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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the importance of teaching about non-standard dialect awareness in English departments, focusing on African American Vernacular English (AAVE). The paper asserts that it is the job of teachers to present students with appropriate knowledge about language and to raise awareness of nonstandard dialects, rather than perpetuate myths. The paper suggests that despite college educators' attempts to address issues facing AAVE-speaking students and provide solutions, the U.S. public remains in opposition. When linguists began studying AAVE in the 1960s, the goal was to find connections between AAVE and reading failure in order to create solutions to help children succeed in acquiring standard English. This remains a main focus of AAVE research today. Researchers have discovered deep social and political implications in this work that create roadblocks to discovering and implementing new teaching strategies and gaining public support for validation of nonstandard varieties such as AAVE. The paper suggests that college English teachers have the ability and the social responsibility to effect change in the outside community through teaching, research, and writing, cautioning that they must begin the process by examining their own biases and beliefs about nonstandard dialects. (Contains 12 references.) (SM)

Riki Thompson
University of Washington
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African American Vernacular English and Dialect Awareness in English Departments

The purpose of my paper today is talk about the importance of teaching about non-standard dialect awareness in English Depts. For those of us teaching English on college campuses we have the ability to effect change to the outside community through teaching, research and writing. Through teaching awareness of non-standard dialects in our classes, we can make a difference with the students we see today, and the students that many of them will teach tomorrow. As teachers in higher education we must first become aware of our own biases and beliefs about non-standard dialects. If at that point we want to take the steps, such as addressing language myths and fostering the awareness about non-standard dialects, then we should do so. Being educated and aware about dialects such as African American Vernacular English, which I will be calling AAVE for the sake of brevity, allows us to address issues with knowledge rather than ignorance, raising awareness within our students, with the eventual hope of raising public awareness.

It is our job as teachers to present our students with knowledge about language, not perpetuate myths. As teachers in higher education we ask the difficult questions and offer direction for those who want to continue the search for answers. To avoid the issue of AAVE and non-standard dialects in the English classroom, is to avoid the reality that those varieties are an integral part of American society, and should be honored as such. In order to claim that we value diversity in our society and our classrooms, we must demonstrate this by addressing AAVE and non-standard dialect awareness in pedagogy.

At a meeting with the Oakland School Board shortly after the Ebonics controversy created national headlines in December 1996, Reverend Jesse Jackson stated, "Your message is not getting through. The language and the message must get synchronized" (qtd in Rickford and Rickford 2000: 163). The message that Jesse Jackson refers to is at the heart of the issue plaguing educators in the conundrum concerning AAVE and dialect awareness.

As educators, the message that we need to get through, is a message of awareness about non-standard dialects. A statement by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) best sums up the message:

> We affirm the student's right to their own patterns and varieties of the language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amount to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable then to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language. (qtd from Wolfram-Estes 1998: 285)

Teaching about AAVE and other non-standard dialects is a controversial issue of which the American public has little understanding and yet, a great many beliefs about. Linguist John McWhorter (1998: 128) suggests a couple of ideas as to why, as Jesse Jackson stated, the message is not getting through: "One suspects that the public has either missed the message or that they have not been convinced by the argument". It is frustrating to hear statements such as these, pointing out the reality—that after forty years of studies and academic conversation over the issues of AAVE—the public is not convinced that AAVE is systematic and legitimate, and we as educators, with all of our data, have failed to convince them.

Despite the well-intentioned attempts of educators in the academy to address the issues facing AAVE-speaking students and provide solutions, the American public remains in opposition. At the 1997 annual Linguistic Society of America's (LSA) conference, linguists drafted a resolution in response to the Ebonics controversy and passed it by a unanimous vote. The Resolution, which I have included with your handout,

declared "the Oakland School Board's decision to recognize the vernacular of African American students in teaching them Standard English is linguistically and pedagogically sound". The Resolution states that the linguistic structures of AAVE are systematic and fundamentally regular, as numerous scientific studies have previously proved; the resolution also addresses the public's negative characterizations of AAVE as incorrect and demeaning, and explains the social and political distinction between "language" and "dialect". In defense of the Oakland School Board's actions, the Resolution points to studies of pedagogical approaches that show positive effects of validating non-standard varieties in teaching the standard. The LSA Resolution illustrates that the conversation has been discussed in the ivory tower with consensus by its members, although attempts to translate outside of the walls of the Academy have been a failure on most levels.

