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ABSTRACT

When teaching composition to speakers of Black English, instructors should be aware of the dominance of oral expression in black culture and base the writing program on developing the students' present language abilities. The social value placed by inner-city blacks on oral expression is evident in the varying verbal contests carried out when interacting with the establishment or authority figures (i.e., "shucking," "jiving") and among themselves ("rapping," "running it down," "signifying," "sounding," "ranking," "styling' out"). This expressive mode is different from that of middle-class speakers in function, being closely involved with performance (self-projection) and audience, and depending on a large body of shared knowledge. In developing a composition program, emphasis should be on teaching students how to handle situations not dependent on shared knowledge--frozen, formal communication. A practical way to do this is with a group writing project which permits interaction (familiar to them), first in a group play and later in group theme writing, building on the students' skills. (JM)

BLACK RHETORICAL PATTERNS

AND THE

TEACHING OF COMPOSITION

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English teachers, particularly composition teachers, constantly face the problem of teaching writing to speakers of what William Labov calls Black English Vernacular (hereafter referred to as BE).[1] BEV refers to the relatively uniform dialect spoken by the majority of black youth in most parts of the United States, especially in the inner city areas of New York, Boston, Detroit, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Cleveland, Chicago, St. Louis, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. In addition, BEV is spoken in many rural areas of the South and is often used by adults for casual or intimate conversations.

What is happening in the Northern cities is that a Southern regional speech pattern is developing into a class and ethnic speech pattern. This process is not a new phenomena. It was also taking place in London during Shakespeare's time when the regional dialects from the east and southwest, spoken by the lower and middle classes, conflicted with the conservative, aristocratic speech.[2] Labov has demonstrated that the same process is operating today. In the suburbs of New York City "where the Connecticut and New Jersey patterns meet New York City patterns, the New York City pattern becomes associated with lower socioeconomic groups."[3]

Linguists have analyzed the grammar and phonology of BEV so that composition teachers can be more systematic in the teaching of "grammar." However, a composition program that merely wants to substitute a socially preferred form for a nonstandard form is a poor program indeed. Shakespeare's plays would hardly be improved by substituting the preferred upper class forms for the middle class forms used by Shakespeare. More

Latin and Greek would not have made Shakespeare a better writer. In a similar vein, substituting middle class forms for BEV forms will not per se make an inner city student a better writer. For a writing program to be effective and worthwhile, it must help the student develop his ability to use language beyond what he is already capable of doing.

In order for a composition program to aid a student in further developing his writing skills, it should be based upon his present verbal abilities. The verbal abilities of inner city black students are in many ways different from middle class students. One of the dominant features of black culture is a continuing reliance on oral expression. This reliance means that there is still a good deal of social value placed on verbal abilities. Although grammar and pronunciation are crucial features of any speaking style, it is the system of decorum which governs what varieties of speech are appropriate under what circumstances. Abrahams points out that the "difference between SE (Standard English) and BE (BEV) lies more in [the] area of 'manners' than language. In Black America, the patterns of expectation carried into public and the ways in which disruptions are handled may turn into a performance."[4] Much of a youth's reputation depends on how well he can perform in various verbal contests.

Shucking, shucking it, shucking and jiving, S-ing, and J-ing are all terms that refer to one of the verbal performances practiced by blacks when they interact with the Man, the establishment, or any authority figure. These terms describe the forms of speech and physical movements that are necessary to maintain a particular guise in a confrontation with an authority figure. Many blacks have developed a keen perception

of what is necessary to motivate, appease, or satisfy an authority figure who is confronting them. Kochman provides the following example:

> One black gang member was coming down the stairway from the club room with seven guns on him and encountered some policemen coming up the same stairs. If they stopped and frisked him, he and others would have been arrested. A paraphrase of his shuck follows: "Man, I gotta get away from up there. There's gonna be some trouble and I don't want no part of it." This shuck worked on the minds of the policemen. It anticipated their questions as to why he was leaving the clubroom, and why he would be in such a hurry. He also gave them a reason for wanting to get up to the room fast.[5]

The function of shucking is both expressive and directive. It is designed to work on both the mind and emotions of the authority figure in order to manipulate him in a particular way. Like many other black speech acts, when it is viewed in its entirety, shucking must be regarded as a performance. Both words and gestures are used to promote the desired image.

Rapping is a popular form of verbal play used on the streets or at parties. Often rapping is used to refer to ordinary conversation, but it is also used to refer to a "fluent and lively way of talking, generally characterized by a high degree of personal style, through which the speaker intends to draw the audience's attention to himself or some particular feature of himself that he feels is attractive or prestigious with his audience."[6] The aesthetic of the rap is designed to focus attention primarily on the way something is said, not on what is said. This is essentially the difference between running it down and rapping. Running it down emphasizes the content of what is said, and rapping emphasizes the personal style of the speaker.

