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Ebonically Speaking: A Sociolinguistic History
and Implications for the Multicultural Classroom

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In the 1995-1996 academic year, Black students in the Oakland (CA) Unified School District [OUSD] were in a state of emergency. Although they accounted for 53% of the OUSD student population, they represented 80% of all suspended students (Fields, 1997), 71% of the special education population, and 64% of students who repeated grades (Perry, 1998).

Conversely, Black students accounted for only 37% of the students participating in gifted student programs (Fields, 1997). The average grade point average of the entire student body was 2.4.

While White students averaged a 2.7 GPA and Asian students averaged a 2.4 GPA, Black students averaged only a 1.8 GPA, the lowest of any ethnic group represented in the district (Perry, 1998). In response, the Oakland Board of Education formed a task force to investigate why Black students were underachieving at such an alarming rate. What they discovered was that there seemed to be a language barrier between teachers and students, despite the fact that they both spoke English.

Many Black students in the OUSD were identified as being speakers of Black Vernacular English, also known as African-American Vernacular English, Black English, and, most popularly, Ebonics (Seymour, Abdulkarim, & Johnson, 1999). Some hallmarks of this communication system include double negatives and negative inversions (e.g., “Can’t nobody tell me what to do”), dropped possessive and postvocalic consonants (e.g., “Frank mama don’ know what she sayin’”), and consonant cluster simplifications (e.g., “han” for “hand”, “tes” for “test”) (Rickford, 1996). Teachers in the OUSD, the majority of whom were White (Fields, 1997), primarily spoke Standard American English [SAE], the mainstream English of most academic and professional contexts in this country (Seymour et al., 1999). What the Oakland task force discovered was that there was a communicative disconnect between speakers of these

two dialects of English. This disconnect, it was hypothesized, is what caused so many Black youths to be inappropriately classified as learning disabled. Furthermore, the constant correction in which teachers would engage to force Ebonics speakers to speak SAE contributed to the students' withdrawal from scholastic activities. In response to this, in December 1996, the Oakland Board of Education passed what came to be known as "The Ebonics Resolution", which officially recognized the cultural significance of Ebonics to its students, and set forth a program intended to instruct SAE-speaking teachers in Ebonics and to utilize Ebonics to increase SAE mastery in students (Oakland, 1996).

Once word of this resolution was made public, the outcry was nearly unanimous. The OUSD Board of Education members were called "lunatics, Afrocentrists, accused of giving up on Black kids, and of legitimizing slang" (Perry, 1998, p. 5) by right-wing pundits. However, they also suffered similar barbs from prominent Black figures, including Maya Angelou, Rev. Jesse Jackson, Oprah Winfrey, and Bill Cosby. Even Kweisi Mfume, then president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP], attacked the plan as a "cruel joke" (Allen-Taylor, 1997, para. 7). Unfortunately, most of the criticism was not leveled at the actual resolution, but at the media portrayal of the resolution. Incomplete reports and misinformation disseminated through the media portrayed the OUSD as wanting to teach Ebonics as a subject; the idea that they wanted to use Ebonics to teach SAE was completely lost on most people.

While the furor has since died down, the cultural, linguistic, and educational issues remain: why are Black students underachieving, and how can educators reach them? The Ebonics issue is a particularly salient one in a truly multicultural classroom for two very important reasons. First, teachers must recognize that Ebonics is not simply "slang" or "poor

English”, but rather, it is a valid, rule-governed system of communication. The next issue then becomes, how can teachers use knowledge of Ebonics to promote student mastery of Standard American English? According to current available research, the OUSD Board of Education members were not the lunatics they were portrayed to be, but instead were engaging in sound, data-driven curriculum design.

Sociolinguistic History of Ebonics

It is estimated that approximately 80% of Black Americans use Ebonics to some degree in their daily life (Newell, 2000). The term “Ebonics” was introduced to the world at a 1973 conference on the cognitive and linguistic development of Black children. Robert L. Williams, a Missouri psychologist, was the organizer of this conference and the man who suggested the word “Ebonics” – a combination of “ebony” and “phonics” – be used to assign a positive Black reference to the language system of the Black community, thereby negating the pejorative descriptions many White psychologists and linguists cast on it (Fields, 1997).

