

Ebonics and standard English in the classroom: Some issues

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Introduction. The Oakland Unified School District Board's resolution about using Ebonics in the classroom in order to help its speakers develop more proficiency in standard English and perform better academically brought to the surface a number of questions and issues on this vernacular. Among these was the question of whether Ebonics is an American English dialect or a separate language altogether. Reactions to the resolutions included myths about its development. I focus on two of them in this essay.

First, some of those claiming that African-American English (AAE) is a separate language have argued that it is a Niger-Congo language mistakenly identified as English (e.g., Smith 1998). Therefore standard English should be taught to its speakers using second-language teaching techniques, more or less in the same way that English is taught to speakers of Niger-Congo languages in Africa, for instance.

The second myth has to do less with use of any special techniques for teaching standard English to AAE-speakers than with negative opinions about African Americans. This myth considers African Americans to be less skilled at acquiring the English language in North America, unlike members of other ethnic groups. Putatively, White Americans have inherited English intact from England and have restructured it little, if at all, whereas African Americans have misshaped it, perhaps beyond recognition, and only their laziness or mental inferiority must be blamed for the problems experienced by their school children.

It is not clear whether these unfounded myths are clearly different from each other, except regarding the ethnic affiliations of their authors and their attitudes to using federal or state funds to help the relevant school children. The Ebonics qua Niger-Congo language position has been advocated especially by some African Americans since Williams (1975), whose definition, discussed below, has provided good justification for requesting allocation of funds from Limited English Proficiency (LEP) programs to teaching standard English to AAE-speakers (Baugh 1998). Since LEP programs were designed for speakers of languages other than English, they argue that AAE can also be treated as a separate language, and techniques for teaching standard English to its speakers must be at

least similar to those used for teaching it to children of immigrants from non-Anglophone countries.

The misshaped English position is an older and more popular myth, held mostly by the average nonlinguist White American and some successful African Americans who have an opinion on the subject matter. Those who subscribe to it assume that the average White American speaks standard English and this is little restructured, if at all, from English as brought over from England in the seventeenth century. Accordingly, all it should take African-American school children to speak standard English is being more dedicated to schoolwork and working harder at the task at hand to succeed like everybody else.

I take issue with both positions, arguing that all American English varieties are contact-based, restructured varieties. Everything we have learned, and will learn, about the development of AAE makes us more aware of questions we should be addressing about the development of White American English varieties (Mufwene 1996a, 1999a). The Niger-Congo identification of AAE is quite a romantic idea that is undermined, on the one hand, by communicative difficulties between Anglophone Africans and basilectal AAE-speakers, and, on the other, by the often observed structural similarities between AAE and White Southern English (Mufwene, *in press a*). I also argue that the debate on Ebonics in the classroom has been unduly ethnicized. It should have been no more than a question on whether or not nonstandard English vernaculars can, or should, be used in the classroom. Aside from further stigmatizing AAE-speakers, the debate as conducted to date has also been at the expense of underprivileged White children whose condition in the classroom has probably not been better off than that of African-American school children.

What we should remember about the development of American English varieties. The tradition of singling out AAE as the only restructured variety of English in North America is bizarre, because there is no White American English variety that matches a British English variety of today or of the past few centuries (Mufwene 1996a). As far as contemporary varieties are concerned, part of the explanation for this diversification lies in the fact that British English itself has changed since the seventeenth century. The population movements that brought European populations over to the New World started in Europe. Migrations of British indentured servants to North America were typically extensions of labor migrations in the British Isles, by which English, Irish, and Scottish populations moved around in search of jobs and often wound up unemployed in port cities such as London, Bristol, and Liverpool, and then decided in desperation to try a chance in the New World (Bailyn 1986; Fischer 1989).

In England, these population movements also entailed dialect contacts, and the latter led to the restructuring of British English into its present dialects. In the case of the United States, the population movements led to new contacts among English dialects (Algeo 1991) and with other languages, European and

non-European. Although English prevailed over the other European languages, such as French, German, and Dutch, its victory was a pyrrhic one. It prevailed in a restructured form. The socioeconomic history of North America suggests that even if British English dialects had not changed over the past four centuries, American varieties of English would still not be identical with them. Indirect evidence for this conclusion comes from new Englishes in places such as Australia, New Zealand, and the Falkland Islands (Trudgill 1986). Although they developed from later, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century varieties of British English, novel contacts of (subsets of) these dialects have produced varieties different from both American and British Englishes.

