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ABSTRACT

Recently much linguistic research has been amassed on black language. With rare exceptions, this linguistic research has been directed to the lower working-class members of the black community. The language of blacks who are not lower class, on the other hand, has been summarily ignored, resulting in the middle-class black protest against the popularization and romanticization of ghetto varieties of English. The neglect of black varieties of English spoken by middle-class blacks has served to promote a negative stereotypical notion of black speech no different from linguistic stereotypes of former days. There is testimony that standard speech is no new arrival to the black community. What most linguists have failed to realize is the new dynamic within the black revolution which encourages an appreciation of divergent forms of black behavior for no other reason than the fact that it is black. The concept of a black standard or, more correctly, black standards for English is a new concept which requires elaboration and refinement. (HOD)

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LANGUAGE DIVERSITY IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY:

A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

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LANGUAGE DIVERSITY IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY: A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

It is common knowledge to most persons at this ~~conference~~ convention that research into the language spoken by Blacks is central to linguistic and educational concerns. So much has been written and discussed concerning the language behavior of Blacks that the serious-minded individual must soon stop to ponder the reasons why so little has been achieved. The old stereotypes live on, Black children continue to underachieve in public schools, unemployment and underemployment among Blacks are on the increase, the inner-city seethes in turmoil, and the Ku Klux Klan is reviving itself across the land. Yet, in the midst of such oppressive social problems, as one linguist noted:

> Research in highly divergent dialects of American English, especially in what has been termed Negro Nonstandard English (NNE), has lately been thriving... [1]

Interest in Black language grew out of three major academic concerns: (1) the linguistic relationship of lower-class Black speech to creole varieties of English spoken in the Caribbean area;[2] (2) the nature of linguistic variation in a heterogeneous

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1 Riley B. Smith, "Interrelatedness of Certain Deviant Grammatical Structures in Negro Nonstandard Dialects." Journal of English Linguistics 3, (1969) 82-88, p. 82.

2 William A. Stewart, "Foreign Language Teaching Methods in Quasi-Foreign Language Situations." Nonstandard Speech and the Teaching of English (Stewart, ed.), Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1964, 1-15.

speech community;[3] and (3) urban dialectology and its implications for the early education of socially and economically disadvantaged children.[4] As a result of research in (1) above, linguists such as William A. Stewart began to publish extensively on the creole nature of the variety of English spoken by Black urban ghetto dwellers. Stewart unequivocally asserts the historical derivation of working-class Black speech from a widespread Caribbean creole:

> Of those Africans who fell victim to the Atlantic slave trade and were brought to the New World, many found it necessary to learn some kind of English. With very few exceptions, the form of English they acquired was a pidginized one, and this kind of English became so well established as the principal medium of communication between Negro slaves in the British colonies that it was passed on as a creole language to succeeding generations of the New World Negroes, for whom it was their native tongue.[5]

The interest in the supposed nature of some varieties of Black speech has led one linguist to suggest that this speech is

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3 William Labov, The Social Stratification of English in New York City. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1966.

4 Roger Shuy; Walter Wolfram; and William K. Riley, A Study of Social Dialects in Detroit. Report on Project 6-1347, Washington, D.C.: Office of Education, 1967.

5 William A. Stewart, "Sociolinguistic Factors in the History of American Negro Dialects." The Florida FL Reporter, Vol. 5, No. 2(1967), p. 22.

a different language from mainstream American English with a different underlying structure.[6] It was the work of William Labov with his pioneer methodological innovations in sociolinguistic research which led to the inclusion of Black speech within the conceptual notion of linguistic variation.[7] Roger Shuy and his colleagues following their research in Detroit initiated a concern for sociolinguistic input into practical educational programs. They encouraged educators to consider the sociolinguistic backgrounds of students as a necessary aspect of teacher training and curriculum development.

