

THE DISCOURSE OF EBONICS: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

America is a true melting pot, as exemplified by the diversity of students in our classrooms. Many are concerned with how teachers are providing instruction for the diverse groups of students they teach. Failure to embrace multiculturalism allows members of society to continue to promote disenfranchisement. For example, proponents of the complex, rhythmic vernacular of Black English known as Ebonics purport that it is a recognizable “tongue”, and should be treated as such. This means that in the grand effort of teaching standard American English, educators must first recognize, and second, not strip from them a language that is useful among its many users. On the contrary, this alleged language has very real negative connotations attached to it. Consequently, the argument of understanding, embracing, and accepting cultural differences—in this case linguistics—rages on.

A Historical Explanation

On December 18, 1996, the Oakland Unified School District’s Board of Education voted unanimously to enact into policy a program to improve the English Language acquisition and application skills of African-American students. This came as a result of recommendations from the African American Task Force. They purported that numerous validated scholarly studies demonstrated that African American students as a part of their culture and heritage as African people possess and utilize a language described in various scholarly approaches as “Ebonics” (literally “Black sounds”, a portmanteau of “ebony” and “phonics”) or “Pan-African Communication Behaviors” or “African Systems”, and that these

African Language Systems have origins in West and Niger-Congo languages and are not merely dialects of English (Public Broadcasting Service, 2005a; Wikipedia, 2005).

These language patterns did not happen by accident. They developed over a period of time beginning with the constant struggle of African peoples (during the Middle Passage) trying to make some sense of the languages of their captors. This evolution of the language system was aided and abetted by the need to communicate in code. This was especially helpful during slavery when Blacks would sing what has become known as Negro Spirituals. Those songs were actual codes in verse and allegory that helped an enslaved people communicate without their oppressors being none the wiser. But it did not stop there. From the Reconstruction Era, to Jim Crow and the Niagara Movement, the language pattern grew. Traveling through the Harlem Renaissance, the Civil Rights Movement, up to the current times of Affirmative Action, the unique style of lingo continued to develop. Thus came into being a distinctive, culturally based subsystem of speech and communication that has resonated throughout the history of this continent.

Recognizing the vernacular spoken by its African-American students as a separate language along with the fact that those same students were in dire need of Standard English fluency, Oakland educators opined that black students were linguistically akin to others for whom English is not native. However, the Oakland School Board did not expect the hostility that followed their ill-advised linguistic assertion that Ebonics was the authentic language of their African-American students. Facing a scornful public, they argued that their ultimate objective was to recognize Ebonics as a means to increase Standard English proficiency among black students (Public Broadcasting Service, 2005a).

Should we, as a nation, expect anything different from what we've attained concerning this speech pattern? Consider that since the time when blacks inhabited this continent, communication has been an integral part of their socio-culture existence. This was because of the restraints placed on literacy attainment, crowd-gathering, and anything else that remotely resembled the ability for enslaved people to rise up out of its current condition. As a result, African-Americans had to learn to communicate in allegory and rhythmic speaking codes.

Sermons have been preached, prayers have been prayed, and great orators have appealed to the masses using this distinctive dialect. Mothers, while nursing their children, would speak and sing in this genre. Both poetry and prose have been written using this unique and ever evolving style of speech. Consider this attempt in the late 1800s to capture its essence.

An Ante-Bellum Sermon

WE is gathahed hyeah, my brothahs,
In dis howlin' wildaness,
Fu' to speak some words of comfo't
To each othah in distress.
An' we chooses fu' ouah subjic'
Dis--we 'll 'splain it by an' by;
"An' de Lawd said, 'Moses, Moses,'
An' de man said, 'Hyeah am I.'"

Now ole Pher'oh, down in Egypt,
Was de wuss man evah bo'n,
An' he had de Hebrew chillun
Down dah wukin' in his co'n;
'Twell de Lawd got tiahed o' his foolin',
An' sez he: "I 'll let him know--
Look hyeah, Moses, go tell Pher'oh
Fu' to let dem chillun go."