The situation of AAE is a compounded one, with the still unanswered question of what role African languages played in the selection of its features, even if the features themselves did not necessarily originate in the African languages (Mufwene 1999b). AAE has remained very close structurally to White English varieties that developed on the tobacco and cotton plantations of the southern states, as well as on the rice fields of coastal South Carolina and Georgia. Gullah must have diverged earlier from other American varieties, because segregation was instituted early in coastal South Carolina, in 1720, when the colony was proclaimed a crown colony. The reasons for segregation were that the Blacks made up the majority of people in the region, and, as a result, Whites thought there were constant threats of uprising against slave-owner oppression (Wood 1974). Nonetheless, Gullah remains close to plantation White speech, despite the kinds of differences observed by Rickford (1985).

African-American vernacular English (AAVE) seems to have diverged rather late from White Southern English, to which it has remained very close. The divergence, attributed mostly to White varieties undergoing changes in which African Americans have not participated, is the consequence of the institutionalization of segregated life styles since 1877, at the end of Reconstruction and after the passage of Jim Crow laws (Schneider 1995; Bailey 1997). The fact that AAVE shares several of its features with White American varieties (e.g., Appalachian English) suggests that its peculiarities were selected from English—undoubtedly under partial corroborative influence of some African languages (Mufwene 1999b)—by the principle of convergence qua congruence (Thomason and Kaufman 1988; Mufwene 1996b).¹

There is thus no reason to assume that the AAE—both Gullah and AAVE—developed by any structural processes peculiar to it, although it has selected a set of structural features that only overlaps with sets selected by other dialects. This observation applies to any English dialect, because none is identical with another. Despite the following definition of Ebonics proposed by Williams (1975) and adopted by Smitherman (1997) and Smith (1998), it remains that AAE-speakers sound more like speakers of other American English varieties than like those of Caribbean or African English varieties:

Ebonics may be defined as “the linguistic and paralinguistic features which on a concentric continuum represents the communicative competence of the West African, Caribbean, and the United States slave descendants of African origin. It includes the various idioms, patois, argots, ideolects [sic], and social dialects of black people” especially those who have been forced to adapt to colonial circumstances (Williams 1975: vi). *Ebonics* derives its form from ebony (black) and phonics (sound, the study of sound) and refers to the study of the language of black people in all its cultural uniqueness. (Williams 1975: vi)

Structural linguistic facts, especially those features that AAE shares with other American nonstandard vernaculars (e.g., Poplack 1999; Bailey and Thomas 1998), suggest that AAE is a regular American linguistic phenomenon, and it need not be disfranchised because of the race of its speakers (Mufwene 1997). A pilot survey I conducted recently (Mufwene, in press b) shows that, overall, its speakers think they speak English and not some form of a separate African (-American) language.

AAE in the classroom. The typical solution proposed to date to improve the proficiency of many African-American school children in standard English has been conceived on second-language teaching techniques. To be sure, there is a sense in which standard English, an elusive target that I will not attempt to define here, is a second-language variety to most English speakers. One of the reasons is that it is primarily written with structures more consistent with writing as a medium of expression, whereas other English varieties are primarily oral, with structures more consistent with orality. For instance, the latter have fewer complex sentential structures and certainly fewer instances of complex subordination. *Wh*-relative clauses and Pied-Piping are more typical of written texts than of spoken discourse. As a matter of fact, *wh*-relatives in spoken discourse are a byproduct of literacy. They are rather uncommon in nonstandard vernaculars, except for *where* and *what* in a sentence such as *everything what Mary said*. However, some vernaculars are structurally closer to the standard than some others are, and speakers of such varieties have fewer problems developing proficiency in standard English. One may also argue that one of the reasons some native speakers fail to acquire perfect command of standard English is their inability to perceive differences between some structures of their vernaculars and those of standard English. For instance, to the extent that *ain't* is accepted as an emphatic negator, one may miss the fact that standard English does not allow saying *I ain't seen Tom* instead of *I haven't seen Tom*. Likewise, because *done* meaning ‘finish’ is homonymous with *done* as past participle of the verb *do*, its use as a marker of PERFECT in nonstandard vernacular English, as in *I done told you*, may easily be

transferred incorrectly into standard English discourse. Underdifferentiation and overgeneralization are phenomena common in second-language usage.

Similarities between learning a second language and developing proficiency in a second dialect end, perhaps, with the above observations. A native speaker still feels that he or she is learning to read and write, and even compose more structured discourse, within the same language. In the process of learning standard English, he or she brings into the classroom assumptions and expectations that are not the same as those of non-native speakers of the same language, such as being able to understand what is said in standard English and paraphrasing it in their own vernaculars. Such an expectation is to some extent validated by the exposure that a hearing child has typically had to oral media before going to school. The child has developed some passive competence in the media variety and an awareness of structural features that distinguish that variety from his or her own vernacular. Unfortunately, because of the passive nature of this competence in the media dialect, the child may not realize that he or she keeps slipping back to patterns of his or her own vernacular while intending to speak or write standard English, especially when differences between the two varieties are subtle and the relevant nonstandard features are strongly stigmatized. The question here is: how should teachers handle such situations? Should they treat speakers of nonstandard vernaculars in the same ways as they do speakers of languages other than English? Are the psychological dispositions so similar in both cases?