The end result of such linguistic research was the amassing of an extensive literature on Black language. With rare exception, this linguistic research was directed at the lower and working-class members of the Black community. For the creolist, it was among the lower classes of Blacks that creole language patterns were preserved; those linguists working in language variation sought to measure the shift from nonstandard to a more standard speech among lower class Blacks depending upon shifts in the social situation. Education-minded sociolinguists focused on the language of the lower-class Black

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6 Marvin D. Loflin, "Teaching Problem in Nonstandard Negro English." English Journal, 56, (1967), 1312-1314.

7 Labov, op. cit.

because of
population, ~~since~~ the traditional academic retardation of lower-class Black children. Each group of linguists had his particular reasons for drawing on the Black lower class for its language samples. The end result of such narrow linguistic focus is the current popularity of the label "Black English" to refer to the socially stigmatized, non-prestigious English of the lower and working classes. It is this variety of Black speech which linguists have projected to national attention. The language of Blacks who are not lower class has been ~~commercially~~ ignored in linguistic research, resulting in the middle class Black protest against the popularization and romanticization of ghetto varieties of English. This neglect of Black varieties of English spoken by middle class Blacks has served to promote a negative, stereotypical notion of Black speech which is no different from linguistic stereotypes of former days.

The linguist, apart from doing his linguistics, must be concerned and, therefore, assume responsibility for the linguistic images he promotes. It should surprise no one that social science in this century has served to give a scientific basis for the popular prejudices widely held against oppressed minorities. To focus undue research upon the stigmatized behavior of the lowest socioeconomic members of the Black community promotes the impression that Blacks

really have not changed very much. The nigger dialect of a past era is recaptured in a dress-up label of "Black English." Not only does this kind of research stigmatize the community, but it also misrepresents the reality of language diversity in the Black community. The question of standard Black speech is much more reflective of current intra-community social dynamics than nonstandard Black speech. Contrary to popular opinion, "Black English", or the language of the ghetto, is not the language of the Black revolution. All Black leaders, A. Philip Randolph, Whitney Young, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Stokeley Carmichael, Rap Brown, Bobby Seale, Eldridge Cleaver, and others, each, without exception, exercises an articulate mastery over some variety of Black standard speech. In addressing the Black community, Black leaders establish empathy by flavoring their speech with ethnic material of various sorts, but they do not fall into an onslaught of nonstandard ~~speech~~ English.

There is testimony that standard speech is no new arrival to the Black community. Booker T. Washington once made ~~the~~ a revealing observation concerning Black speech in noting that

> When he [meaning the Black man] went into slavery, he was without anything which might properly be called a language; when he came out of slavery,

> he was able to speak the English tongue with force and intelligence.[3]

Some of the testimony of standard speech in the Black community comes out of the eighteenth century. Sir Charles Lyell, a British traveller, ~~visitor~~, witnessed a Black church service and wrote that

> He ... concluded by addressing to them a sermon, also without notes, in good style, and for the most part in good English; so much so, as to make me doubt whether a few ungrammatical phrases in the negro idiom might not have been purposely introduced for the sake of bringing the subject home to their family thoughts . . .[9]

I don't intend these quotes to capture a few quaint facts about a handful of standard-speaking Blacks, but rather as historical confirmation of a concept which has escaped contemporary linguists working with ~~the~~ Black language data. The label "Black English" is an unfortunate one; its current definition excludes from serious consideration forms of Black speech which characterize the English of more than fifty percent of the Black community. There are numerous historical factors which give credence to standardness

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8 Quoted in an article by Thomas E. Harris and Patrick C. Kennicott, "Booker T. Washington: A Conciliatory Rhetoric," in Language, Communication, and Rhetoric in Black America. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1972.

9 Quoted in Leslie H. Fishel Jr., and Benjamin Quarles, The Negro American: A Documentary History. Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1967, pp. 135-136.

in the Black community: standard-speaking Blacks in West Africa during the slave trade, the house servants, the Black preacher, the Reconstruction era, free Blacks - North and South, the Harlem Renaissance, the ornate language of the Black church, a literary tradition which goes back to Jupiter Hammon and Phyllis Wheatley of the eighteenth century, and a traditional middle class. More than purely linguistic interest must guide the researcher who considers himself qualified to conduct linguistic research in the Black community. Of critical importance are (1) historical forces which have shaped the lives of Blacks in America, (2) and an ethnographic knowledge of life styles of Black America. Simply to amass a voluminous body of data from which we extract a short list of diagnostic linguistic features is not serious-minded research. Despite a decade of intense sociolinguistic research, linguists know very little about the realities of language in the Black community.