One key area of controversy in this topic is that of the sociolinguistic status of Ebonics: is it a dialect of English, or is it a separate language unto itself? The answer is dependent on who gives it. Dr. C. Aisha Blackshire-Belay, a linguist at Indiana State University, believes that the grammar, sentence structure, and tonal omissions of Ebonics link it more closely with the West African languages of Ibo, Yoruba, Ewe, Wolof, Fante, and Mandinka than English (Fields, 1997). Other linguists, such as Dr. Fay Vaughn-Cooke, chair of the department of language and communication disorders at the University of the District of Columbia, maintains that insufficient research exists to link present-day Ebonics to West African languages, and that Ebonics is simply a social dialect of English (Fields, 1997). What these two camps can agree upon is that Ebonics, like most other forms of communication, relies upon more than just words

for expression. Body language, eye contact, physical proximity, narrative sequence, and other factors all contribute to this form of communication; it is not strictly a verbal phenomenon (Fields, 1997). Furthermore, and probably most germane to the educational controversy, most linguists and linguistic societies, including the American Speech-Language Hearing Association [ASHA] and the Linguistic Society of America [LSA] (Seymour et al., 1999) consider Ebonics a valid, legitimate, rule-governed system of communication, not merely “slang” or “improper English”, as many of its detractors describe it (Newell, 2000).

While the term “Ebonics” goes back to 1973, the system described by that term goes back much farther. Some linguists believe that all facets of Ebonics can be found in Southern white speech, and are therefore derived from British dialects. Historical geographic segregation from Whites allowed Ebonics to evolve differently than SAE. Others believe that Ebonics is the result of a creolization of English that combines English vocabulary with grammatical structures of Surinamese and Caribbean languages spoken by slaves of West African origin (Newell, 2000). Regardless, Ebonics and slavery are inextricably linked. This connection to a systemic denigration of a people influences, to no small degree, much of White America’s perception that speakers of Ebonics are uneducated. Linguists worldwide would disagree with this stereotype; as Dr. Blackshire Belay puts it, “there is no such thing as a good language or a bad one” (as cited in Fields, 1997, p. 19).

This cultural history dovetails into the education of Black children thanks to the work of the aforementioned Robert L. Williams, who eventually focused his research on the impact of this language system on Black student achievement. According to Williams his “findings suggested that children brought certain linguistic patterns and codes with them to the school, but that the codes that they were accustomed to were not being used in the school...[t]here was a

discontinuity between the child's code and the school's code, and the child's code was being denigrated" (Fields, 1997, p. 24).

To support his anecdotal observations about the discontinuity in codes, Williams and colleagues administered two standardized test forms to a group of Black kindergartners: one in SAE, the other in Ebonics. One experience exemplifies the findings of the study: children were shown a picture and asked to point to the squirrel that was "beginning" to climb a tree. Some answered correctly, but many did not. Williams then asked students to point to the squirrel that was "fixing to" or "starting to" climb the tree. All students answered correctly (as cited in Fields, 1997). Williams study clearly illustrates how growing up around speakers of Ebonics influences a child's understanding of SAE – the children all knew how to complete the task, but simply did not understand the SAE phrasing.

Why Should We Care (Multiculturally Speaking)?

Few, if any, teachers would openly advocate discriminating against certain students based on religious beliefs, sexual orientation, or ethnic identification; to do so runs counter to the central philosophies of teaching young people who are growing up in an ever-shrinking world. However, the outcry against the Oakland Ebonics Resolution of 1996, as well as much of the disparaging comments made about Ebonics, demonstrates at best an ignorance as to the systematicity and cultural significance of Ebonics, and at worst, outright bigotry. Dialect prejudice, as Hamilton (2005) puts it, is neither new nor uniquely American. Giles (1971, as cited in Stubbs, 2002) carried out experiments in Great Britain in which participants were led to believe they were listening to samples of speakers using standard and regional dialects. In fact, they were listening to different samples of the same speaker using all the different dialects. The "speakers" who spoke Standard English were perceived as being more ambitious, intelligent,

self-confident, and reliable than those who spoke with the dialects, accents, and characteristic speech of “slovenly” and “ugly” cities such as Liverpool, Newcastle, Birmingham, and Glasgow. It is not hard to imagine how such prejudices could easily carry over into a student-teacher relationship. In fact, Au (1993, p. 124, as cited in Gupta, 1999, p. 3) found that “the primary barriers to school literacy learning did not lie in the details of sounds, grammar, and vocabulary. Instead, the barriers were those created by schools’ failure to acknowledge and appreciate students’ home cultures and to build upon the interactional styles and everyday use of language with which students were already familiar.” Similar studies by Johnson & Clement (1973, as cited in Hilliard, 2002) and Nimnick & Johnson (1973, as cited in Hilliard, 2002) support this claim. If Black students are to achieve at the same rate as their White, Asian, and Latino peers, then clearly educators must do everything in their power to destroy these barriers.

