

Ebonics: the third incarnation of a thirty-three year old controversy about Black English in the United States

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Abstract

The Ebonics controversy in the United States is not an aberration. Rather, it represents a convergence of varied interests, attitudes, and experiences which are partly products of United States history and geography. To understand the controversy better, important elements of the geographical and historical milieu precede the general discussion.

The scientific study of African American speech has existed for over forty years. Historically, popular interest in the topic can be divided into three stages: the first is lengthy; the latter two, short. The author provides a dual perspective: both as an observer and as a participant for the past thirty-three years.

Key Words: Ebonics, Nonstandard Dialect, Education.

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1. Introduction

Some social context may be useful. Some envy the U.S. with its single common language for thousands of kilometers. The shared tongue fosters community while cultural diversity strains unity, but this vast monolingual expanse exacts a price. Many Americans lack economic, social or other pragmatic reasons to learn other languages, or about language.

Some speakers preserve varying degrees of bilingualism. Native Americans, Hispanics, some Asians, and Euro-American support groups like Polish-, Italian-, and German-Americans are examples. True bilinguals use the second language at home and in social and/or political groups. Others have limited command of languages from their roots in Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Pacific or Native American communities. What command they have ties them to their heritage.

Shaping U.S. views more is the relative, not absolute, homogeneity of its English. Crossing geopolitical lines can bare major dialect shifts, but most people expect, and usually find, subtle differences at stops along incremental car or boat trips. Distance-devouring bus, air or train travel can convey passengers to speech very different from their own, but extant gradation lets such speech seem to be peripheral to an ideal core, not to be another parallel system.

In Europe, where a few kilometers mean very different languages or dialects encountered by travel or broadcasts, certain facts are concrete which are abstract to average Americans, even the otherwise well-educated. Examples are how important learning other languages is and how much one's home dialect may differ grammatically from a public/standard/dominant dialect. Americans know that pronunciations and vocabulary differ among and characterize specific geographical areas.

As elsewhere, language suppression has occurred in the United States. After World War I, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned laws of American states which had banned teaching or publicly speaking German. Before World War II, children of immigrants and native Americans commonly were forbidden classroom and playground use of their native languages.

On August 1, 1997, the U.S. Congress passed a law making English the official government language, after twenty-three states had done the same. A Senate vote and court challenges remain before the law takes effect. The growing Spanish-speaking areas of the country had become centers of language paranoia and resentment by some English speakers.

While Poles, Germans, Italians and others had learned English to adapt in years past, more recently, Spanish use in voting booths and on public signs, and government-funded bilingual classes have fostered notions that Latinos enjoyed special treatment that no one else had had before. Others wanted English made official to avoid the kind of division which Canada faces between anglophones and francophones.

Cross-currents of conflicting interests and mutual suspicion fuel controversy regarding many issues concerned with language. Every stage of the Black English controversy has proved no exception, igniting controversy on several fronts.

Race clouds issues of Black English, termed *Ebonics* in the controversial Oakland, California School Board resolution. Black leaders suspect whatever labels black pupils as different, mindful of past racist practices. Conversely, many U.S. whites think that outlays for minority education have shown poor returns, a perception which ignores reality in poor school systems, but serves politicians advocating cost-cuts.

The speech has been studied systematically over forty years, and the term *Ebonics* itself dates from the seventies, e.g. Williams (1974). However, *Ebonics* first drew national media focus late in 1996. Thus, many Americans think that regard for black students' speech is, or is part of, a new educational fad. A typical example is Loveless (1997) «The Academic Fad that Gave us *Ebonics*».

Others deem it a red herring, seeming to address literacy in Oakland but taking attention from other more needed and costly remedies, e.g. Moore (1997) «Language Is Not the Problem». Few know how long some black Americans' distinct speech has concerned either theoretical studies or practical applications, e.g. Defranz (1979) «A Critique of the Literature on Ebonics», a survey from 1865 to 1975.

2. The first incarnation

In Chicago, 1963-4, I encountered Black English as a dialect-survey-project research assistant. Among my duties was compiling a bibliography relating home speech to literacy acquisition. The main focus was on what had been called *Negro Dialect*. My pre-Internet era searches were in card catalogs and periodical guides of major Chicago research libraries. Many non-scholarly works simply treated Black English as a curiosity. Others recorded folk idiom, preserving what they saw as doomed to extinction. Scholarly studies usually reported on vocabulary and/or on pronunciation.

McDavid and McDavid (1951) critiqued serious studies, both biased and objective from 1902 to 1950. From the fifties to early sixties, dialectologists focused more on social than regional dialectology: how speech differentiated people within an area rather than between areas.