From the earliest period of contemporary research in so-called "Black English," there has been a vocal objection from the Black community. Linguists, such as William Stewart, have sought to silence this opposition by appealing to "sociopolitical issues."[10] These arguments claim that the status-conscious Black

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10 William A. Stewart, "Sociopolitical Issues in the Linguistic Treatment of Negro Dialect." Monograph Series in Languages and Linguistics, Twentieth Annual Round Table, No. 22, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1970, 215-223.

middle class prefers to disassociate itself from all forms of lower-class Black behavior, especially lower-class language patterns. This attitude was certainly prevalent in the Black middle class that E. Franklin Frazier analyzed in his Black Bourgeoisie (1957).[11] Even so great a poet as Paul Laurence Dunbar saw his writings rejected and criticized by the Black middle class for his pioneer usage of folk dialect in poetry.

What most linguists have failed to realize is the new dynamic within the Black revolution which encourages an appreciation of divergent forms of Black behavior for no other reason than the fact that it is Black! I, for one, do not endorse the current fadishness of romanticizing the ghetto, and the Hollywood elevation to cultural heroes, characters drawn from the ugly realities of ghetto life. There is much more to the Black community than the ghetto, and ghetto language. The middle-class Black protest against narrowly-focused linguistic research into lower-class Black speech was another way of asking the age-old question of an oppressed minority: When you come to study us, why must you insist upon projecting the behaviors of our most stigmatized representatives. Research has shown that Blacks them-

11 E. Franklin Frazier, Black Bourgeoisie. New York: The Free Press, 1957.

selves hold in negative esteem the language that linguists refer to as "Black English." [12]

As a product of the Black community, I feel that the English that I speak at age 31 is no less important than the English I spoke at age 11. And since I grew up in a lower, working-class community, I undoubtedly spoke the nonstandard language of my peers. However, of equal importance is the fact that I did not have meaningful contact with the White community until my entrance into the university; and yet, I was able to acquire a standard form of English. There must be something going on in the Black community which makes available to its members the acquisition and use of a standard. How else might one, even a linguist, explain my success -- and that of many other Blacks from lower and working-class neighborhoods -- in acquiring a standard form of American English prior to interpersonal contact with the White community.

The neglect of linguists to study the language of Blacks other than the mono-stylistic, nonstandard language of the ghetto, has limited the credibility of linguistic research. The time has come when all social scientists must address themselves to the question of relevancy of their subject matter to the solution of

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12 Johanna S. DeStefano, "Black Attitudes Toward Black English: A Pilot Study." The Florida FL Reporter, Vol. 9, Nos. 1 and 2, Spring/Fall 1971, 23 - 27.

American social problems. By focusing linguistic research on the nonstandard, socially unacceptable, stigmatized English of lower-class Blacks, the linguist indirectly projects a linguistic image of the Black community which is an age-old stereotype of American social history.

The Black community, contrary to popular opinion, has changed greatly. Although Black leaders attempt to incorporate ethnic material into their speeches, the language of the Black revolution is not "Black English," but a prestigious standard required of community leaders. You are not going to lead any kind of movement in the Black community with "Black English!"

How one defines his problem will act selectively on what questions are asked. Linguistic credibility has suffered unnecessarily among Blacks because of the language behaviors that linguists have chosen to research. The concept of a Black standard, or more correctly Black standards for English, is a new concept which requires elaboration and refinement. However, the operation or use of some standard in the Black community is at least two centuries old. Linguistic research which stereotypes a community does not contribute to the alleviation of social problems; quite the contrary, it provides a scientific basis for a popular prejudice.

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