Any classroom teacher or other educational professional who wishes to engender a sense of inclusiveness must recognize that for many Black children, Ebonics represents the language of love; the language spoken by their parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. When teachers criticize that home language or dialect, says speech and language pathologist Karen Beverly Ducker, that sends an explicit message to the child that “the way [his] mommy talks to [him] is bad...” (as cited in Fields, 1997, p. 26). To come into a classroom and be told by a teacher that the way they speak is substandard or wrong is detrimental on numerous levels. Language is neither “right” nor “wrong”; such a prescriptive view of the subject oversimplifies an incredibly complex topic (Gupta, 1999) and makes children feel inferior and resistant to school (Hamilton, 2005; Fields, 1997)). What frequently gets lost amid the controversy was the OUSD Board of Education’s intent in passing the Ebonics Resolution, which was to teach students how to speak SAE. Standard American English is the language of social and economic

power in the United States, and all students must be able to utilize this standard form of communication in order to have access to the benefits of that power (Newell, 2000). The challenge before educators now is to do so without devaluing the students' home language (Gupta, 1999; Smith, 1998), whether it is Ebonics, Appalachian English, or the Scouse, Brum, and Geordie dialects found in England.

Since teachers will be the ones interacting with these students on a daily basis, perhaps it is most vital for them to develop an understanding of Ebonics. Hilliard (2002, p. 101) even goes so far as to say that teachers do not need to learn specific techniques to teach speakers of Ebonics, but rather, they "must be taught so that their total orientation toward language and cultural linguistic principles represents the best that we now know about the subject. It is not the bag of tricks but the general attitude of a teacher that is important." As with other issues of multiculturalism, attitude is where all change begins. Hilliard's opinion is well-founded; he cites several studies that demonstrate that if a Black child is seen as language deficient, the behavior of the teacher changes toward that child as compared to students who speak SAE. These teachers will engage the child in communication less and pay less attention to him (Aaron & Powell, 1982; Irvine, 1991; Simpson & Erickson, 1983, as cited in Hilliard, 2002; Foster, 1997). Clearly, attitude is the basis for acceptance in a multicultural framework. However, there are specific methods and activities teachers can use in order to teach their students how to speak and write SAE while still respecting, and even utilizing, Ebonics.

Implications for the Classroom

Perhaps one of the most significant studies on the utilization of Ebonics in the classroom was Simpkin & Simpkin's (1981, as cited in Rubba, 1997) study of the Bridges transitional reading program. 540 children (530 of them Black) participated in the study, in several cities

across the country. A control group ($n=123$) remained in their local remedial reading program, while the experimental group ($n=417$) used the Bridges program. In this program, children began reading instruction using readers written in Ebonics and dealing with topics that were familiar to them from their community experiences (mostly urban). They moved on to readers written in a mix of Ebonics and SAE, and then finally to readers written exclusively in SAE.

After four months of reading instruction, each group was given the standardized Iowa Test of Basic Skills in Reading, Level 12 Form 5. The control group made an average gain of 1.6 months of reading proficiency in that 4-month span of time. The Bridges group averaged 6.2 months of reading proficiency gain in the same amount of time (Simpkins & Simpkins, 1981, as cited in Rubba, 1997). Almost as impressive as the students' progress is the fact that this progress was demonstrated on a nationally-normed standardized test, a tool which has long been decried as culturally and linguistically biased against Black students (Seymour et al., 1998). Despite the efficacy of this program, parents and school administrators protested the use of materials written in Ebonics, and the Bridges program was never adopted.

Simpkins & Simpkins (1981) is probably the most widely recognized study in the field of Ebonics education, but there also exists a body of research over thirty-five years in the making to suggest that Ebonics can successfully be used to teach SAE literacy to Black students (Hoover, 1998). Research conducted by Stanford University's Program on Teaching and Linguistic Pluralism from 1969 to 1980 demonstrates that "teachers who had highly positive attitudes and expectations toward Ebonics speakers, as well as more information about Ebonics characteristics and how to teach such speakers, were those whose students gained the most over a five-month test period" (Hoover, 1998, p. 74). There are also other highly-structured programs available that utilize the same data-driven approach, similar to that used to teach foreign languages: expose

students to regular sound patterns (phonics) first, then passages written in those patterns (Hoover, 1998). Those who believe Ebonics has no place in the classroom would do so despite an overwhelming body of evidence to the contrary.

