders in complete and understandable terminology. Yet, when Black children entered the institutional classrooms in search for the tools and knowledge designed to make them better qualified and more fluent in coping with their communities, they were told that they would

have to start all over and learn another first language. For the English which they now spoke was a substandard, meaning "bad," language.

The above educational enlightenment worked very effectively if it proposed to literally "wipe-out" countless numbers of Black children. These prospective students were led to believe that cultural and linguistic differences constituted "inferiority," and that different learning patterns could be translated as nothing but "unteachability." However, when we compare the historical development of Black English with other languages, it is clearly the equivalent of them. I am amazed, indeed shocked, by the levels of ignorance exhibited by those of this educated society who label without the least research Black English as non-standard, and therefore, inferior. This amazement becomes even more realistic when considering the facts. And facts say that about eighty percent (80%) of all Black Americans speak this Black English along with groups of Puerto Ricans in New York, groups of whites in the South, and some Native American tribes (the Seminoles, for example). (Dillard 1972:228)

That there is no universally accepted or "proper" version of spoken English seems to be ignored or forgotten when the discussion concerns Black Americans. Why can we not remember that even within regional and ethnic groups variants exist which may be peculiarly conditioned by geography, social class, and historical influences? Henry H. Mitchell accounts for the existence of racist attitudes which continue to survive in his book Black Preaching:

Preaching:

> However, in America, a diabolical combination of racism, class snobbery, and naivete has caused Blacks as well as

> whites to assume, consciously or unconsciously, that there is a single proper American English, and that the language spoken by most Black people is a crude distortion of it. (Mitchell 1970:149)

Despite the above-described attitudes, absolutely no evidence has this author found which shows that Black English is less communicative of ideas than any other variants of American English. If our educational structures will grant that language has meaning and is important whenever the community using it agrees upon that meaning, then, Black English is extremely valid. It (Black English) is the first language spoken by an ethnic group representing millions of people in a distinct culture. Mitchell would agree that cultural norms can not be adequately compared to other cultural norms and fairly evaluated. Thus:

> . . . The word "bad" must never be used by one culture regarding another. No language is bad which conveys adequately the intended meaning of the intended audience. "Ungrammatical" is a less judgmental term, but it still implies that there is one form which is standard, by which all others are judged. (Mitchell 1970:158)

By accepting the view that Blacks speak the way they do because of some cultural deprivation, many educators implicitly deny the legitimacy of Black culture and attempt to eradicate its language. Most linguists would recognize valid linguistic concepts and systems possessed by all human groups, but by continuing to question the humanity of Blacks, the Black communication behavior can be easily rejected. Taylor concludes that this attitude is racist, elitist, colonialistic, and paternalistic.

> It is racist because it implies that white opinions on language goals and programs for the black community are the best ones. It is elitist because it presumes that the opinions of "education

> specialists" are the only ones worth considering in contemplating language programs in the black community. It is colonialistic because it implies that black people should only be "permitted" to survive economically, politically, and socially if the terms of the ruling class, i.e., the white, middle class, are met. It is paternalistic because it does something for people -- instead of encouraging self-determination -- presumably because of a feeling that the people are incapable of making decisions for themselves. (Taylor 1971:24)

Perhaps the solution to this negative attitude can be obtained if educators will treat Black English as they do any other first language in a second language class. Trying to teach Black students to speak general American English demands that the teacher know and understand Black English as well. Only as Black America takes control of its own community and educational system will Black English take its rightful place in Black goals.

STRUCTURES AND STYLES

In order to bridge the gap between education and Black English, several questions remain to be answered. Some of these questions include: What are some of the structures to be expected when exposed to Black English? Are there regularized rules of grammar that apply to this cultural language? Can the grammatical patterns be predicted in Black English? Some of these questions are answered below based on Dillard in his "On the Structure of Black English" chapter and on Smith in his "Black Language Styles" section.