In 1969 the *Philadelphia Daily News* created a public outcry when it printed a story titled "Order to OK 'Black English' in Schools comes Under Fire," based on a memo circulated to school district personnel that suggested they read *Teaching Black Children to Read*, an edited book of papers written by linguists, who insisted that Black English is systematic and legitimate, and warned of the implications of denying those facts (Smitherman 1998). In 1979, the "Black English Case" created more public controversy over AAVE. The lawsuit *King vs. Ann Arbor* was brought by seven parents who believed the schools to be responsible for their children's reading failures. Judge Charles Joiner's decision, see figure 6, stated that the Ann Arbor School District was liable in that "the failure to develop a program to assist their teachers to take into account the home language in teaching Standard English may be one of the causes of the children's reading problems" (qtd in Smitherman 1998: 104). The school district was required to institute programs to help educate teachers about the language system of AAVE, to foster both increased knowledge and understanding about the dialect. In 1996, the Ebonics controversy erupted in Oakland. Once again, there was public outcry, and the rampant misrepresentations of AAVE illustrated the public's lack of knowledge about language issues. Despite the decision in Ann Arbor in 1977, mandating programs to increase knowledge and understanding of the dialect, public opinion in 1996 proved that times had not changed much; on a national level, people still misunderstood the

intentions of educators, and stood behind their beliefs that AAVE was nothing more than "lazy" or "broken" English, regardless of scientific findings stating otherwise.

When linguists began studying AAVE in the 1960s, the goal was to find the connections between AAVE and reading failure in order to create solutions to help children succeed in acquiring Standard English (Labov 1967a, Baratz 1969, Stewart 1969, Baratz and Shuy 1969, Wolfram 1969). This is still one of the main focuses of AAVE research today, although through the process of research and discussion, more questions have been asked, such as: What are the origins of AAVE? Is AAVE derived from non-standard varieties of British English or is it derived from West African and Caribbean creoles? Is AAVE diverging from Standard English or is it in the process of decreolization? Researchers and educators have discovered that there are deep social and political implications in this work, creating many roadblocks in the path of discovering and implementing new teaching strategies, as well as gaining public support for validation of non-standard varieties such as AAVE.

For those of us teaching English on college campuses we have the ability to effect change to the outside community through teaching, research and writing. Through teaching awareness of non-standard dialects in our classes, we can make a difference on a manageable level. I must remind you, that before we can teach about non-standard dialects, we must first become aware of our own biases and beliefs about non-standard dialects. Many of us in the Academy believe that we have a social responsibility to use our acquired knowledge and give something back to society. This concept is known in the field of sociolinguistics as the *Principle of debt incurred* coined by linguist Bill Labov, who states: "An investigator who has obtained linguistic data from members of a speech community has an obligation to use the knowledge based on that data for the benefit of the community, when it has need for it" (1982: 172).Walt Wolfram has elaborated on Labov's principle with the *Principle of linguistic gratuity*, which states: "Investigators who have obtained linguistic data from members of a speech community should actively pursue positive ways in which they can return linguistic favors to the community" (1998: 264). The job of English teachers in higher education needs to include imparting knowledge about language—rather than myths—to future generations if we are to get our message through, thus returning linguistic favors to the community.

In teaching, we must decide whether to include readings and discussions about dialects and their validity. Many great authors use vernacular in their work—Zora Neale Hurston in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Mark Twain in *Huckleberry Finn*—and we as literature teachers must choose how we address these choices. For those of us teaching composition and creative writing classes, we may be confronted with students using vernacular, either consciously or unconsciously, in their work—placing us in the position of informing the writing process or possibly discouraging the writer. If we hold beliefs that AAVE is "bad" English, as opposed to appreciating the difference, we may stifle a talented student who could become the next Langston Hughes. Whereas, if we are educated about non-standard varieties, we can positively inform the student about such a stylistic decision, as well as inform the writing process. It is most likely that students we encounter in college have already mastered the art of code-switching between AAVE and standard English, although they may not have accurate information about the issues surrounding their situation. Being educated and aware about AAVE allows us to address issues with knowledge rather than ignorance, raising awareness within our students, with the eventual hope of raising public awareness.

It is our job as teachers to present our students with knowledge about language, not perpetuate myths. I would like to repeat, that to avoid the issue of AAVE and non-standard dialects in the English classroom, is to avoid the reality that those varieties are an integral part of American society, and should be honored as such. In order to claim that we value diversity in our society and our classrooms, we must demonstrate this by addressing AAVE and non-standard dialect awareness in pedagogy.

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