Earlier, Dialect Atlas workers had gathered educational, economic, ethnic, gender and age-grade data from informants who provided phonetic and lexical samples for their surveys. However, the Atlas project's charge was to map, not apply, the information gathered.

Civil-rights' gains and school integration drew attention to disproportionately low reading and writing levels of disadvantaged black pupils. Dialectologists, and many sensitive teachers, understood linguistic interference to add another subtler problem to pupils' more obvious economic and environmental problems. Collaboration began with others in related areas, who pooled their experiences and research at conferences, some mention of which will follow.

From the start, terminology was problematic: Negro Dialect, Black English, Black English Vernacular (BEV), African/Afro-American Vernacular English (AAVE), Ebonics (Ebony + phonics). The general public interpreted these terms as the typical speech of black Americans (including terms popular with linguists from the late seventies to the present which incorporated the word *vernacular* an opaque term to average Americans). While most black Americans use it at least part of the time, some black Americans do not. Further, Latin American, Asian and other immigrants, residing in predominantly black neighborhoods, may exhibit many speech patterns associated with Black English.

The term Black English predominated in the mid-sixties to mid-seventies. I would pick 1964 as a boundary year for the Ebonics controversy's

first incarnation, although this latter term did not yet exist. Several publications and events took place that year which were to have many ramifications.

One event was a Bloomington Indiana Conference in August 1964. The proceedings appeared in Shuy, Davis and Hogan (1965), funded by the U.S. Office of Education. Other sources were the Center for American English of the Illinois Institute of Technology and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). Shuy (1969) reported that the term *functional bidialectalism* (diglossic use of Standard English and Black English) was first uttered there (cf. McDavid 1966).

Conference participants proposed that the NCTE and the Center for Applied Linguistics should sponsor a national committee to address English language learning problems of the culturally underprivileged. At the Center's Washington, D.C. Headquarters, it met and formed, February 1965, as the Advisory Committee for the Clearinghouse for Social Dialect Studies. The Clearinghouse published such studies through the Center in cooperation with the NCTE.

Also that month, the NCTE executive council met to form a National Task Force on Teaching English to the Disadvantaged. It met again in Chicago, March 1965. Among other events, NCTE Task Force members heard a detailed report from the Bloomington Indiana Conference. The task force then began a two-month survey of 190 U.S. language-arts programs for the disadvantaged, publishing a report later that year.

William Stewart (1964) edited a three-article anthology. One article introduced Stewart's concept of quasi-foreign language teaching, intermediate between native and second language teaching. (Hoffman 1972 explored this exhaustively). Stewart also discussed African roots for Black English, later expanded (1967, 1968). He influenced Dillard's comprehensive (1972) book on the subject.

Lee Pederson (1964a), in the same work, discussed «Non-standard Negro speech in Chicago». Also, in 1964, two related dissertations appeared. One was Pederson's (1964b) «Pronunciation of English in Chicago». Another was William Labov's innovative dialect-survey-based study: «The stratification of English in New York City». In 1966, the Center for Applied Linguistics published Labov's dissertation.

General dialect surveys in Chicago (McDavid and Austin, 1966), Detroit (Shuy et al. 1967) and New York (Labov 1966) also inventoried Afro-American dialect features, producing varied research-based publications within the decade. Wolfram (1969) and Labov (1970) are two excellent examples. The period also saw some applications to classroom teaching and curriculum development in centers like Chicago, New York and Washington. Representative publications occur below.

I am most familiar with a Chicago bi-dialectal oral-language and reading project for which I was linguistic consultant. Gladney and Leaverton, co-directors, published its results and bases in 1968 when New York City's

Board of Education's *Non-standard dialect* also appeared. In 1971, Feigenbaum's bibliography included representative teaching methods and materials, and Malmstrom listed institutions offering courses on non-standard English, usually Black English.

Many fine programs clearly would not survive to refine techniques and materials after federal funds from the War on Poverty had ended. School boards —facing financial, racial, legal and other problems— would reasonably be loathe to confront another, especially as officials misunderstood and opposed one another. Further, this would mean explaining a subtle matter to an already suspicious or hostile public.

The focus of debates over Black English in the educational literature of the seventies shifted from actual classroom methods for Standard English mastery to the theory behind existing and projected methods. Sides were chosen and frozen; few changed positions. In 1974, the Florida FL Reporter had a special issue on Black English to which I contributed.