Perhaps the two most obvious and surface differences involve the systems of verbs and the rules of pluralization. In Black English, the verb

that seems to be the foundation of general American English verbs, "To Be," is assumed to be understood, and its conjugated forms in particular are usually omitted. Seldom does the words am, is, and are appear. Thus, the general American English sentence "He is sleeping" becomes "He sleepin'" in Black English. The sentence, "John is at home" would be said, "John, he at home." (Dillard 1972)

Third person singular verb categories used in general American English are not indicative of Black English. One will find "John runs" replaced by the Black English, "John run." In essence, the present tense in Black English employs no final -s on the third person singular verb form. Lay My Burden Down records several examples of this usage:

". . . She give him the piece of paper. . ." (Botkin 1945:7)

"All he feed us was raw meat." (Botkin 1945:75)

"He come to Texas and deal in stolen horses." (Botkin 1945:76)

One of the most often heard characteristics of Black English is the usage of "be." The statement, "My brother sick" indicates that the sickness is currently in effect. However, the situation is probably temporary, of short duration, and not likely to be continuously occurring. On the other hand, "My brother be sick" indicates long-term illness which has been, is now, and is expected to remain for a relatively long time. It denotes that which went on before and after. Examples of this are also readily available in Botkin's Lay My Burden Down:

"Us be in the house at night, peeping out. . ." (Botkin 1945:77)

"Generally, people in the country be scared of a graveyard. . ." (Botkin 1945:150)

The rules applied here demand some serious commitment to whether the action is momentary or continuous, Black English allows optional tense descriptions.

Forms which reveal the optional description of tense in Black English in contrast to the obligatory part of general American English can be seen in the following examples.

That man stare at me and I ain' know him.

He stood there and he thinkin'.

And when I come back they come back.

Black English also involves what linguists refer to as point-of-time aspect (I been know) and progressive aspect (I been knowin'). The word "been" shows action quite decidedly in the past. That same kind of past action is revealed in sentences using "done":

I never done much field work 'till the war come on. (Botkin 1945:80)

The Lord done put it on record. . . (Botkin 1945:83)

The last verb form to discuss in this paper is the Black English form "-in'" which occurs regardless of whether the action is past or present tense:

He got a glass of water in his hands and he drinkin' some of it.

She real skinny, and every time you see she eatin' Cheerios.

My teacher said I passed on the skin of my teeth. My sisters and them up there talkin' 'bout I should stayed back. (Dillard 1972:43)

The second major difference in Black English and general American English involves rules of pluralization. In Black English, nouns following numerals or other expressions which clearly indicate plurality, are not changed. Thus, "So many million dollars" used in general American English becomes "So many million dollar" in Black English. The system requires no pluralization of the noun when the modifier denotes pluralization. To say "Mary has ten sisters" would be grammatical redundancy. The Black English rendition reads, "Mary have ten sister." (Smith 1973)

Briefly, relative clause patterns also differ greatly in Black English. For example, one finds:

". . . There was one woman owns some slaves. . ." (Botkin 1945:7)

Prepositions are distributed differently. Thus, general American English would be "out of the house" while Black English says, "out the house."

Black English uses "what" where general American English would use "who."

"My youngest sister, what live in Georgia. . ." (Botkin 1945:77)

". . . They had a darky there named Dick what claim sick all the time." (Botkin 1945:3)

"Master John Booker had two niggers what had a habit of slipping across the river. . ." (Botkin 1945:3)

Perhaps neither structure nor vocabulary adequately shows the expressions "here go" (higo) and "dere go" (daego) as commonly found in the Black language communities. The Black English sentence "Here go a table" would translate into "Here is a table" in general American English, and "Dere go a man and a lady" becomes "There is (are) a man and a lady."

In conclusion, one finds that the language spoken in a majority of the Black communities of the United States has structures and rules just as any other language. The vocabulary has meaning which the community has agreed upon. For an outsider to adequately understand this Black English, he should treat it as he would any other foreign language. Any references to Black English as lesser than any other language are uninformed and racist references. For this language does work for the community using it.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Botkin, B. A. (ed.) (1945) Lay My Burden Down. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Dillard, J. L. (1972) Black English. New York: Random House, 1972.

Mitchell, Henry H. (1970) "Black English," Black Preaching, Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co.

Smith, Arthur L. (1972) Language, Communication, and Rhetoric in Black America. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc.

Smith, Arthur L. (1973) Transracial Communication. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Taylor, Orlando L. (Spring 1971) "Some Sociolinguistic Concepts of Black Language," Today's Speech. Vol. 19, pp. 19-26.

Williams, Ronald. (Spring 1971) "Race and the Word," Today's Speech. Vol. 19, pp. 27-33.