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Issues for Educators

Following this brief historical perspective, let us examine some of the issues and challenges in dealing with the discourse of Ebonics in our nation's schools. Many studies have focused on the comparison of speaking and writing styles of black students, the employability of black speakers, and the perceptions of teachers of those who speak black dialect (Evans et al, 2000). For many of the nation's educators, few pedagogical issues are more important than these.

Within the bureaucratic world and workplaces of every society, institutions require expertise in some arbitrarily chosen genre which is governed by its own set of rules. The choice of sentence structures or the explanation of the meanings of words depends upon the immediate context of the genre users and their unique language structure. In actuality, words have no inherent meaning given them by some independent power. They have the consensus meaning that people in an ever-widening community give them (Franklin & Hixon, 1999). In their research, Franklin and Hixon, purport that speaking a language, therefore, is a special kind of coded behavior, to the extent that when a person does not speak a preferred language as is desired or expected in a society, that person may be perceived as an ignorant individual who does not share the same social knowledge and concepts as others.

This reaffirms the notion that language is often a barometer by which many people measure one's intelligence. To some people, however, the requirement that Standard English be spoken in our classroom is considered discriminatory because this requirement places an additional burden on the non-standard English and non-English speaking students. In an effort to combat this malady, school counselors can play a part. Inasmuch as Ebonics is a real and legitimate community-based language system that cannot be ignored or devalued, school counselors can consult and collaborate with teachers to facilitate the effective teaching of Standard English to Ebonics-speaking students while preserving the integrity of their indigenous language system (Harper, Braithwaite, & LaGrange, 1998).

The ability of a people to hold on to its indigenous roots is important to the psycho-social development of such a people. For the descendants of the Africans brought to the Western hemisphere as slaves, Standard English is the imposed language of racial oppression (Harper et al., 1998). Since blacks in America, in most cases, cannot retrace their original tongue, they have a double edged sword with which to contend. Therefore, care must be taken so as not to teach the symbolism of Standard English in ways that encourage further oppression or depreciation of other language forms.

According to the online reference Wikipedia, half of the countries of the world have official languages that have been specifically designated in their Constitution. Some countries such as Albania, France, Germany, and Lithuania, have only one official language. Some have more than one, such as Switzerland, Belgium, Canada, Afghanistan, and South Africa. Still others, such as the United States, have no official national language but do have areas (or cultures) where an official language has been adopted (Public Broadcasting Service, 2005b). Furthermore, tens of dozens of languages are spoken in these United States where its inhabitants are a mix of peoples from all over the globe. Proponents of Ebonics would contend that there is enough room for theirs as well.

Many Black Americans have adopted or inherited the official language of Ebonics. To say that it is not official or recognizable because of its deviation from Standard English is the topic of most debates on the subject. Juxtapose that theory with the knowledge that people from Quebec, Senegal, Paris, parts of Canada and Southern Louisiana, all speak variant forms of French. The same is true of the many dialects of Spanish spoken in Spain, Mexico, or the Honduras. Thus, it becomes disparaging to proponents and users of this alternate language system to be bombarded with the notion that their language is considered the improper use of English. What can be worse is when the language in question is dismissed as bad grammar, lazy pronunciations, or vulgar and profane words.

Other instances of disparity can be related to the traditional or "standardized" psycho-educational assessment of speakers of non-standard English. These assessments do not consider, nor do they fully account for or adapt to, the non-standard, syncopated syntax and cultural experiences that certain test takers bring to the evaluation experience (Gopaul-McNicol, Reid, & Wisdom, 1998).

Gopaul-McNicol et al. favor the Ecological Assessment approach recommended by the American Psychological Association in which students are observed in their most familiar environments (home, community, church, etc.) in order to accurately ascertain their true cognitive achievement and potential, as opposed to the more familiar, culturally biased Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-III (WISC-III) or other assessment instruments. This could possibly level the playing field.