My lead article treated nine positions that I had identified as clustering shared views on several differing but related disputes. For example, an author may believe that Black English features reflect earlier, non-surviving English forms. Another may believe that a residual West African substratum accounts for differences. Both, however, may or may not share the same side on educational remediation.

However authors see origin, they may agree on teaching Standard English: intensive Standard English only, or some use of Black English. Simple arithmetic yields four clusters of views, or positions, from these two issues alone, but reviewing the literature showed fewer positions to exist than multiples of the issues. Space bars listing them here, but the main issues of Ebonics' first incarnation are pertinent.

Two of them mentioned before are its origin and whether there should be a classroom role for it. The latter pits linguists against most other Americans. Is Black English legitimate speech or debased English? White media pundits, educated African-Americans, and most English teachers choose the latter. Often, not just Standard English mastery, but purging all Black English from students' repertoire is advocated. In vain, American linguists set their sophistication about language against the American value judgment that Standard English is better intrinsically, not merely pragmatically.

A related, but not identical, controversy has the title of the *deficit* versus *difference* controversy. Linguists obviously view Black English as merely a different system, lacking the prestige and public utility of Standard English. However, some social scientists, most notably, Bernstein (1971), Deutsch (1967) and Bereiter and Englemann (1966) did not deny the systematic nature of nonstandard speech. Rather, they held nonstandard speech deficient in reflecting the full range of conceptual knowledge, especially the abstract. Bernstein's respective terms for nonstandard and standard speech were *restricted* and *elaborated* codes.

Indeed, standard tongues develop lexicons and structures, especially written forms, more complex than vernaculars. Yet, mainstream linguists asserted that any vernacular could become elaborate in a suitable milieu.

A device I use when discussing the issue is to imagine the deficit researchers transported to Roman Italia, Hispania and Western Gallia. How would the regional Latin vernaculars have fared in discussing Law, Medicine and Philosophy compared to the elaborated code of Classical Latin? Yet, after fragmentation and nationalism, these respective areas produced the elaborated codes —Standard Italian, Standard Portuguese, Galician, Spanish, Catalan, Provençal and Standard French among others.

One of two single-issue positions was in Jenson (1968) where he linked poorer scores of American Black students to genetic inferiority. There was negative reaction by most American educators of all races to this idea. Jensen's view provoked official condemnation from the Linguistic Society of America (1974).

The last controversy involved a few white liberals, who argued that teaching nonstandard speakers Standard English was fascist. Bidialectal approaches were deemed tools for domination of minorities by the majority power structure (Kochman, 1969 and Sledd, 1969).

All others held that mastery of Standard English was essential to foster education and employment for all Americans, majority or minority, regardless of whether Standard English dominance was seen as due to historical accident or to intrinsic superiority.

It was ironic that white liberals condemned bidialectal approaches as too effective in teaching Standard English, while conservative blacks condemned bidialectal approaches as undermining Standard English instruction. Hoffman (1971) addressed this ironic contrast in detail.

Publications on Black-English issues continued in the late seventies, and Williams (1974), objecting to other terms, introduced *Ebonics* as an alternative, but momentum was subsiding. Other issues crowded journals; federal funding was drying up. Some linguists turned to pure research. The Ebonics controversy's first incarnation was ending.

3. The second incarnation

The first incarnation had no fixed locus. San Francisco, New York, Washington, Chicago, Detroit, Atlanta and other centers provided research and/or programs. The second incarnation began in an unlikely site: Ann Arbor Michigan (1979). Some black parents sued its Board of Education, arguing that their children were not learning Standard English effectively and that effective instruction required teachers to know about the language of Black English-speaking pupils.

Noted linguists testified that Black English was linguistically coherent, possible to study as any other language. On July 12, 1979, the judge

found for the parents, ordering Ann Arbor's board to draft a training program.

The Board's plan eventually satisfied the judge. For a short time, a flurry of publications treated implications of the decision for other school systems. A collection of such reactions appeared in Whiteman (1980). After this, little appeared. The second incarnation of the Ebonics controversy ended, for practical purposes, just after it had begun.

Dissertations and articles on Black English in Speech, Psychology and Education journals continued. Students who heard about Black English in college did term papers on it. Intermittent press articles still appeared, like my (1991) remarks in the BFLO Journal. Quantitative dialect studies continued (e.g., journals like *American Speech* published at least one a month). However, the attention of governments and boards of education had largely waned.