Style becomes particularly important when a man is rapping on a woman. When a man and a woman are rapping, the man naturally draws atten-

tion to that aspect of himself which he finds most attractive. The role of the woman is to respond verbally to the advances of the man or to reject them. If she wants to reject him, she normally insults him. She can do this by denigrating either the content or the manner of the man's rap. Again, Kochman provides an excellent example of this type of rap:

> A man coming from the bathroom forgot to zip his pants. An unescorted party of women kept watching him and laughing among themselves. The man's friends hip [inform] him as to what's going on. He approaches one woman -- "Hey baby, did you see that big black Cadillac with the full tires ready to roll in action just for you?" She answers -- "No... , but I saw a little gray Volkswagen with two flat tires."[7]

As the above example demonstrates, the competitive aspect of the event can become quite keen with each party attempting to outperform the other in his or her repartee. When one party clearly outperforms the other, as the lady did in the above example, she is said to have capped him.

Probably the best-known of the black inner city verbal games is the dozens or the dirty dozens. It is known as signifying in Chicago, sounding in New York City, joining in Washington, D.C., and ranking in Philadelphia. The most well-known example is the signifying monkey from Roger Abrahams' Deep Down in the Jungle.

Signifying has two separate, but related, functions. It is used either as a directive or to arouse feelings of embarassment, resentment, or shame. When it is used as a directive, as in the signifying monkey, the signifier repeats or pretends to repeat what someone else has said about the listener. The report is couched in plausible language designed to arouse hostility and anger. The implication of what the listener must do to retain his status is usually quite clear. When the function of sig-

nifying is to arouse feelings of embarassment, shame, or frustration, or to diminish someone's status, the tactic employed is direct in the form of a taunt.

One of the principal defining characteristics of signifying is its indirect intent. The interpretation or significance of the utterance cannot be arrived at by consideration of the literal meaning of the utterance. The apparent significance of the message differs from its real significance. It is its inferred meaning that signifies its actual meaning. The second major characteristic of signifying is that its apparent meaning serves as a key which directs hearers to some shared knowledge, attitudes, and values that must be processed metaphorically. The actual spoken words may refer to this shared knowledge either by contradicting it or by giving what is known to be an impossible explanation of some obvious fact. The decoding of the actual message depends upon the indirection and upon the shared knowledge of the participants. This shared knowledge operates on two levels. Claudia Mitchell-Kernan gives the following example of signifying:

> The relevant background information lacking in this interchange is that the husband is a member of the class of individuals who do not wear suits to work.
>
> Wife: Where are you going?
> Husband: I'm going to work.
> Wife: [you're wearing] A suit, tie and white shirt? You didn't tell me you got a promotion.[8]

In order to arrive at the "real" semantic interpretation, this exchange depends a good deal on the shared knowledge that the husband does not wear a suit to work. It is the intricacy of the allusion to shared knowledge that makes for the success of these speech acts.

The final example of black rhetoric, stylin' out, is associated with black ministers. In most cases college freshmen do not practice it; but since the minister is the man of words for the community, he does provide an example that these students often try to imitate in formal situations such as composition classes. Grace Sims Holt has pointed out:

> Whatever other functions fell to the minister in the early black church, it was clear that the most important one was to create the form of hallucination that would provide the basis of hope which would allow one to endure another week, at which time emotional release could again be provided.[9]

The status of the minister depended upon his capacity to arouse an emotional response. These ministers must become true verbal artists. They parade rich, descriptive phrases before the audience, and the audience responds in emotionally charged language. The reason for their being is emotion.

Because the function of stylin' out is emotional release, repetition becomes an important stylistic device. Martin Luther King made very effective use of the repetition of the phrase "I have a dream . . . ." in his famous sermon. This use of repetition serves as a communication device which emphasizes and drives home to the audience the important points that the minister is trying to make. By means of repetition, the minister makes certain that the semantic meaning of the message is not swallowed in its emotionalism.

The above examples demonstrate that inner city blacks have a keen sense of oral communication. However, it differs from the speech of middle class speakers in significant ways. The function of all these forms of speech is closely involved with performance and audience participation. In addition, the function of these speech forms except running it down, which focused on content, were primarily concerned with projection of self, or, in other words, a concerned subjective point of view. The language

in these rhetorical devices was used to assert oneself or to arouse emotions in others. In order to achieve the desired results, the speaker must depend upon a large body of shared knowledge.