By now, one fact seems apparent. The ethnically identifiable language of African Americans—and what to do about it—is nothing new. It has long been the subject of great controversy. African American speech was often caricatured as buffoonery, child-like, and ignorant. This stereotype has continued throughout the 20th century in film, radio, and television (Taylor, 1998), although in recent years, the vernacular language systems of African Americans (including slang) have been glamorized in the popular culture, especially notable in terms of advertisement dollars—“Whazz...zzzupp!”

How do we take this oft-misunderstood colloquialism from its infamous, historical status to one that is more congruent with all invested parties? In grappling with this question, we recognize that socio-linguists, researchers, psychologists, educators, and policy makers are some of the invested stakeholders. It is my belief that all of the aforementioned realize the need for African American children to acquire competency in Standard English. African American parents want the same, but many also want their children to be knowledgeable of the traditional language systems of the African American community and to use these systems in the proper contexts. In his article, Taylor (1998), asks whether children should be taught that there is a time and place for all language, thereby encouraging the development of bi-dialectal educational programs in which Black students retain Ebonics and speak Standard English when it is required?

My assumption is that most would answer yes. For the idioms expressed in Ebonics are just a play on words and phrases. The phonology of Ebonics suggests that it is a mere matter of semantics. Once the tacit knowledge of how and when to use it is developed, it becomes almost instinctive. This is called code-switching. It is the ability to alternate between one or more languages or dialects in the course of discourse between people who have more than one language in common. Code-switching is valuable. Its inherent nature affirms the fact that other languages do indeed exist. Acknowledging the validity of Ebonics in no way suggests teaching it in the place of Standard English. Acknowledging Ebonics can and should serve to facilitate the teaching of Standard English (Rush, 1997).

Challenges for the Future

When Dr. Robert Williams, professor emeritus at St. Louis's Washington University, coined the term Ebonics in 1973, then later detailed it in his 1975 book, *Ebonics: The True Language of Black Folks*, he probably had no idea the firestorm it

would cause. Many may not be aware that he brought attention to this language genre as a means of its official recognition, while at the same time realizing the need to help African-American children master Standard English. He understood that it (Standard English) was the common language of America, especially as it pertained to education, business, commerce, and the industrial world. Yet, he could not ignore the rich variety of idioms, patois, argots, and social dialects of Blacks that are considered to be the linguistic continuation of Africa in Black America. With that understanding, Ebonics has been the source of both celebration and disdain. Blacks themselves are perplexed concerning what to do about what essentially has become their own language—try as they may to separate themselves from the negative connotations of it.

I contend that we focus on the flavoring and texture of the words and phrases that come from this not-so-new art form, especially when they can be delivered in eloquent fashion. The precedence for this is in the case of the acceptance of Shakespearean or Elizabethan words and phrases so much so that it has become common language. Certainly, corporate America has realized that Hip-Hop, which is laced and chock-full of Ebonics, brings an economic value to the table.

I make no claims asserting my support or non-support of the language genre. That is not my intent. My purpose is to unveil some of the issues and challenges facing the discourse of Ebonics. Indeed the semantics used in such a rich language can be confusing. But does that justify the negative repercussions heaped on its users? I believe these repercussions manifest themselves in many ways. Research points to the association between language and intelligence. I submit that society obviously connects language patterns (i.e. Ebonics) with other societal factors such as drugs, crime, etc. This can perpetually drive a wedge through the gaping holes that already exists between cultures in America.

On the other hand, should Standard-English speakers tolerate what obviously is the unconventional use of their language? I agree with the assertion that Standard English cannot and should not be devalued, nor should its importance to the educational processes of all American youth and adults be minimized (Harper et al., 1998). Understanding and acceptance of diverse language patterns is part of becoming less ethnocentric. Since language is a vital part of any culture, that would be a huge step in closing the cultural gaps that divide us as a nation.

However, given that Ebonics is in such wide use among today's youth in schools across the nation, educators, and society in general, will have to agree upon a mutual common ground on which to stand. For it doesn't appear that the African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), (Wikipedia, 2005), we know as Ebonics is going anywhere anytime soon. Or, Ebonically speaking, *It's gonna' be here for a minute.*

Although the debate has quieted some as of late, I believe this linguistically-charged argument is far from over.

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