4. The third incarnation

Then entered an Oakland (California) School Board resolution in December 1996. The resolution's main thrust was to use some Ebonics in the classroom to improve their students' standard English mastery. It defended the legitimacy of Ebonics based on linguistic research. The resolution also included seeking federal bilingual funding based on the claim that Ebonics was a language separate from (Standard) English. Critics posed legitimate questions. The Board did not clearly articulate its intent to a general audience. It is doubtful whether the Board had anticipated how widespread the media coverage of its resolution would be.

An example is the Board's use of the term «genetic relationship», to link Ebonics historically to West African languages, employing the family-tree metaphor, familiar in historical and comparative linguistics. However, popular-media readers —lacking such familiarity— took «genetic» literally as 'biological', viewing the Board as incompetent and/or ignorant and/or racist, a poor reward for its boldly seeking substantive change despite some unwise choices in aims and wording.

Many question the Oakland Board's seeking bilingual funding. Systematic contrasts between Ebonics and Standard English grammar have led some to endorse teaching Standard English as a second language, but unlike foreign-language learners, all Ebonics speakers are already competent passive interpreters of Standard English. Like other Americans, Ebonics speakers encounter radio, video and film where standard and non-standard speech of various regions and groups occur. Like everyone else, black children learn what contexts demand Standard English, even if they can't always produce it.

Distinct slang, pronunciation, intonation and grammar mark Ebonics users to themselves and others. Yet stigmatized features so rivet observers' attention that the Standard English which black pupils do speak is often

missed. One use of «Here go your book» impacts listeners more than multiple uses of its standard counterpart: «There's your book».

Yet I have heard primary pupils adapt to Standard English in class, varying from limited to perfect biloquialism. Biloquial pupils were often deemed non-Ebonics users. Unobtrusive hall and playground listening, while ostensibly talking to other adults, would reveal that such pupils commanded Ebonics perfectly as conditions warranted.

My dissertation (1970b) was on the speech of high-school students who spoke Standard English better, and in larger numbers, than their younger peers. I avoided observing typical classroom contexts where schools had succeeded more than teachers, students or parents were aware.

Most Ebonics users in my college classes speak Standard English most of the time in classes or offices, less in the hallway or student union. Most whites miss the Standard English preponderance. Nonverbal patterns of pitch and vocal channel features—unused by whites without ties to the black community—mark Ebonics speakers as well as visual confirmation of race. This association affronts many non-Ebonics-speaking African Americans, who resent their Standard English skill prejudged by appearance over actual performance.

A chasm exists between what many linguists and educators truly support and what the public thinks that they do. Most laypeople focus on *slang* during Ebonics debates. *Language is words* is a view of monolinguals who do not have to operate with two sound, grammar and sense systems. Portrayals in the media, and actual association with Ebonics users, reveal vocabulary deemed conventionally unsuitable for classroom or boardroom. Critics who equate Ebonics with unsuitable vocabulary view anyone advocating its classroom use as irresponsible or subversive, e.g. Hobbes (1997) and *Business Journal* (1997).

As noted, vocabulary is least problematic for students. Any American learns an elevator is a *lift*; a hood, a *bonnet*; and a wrench, a *spanner* in England. Ebonics users also adapt as needed. Like any vernacular, Ebonics vocabulary changes. Yesterday's *cat* is today's *dude*. What white teenager says «This is the cat's pajamas» today?

Pronunciations associated with Ebonics speakers stigmatize them. Linguists and educators have made inventories, some designing drills to correct the pronunciations. I have even assisted in this, despite reservations that such teaching supports conformity to class and race prejudice, because of pragmatic value in the classroom and job market.

However, in my dissertation (1970b) and in Hoffman (1974a, b), I questioned whether an independent Black English phonology truly exists. I did not discount evidence of a phonological pattern that reflects a West African Creole substratum but noted that contemporary Ebonics phonemes all occur in British dialects where African influence was minimum or absent.

Dillard (1972) among others noted that what white and black speech share may not stem from one-way borrowing. White children on plantations

may have become biloquial in Ebonics and Southern Standard English. To presume a direction without evidence would be ethnocentric, if not racist.

In my research, I used Wright's *English Dialect Grammar* whose original printing was 1905. Using eye-dialect spellings from literature rather than phonetics, 'them' and 'thing' can occur as *dem* and *ting*. 'With' can occur as *wif*, *wiv* and *wid*. 'Fool' and 'fact' can be *foo* and *fack*. 'Wonder' can be *wunner*, and 'told' can be *tol* or *tol*. No one British dialect appears to allow all these possibilities, however.

I should note that specialists disagree on whether Ebonics phonology affects literacy. Does it, or how much does it, hinder reading mastery? English varieties exist throughout the world where people master reading despite marked differences between local pronunciations and the printed page.