The terms high context and low context[10] help to describe the problems involved in developing the necessary type of composition program. A high context evokes a kind of behavior that suggests a high degree of familiarity with the situation and the people in it. A low context evokes behavior that suggests unfamiliarity with the situation and the people in it. The range of language that Bernstein calls "restrictive code" or the intimate and casual style of Joos are appropriate for the high context situation. The low context situations, however, demand the elaborate code or the formal or frozen style and it is the low context situations which face the students in school. An effective composition program aims toward developing the students' ability to deal effectively with a low context situation. To do this, the student must learn to handle situations that are not dependent upon shared information; he must learn to provide the necessary background information. A low context writing situation prohibits the speaker from relying upon the non-verbal features which are characteristic of intimate and casual speech.

If the student is to learn to control the formal and frozen styles, which seem necessary for academic achievement, he must learn to disassociate himself from events and to report them in an impersonal way which seems to be objective. But perhaps, and most important, he needs to learn to use a deductive approach. In spite of what many English teachers say, inner city students use concrete examples. However, the examples usually imply inductively, rather than state explicitly, the fundamental assumptions.

In other words, they depend upon a body of shared knowledge -- only the instructor does not usually share this knowledge. As a result the instructor misses the point the student is making and usually falls back on old reliable comments such as "be concrete" or "be specific." The student has been "concrete" and "specific." What he needs to do is to become more proficient in the deductive approach. He needs to state the fundamental propositions (the knowledge which he shares with his contemporaries) and to speculate about the results through concrete examples.

Since inner city students are already adept at oral performance, particularly with performances that involve audience participation, one practical way to begin a composition course is with a group writing project. Groups of about four or five students seem to work the most efficiently. Besides producing a comraderie in class, this type of project allows for a high degree of verbal and kinesic interaction. Often this interaction takes the form of a response on the part of group members to the work and ideas of one another. In many ways it becomes analogous to some church services in that a student leads the group which continually responds. The group often switches leaders during the class period, but there tends to be continuous interaction among the class members. This type of project at the beginning of the semester lessens the threat that inner city students feel in a new environment because it involves, at least partially, a familiar mode of communication.

After a group play, the class can be divided into different groups and a theme can be written in the same manner. Again, it should be read to the class. Writing the first theme as a group has at least two advantages. This approach stimulates the student through group encouragement

and provides the students with an audience of their peers. In addition, the teacher does not appear as a direct threat. Abrahams has pointed out that most lessons for the black child are learned through observation rather than direct teaching. In fact, direct teaching is often associated with hostility and punishment so that it has little effect on inner city students. By beginning the writing process as a group action, students with serious writing problems can learn a great deal by watching and observing how better writers go about writing their papers.

Because inner city students are already familiar with personal narratives, this type of writing should also come early in the course, perhaps as the first individual essay. At the beginning of the course, it is still difficult for a student to write an essay that does not depend, at least partially, upon shared knowledge. For this reason, a persuasive theme based on shucking, such as "How to Talk Your Way out of Something," makes a good theme topic early in the course.

By beginning a writing course with themes based upon the oral tradition with which the student is already familiar, the composition teacher can build upon the skills which the student has. Once the student becomes somewhat familiar with the writing process and feels less threatened by it, then the teacher can move on to more formal writing. But when doing so, the teacher should be explicit in directions and make certain that the student knows he is running it down, seeking literal truth, and that analogies are only for explanations.

Footnotes

1. William Labov, Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972). Hereafter referred to as Labov.

2. See Helga Kokereritz, Shakespeare's Pronunciation (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1953) and Henry C. Wyld, A History of Modern Colloquial English (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936).

3. Labov, p. 9-10.

4. Roger D. Abrahams, "Talking My Talk: Black English and Social Segmentation in Black Communities," Florida FL Reporter, Spring/ Fall 1972, p. 30.

5. Thomas Kochman, "Black American Speech Events and a Language Program for the Classroom" in Functions of Language in the Classroom, ed. Courtney B. Cazden, Vera P. John, and Dell Hymes (New York: Teachers College Press, 1972), p. 250. Hereafter referred to as Kochman.

6. Kochman, p. 217.

7. Kochman, p. 244.

8. Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, "Signifying, Loud-Talking and Marking" in Rappin and Stylin Out ed. Thomas Kochman (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1972), p. 321.

9. Grace Sims Holt, "Stylin Outta the Black Pulpit" in Rappin and Stylin Out ed. Thomas Kochman (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1972), pp. 195-196.

10. See Frederick D. Erickson, "Discussion Behavior in the Black Ghetto and in White Suburbia: A Comparison of Language Style and Inquiry Style." Doctoral Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1969.