Many teachers lack either the resources or support to implement one of the aforementioned structured programs in their classrooms. Fortunately for them (and their students), there are a number of ways teachers can utilize students' knowledge of Ebonics to teach SAE literacy. One is to incorporate literature written in nonstandard dialects into the curriculum. In the current context, this would mean literature that uses the conventions of Ebonics, but it could be done with any nonstandard dialect. Literature can be chosen based upon how it reflects the dialects of the students in the classroom (Newell, 2000) or it can be examined as a method of developing "all students' understanding and appreciation of other cultures" (Au, 1993, p. 176, as cited in Gupta, 1999, p. 5). An example of a work written in nonstandard dialect is the poem "An Antebellum Sermon", by Paul Laurence Dunbar, in which the speaker addresses the hardships of slavery in the language of his audience, using words such as "brothah", "howlin'", and "'splain" in place of "brother", "howling", and "explain" (Newell, 2000). Works by Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and Gwendolyn Brooks, among countless others, could be used to serve this purpose. Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are also prime examples of classic American literature in which the protagonists speak in a nonstandard dialect.

Teaching children about a natural linguistic phenomenon called code-switching is another way to incorporate both SAE and Ebonics into the classroom. Code switching is the act of changing dialect or speech patterns based on one's social surroundings. Teaching students about code switching reinforces the idea that Ebonics and SAE are both entirely appropriate in certain

social settings. Chinn & Gollnick's (1998, as cited in Newell, 2000) research suggests that those who possess the skill to determine situational appropriateness for code-switching may hold a distinct advantage over those who lack that skill, and may be better able to function and gain acceptance in more cultural contexts. This, presumably, would lead to higher rates of academic and professional success for speakers of Ebonics. As Foster (1997, p. 6) put it, these students "should be allowed to retain the ability to *chill* on the corner with the brothers and sisters, if they so desire, while learning how to speak, dress, and behave for business or professional success."

Historically, most speakers of Ebonics have been subjected to constant correction by their teachers, a practice which has been proven to be not only ineffective at improving SAE literacy, but detrimental to their overall learning (Newell, 2000; Gupta, 1999). To gain SAE practice in a correction-free environment, Newell (2000) suggests role-playing activities. Younger children may try role-playing cartoon characters or superheroes, while older students may perform dramatic productions or assume the personae of newscasters. These techniques deflect focus from the student's speech and reinforce the notion that different language forms are appropriate in different social contexts (Delpit, 1997, as cited in Newell, 2000).

Teaching methods need not be Ebonics-specific. Writing workshops, a long-time staple of the English and language arts classroom, can also be an effective way to teach specific SAE literacy skills to speakers of Ebonics (Calkins, 1986, as cited in Gupta, 1999). Whether done individually or in small groups, this form of direct instruction allows the teacher to teach grammar, vocabulary, spelling, or to focus on a particular area of need for each individual student. Having students create and decorate wall charts that compare frequently used standard and nonstandard sentence structures or vocabulary can be a tactile, kinesthetic method of getting students to work with the language, and can also serve as an ever-present reference source for

students (Gupta, 1999). Finally, incorporating lessons on the history and fluidity of the English language throughout history may provide students with a bit of perspective, and reaffirm that there is truly no one “right” way to speak English.

Conclusion

“It is criminal to graduate African-American students who cannot speak and write standard English... We, in higher education, must find a way to effectively teach Black children and then, we must prepare a teaching force to do it” says Orlando L. Taylor, Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Howard University (Fields, 1997, p.26). While this is certainly true, it seems that societal attitudes toward Ebonics and speakers of Ebonics must also change if any progress is to be made. The OUSD drew an immense amount of criticism from across the nation for daring to legitimize a nonstandard dialect by attempting to use it to teach its students Standard American English. Despite the enormous public outcry from both Black and non-Black Americans, their actions were pedagogically sound and data-driven. Despite the existing body of research that supports programs and philosophies like Bridges and the Ebonics Resolution, colleges and universities must continue to conduct research in this area and passing on the benefits of such studies to their teacher trainees. While many were quick to loudly and publicly criticize the OUSD Board of Education, not one of those critics stepped forward to offer a viable, feasible alternative solution. Until one is proposed, educators must know that using Ebonics as a transitional method of teaching Standard American English is pedagogically, empirically, and multiculturally sound, and should be given much wider consideration than it currently receives.

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