Ebonics pronunciation is not uniform all over. White and black communities, North and South, maintain differences. Yet, Northern blacks and whites share some features, like Southern blacks and whites. Social dialect divergence coexists with regional dialect convergence.

The enduring and uniform thread uniting speakers here, and linking them to the Caribbean and West Africa abroad is grammar. The most detailed treatment which I know is Fickett's (1970) dissertation, mentioned in Dillard (1972).

The systematic nature of Ebonics grammar and its points of apparent overlap with Standard English is described in many publications. I will just contrast here what I find in college writing courses with standard and non-standard, and white and black students. It is a three- not two-group contrast. (I have Hispanic and foreign students as well).

The three groups to contrast are white or black standard, various non-standard white, and Ebonics speakers. One contrast between standard and non-standard speakers' writing is frequency. Nonstandard writers have less control over sentence boundary and consistent homophone spelling. Non-standard writers use nonstandard past-participle and past-tense verb forms, malapropisms and double negatives.

Paradigm marks Ebonics speakers' writing. Nouns are often unmarked for possessive. Regular verbs are often unmarked for third-person singular present or past-tense verb inflections where Standard English has such agreement.

Such special differences, packaged with uses shared with white nonstandard speaking peers, provide a portrait from pen or keyboard. It is a black student hired for technical skills or to fill quotas, but not for writing skills.

Most are bright, articulate, and adept at various skills in their major. Grammatical interference mars otherwise positive academic feats, despite thirteen or so years of Standard English examples and reinforcement. Mostly such students and their teachers are as unaware of this as the general public, who opposes any departure from traditional teaching. Language and dialect views will not change soon. Most Americans, minority or majority, educated or not, rich or poor, have firm roots in 18th-century values. Historical, com-

parative, structural and generative linguists have barely impacted pre-collegiate English teaching. Linguists' training and experience rate little in fiery public debates. Strong feelings make people react to expectations, not reality.

I was one of two experts on Ebonics interviewed by the *Buffalo News* (Miller, 1997). Though I only advocated teachers' knowing about Ebonics to aid Standard English mastery (and was cited accurately), *News* readers sent me mail condemning my wishing to replace Standard English study with Ebonics. The Ann Arbor parents whose views I had cited were likewise vilified although they and the judge, like me, advocated that teachers should study, though not use, Ebonics. (On such study, see Hoffman 1970a).

May 1997, five months after the original resolution's furor, the Oakland California School Board has forsaken advocating Ebonics. Like the second incarnation, the third has ended just after it began. The general public in the U.S. believes that the hue and cry of public outrage has silenced this nonsense, and certainly other boards with similar notions have been intimidated by the furor.

5. Conclusion

Fruits of the first incarnation and the vitality of black culture remain. Unknown to most, other more detailed and more widespread programs were and are in existence which use Ebonics in some form.

A successful program named *Bridge* that raised reading levels was ended by outraged parents who objected to it despite its positive statistics. It was discussed in Simpkins and Simpkins (1981). Rickford and Rickford (1995) reported on three projects using readers in the African-American Vernacular. An example of such a reader was Bently (1973). Cummings (1997) discussed a successful ten-year biloquial program in Dekalb County, Georgia, which avoided terms which might alarm the public, and it used funds from sources meant for general educational improvement. Although critical of them, Heilbrunn (1997) was aware of existing programs in San Diego, Pomona and Los Angeles, California.

Naturally, some African-American authors employ Ebonics in its natural contexts within their works, although ambivalence is present among some authors. Discussions of this occur in short biographies within the anthology by Mullane (1993), *Crossing the Danger Water: Three Hundred Years of African-American Writing*.

The more obvious problems of poverty, single-parent and young-parent homes in crime-ridden neighborhoods and in under-funded school systems dominate articles about the plight of black people in America, and rightly so. Nonetheless language-arts problems, less obvious and less directly dire, remain. Covertly or overtly used, biloquial methods are being used and refined. A fourth incarnation of public awareness and reaction looms, but where and when remains to be seen.

Abbreviations

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|------|---|
| CAL | Center for Applied Linguistics, |
| IIT | Illinois Institute of Technology |
| NCTE | National Council of Teachers of English |
| OE | Office of Education |
| SUNY | State University of New York |

Square brackets enclose ref. nos. for items often available in microfiche and/or paper from ERIC Document Reproduction Service; 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110; Springfield, VA 22153, USA. (In USA, 1-800-443-ERIC).

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