The literature reports all sorts of humiliating experiences in which the child's vernacular has constantly been put down, his or her sense of identity and self-esteem shattered, and motivation for performing well in the classroom eroded (Delpit 1998). Based on Smitherman (1998), Judge Charles Joiner was right in treating the problem in the Ann Arbor Black English Trial more as a problem of attitude toward the vernacular of African-American school children than as a problem of another language or of significantly different structures. The position regarding structures is indeed what is supported by McWhorter (1997: 9–10) when he observes:

It is a fact that Black English is not different enough from standard English to pose any significant obstacle to speaking, reading, or writing it. Black English is simply a dialect of English, just as standard English is. . . .

It is mutually intelligible with standard English both on the page and spoken and its speakers do not occupy a separate nation. . . .

We also must not make the mistake of equating Black English with mere “street slang.” Black English speakers indeed often use a colorful slang . . . just as standard English speakers

use slang. . . . African-Americans are often aware of the similarity between black speech and that of poor Southern whites, such speech is essentially as different from standard English as Black English is.

The way to interpret McWhorter's position constructively is that AAE is not alone in being different from standard English and that the differences between AAE and American standard English are not necessarily greater than between the latter and other American nonstandard English vernaculars. The position implies correctly that techniques for teaching standard English to African-American school children need not be different from those used for teaching it to other American school children who speak English natively, though they should be adapted to subcultural differences. This position does not of course entail that school systems should continue business as usual. It simply suggests that AAE need not be treated as an exceptional or uniquely deviant case in the classroom.

In a way McWhorter's position invites us to situate elsewhere than in structural differences the problem with the failure of school systems to make many African-American school children proficient in standard English. The kinds of attitudinal problems discussed, especially by Delpit (1998), deserve more attention. She points out that solutions proposed to date to address underproficiency in standard English have typically eroded the positive disposition of African-American school children in one way or another. The very fact of singling out their vernacular as the only or most deviant one from standard English is a problem in itself, because we know that every vernacular deviates from standard English in one way or another. It boils down to a problem of tolerance of linguistic variation, reflecting negative attitudes of some members of the American society to speakers of some specific varieties (Lippi-Green 1997). It is indeed a problem when the child is led to wonder why some ethnic ways of speaking are accepted but not his or hers. Adopting special solutions that privilege other ethnic and cultural backgrounds over those of African-American kids is a serious psychological problem that can kill the student's motivation for learning.

Solutions that insist on treating AAE as a separate language of the Black Diaspora have derived support from cultural differences that distinguish the average African-American population from the majority White American population (e.g., Smith 1998: 55). They have, however, ignored differences within the White American population, for instance, the fact that Appalachian and rural White Southern school children apparently face problems similar to those of African-American children, unless their teachers are from their own backgrounds and use educational materials that pay attention to these particular backgrounds. Overemphasis on structural differences between White and African-American ways of speaking, sometimes suggesting that most Whites speak standard English, gives the historically incorrect impression that unlike other Americans,

African Americans have failed in the acquisition of English as brought from England. It contributes unwittingly to the myth that African Americans are lazy or mentally inferior and had to develop their vernaculars through extraordinary processes. Despite their authors' good intentions, this approach disfranchises and stigmatizes African-American school children as much as those alternatives that are racially motivated and assign them to special remedial programs on the simple basis of dialectal differences.

Delpit (1998: 19) is correct in observing that constant negative comments about their vernaculars and constant zealous corrections of the ways they read or speak make African-American school children "increasingly aware of the school's negative attitude toward their community." This treatment of African-American children makes them resentful of being put down and unmotivated for learning. Indeed, as Delpit also observes, there are alternative, less humiliating, and more constructive ways of teaching standard English to AAE-speakers, as there are for speakers of other vernaculars. For instance, she suggests role playing, which should teach the kids "that there are many ways of saying the same thing, and that certain contexts suggest particular kinds of linguistic performances" (Delpit 1998: 19). Excessive corrections intended to discourage school children from speaking their vernaculars altogether often ignore the fact that the same children are subject to contrary peer pressures in their own backgrounds, such as stigmatization for "talking proper" or like a White person.

As a matter of fact, AAE has persisted, despite being stigmatized, because it has also functioned as a marker of ethnic identity in a society where integration has been more *de jure* than *de facto*. When an African-American child is put down at school, when he or she realizes that the chances for success in the socio-economic system look grim despite promises associated with standard English proficiency, and when there is no rational motivation for losing one's ethnic identity, then the child may lose interest in learning. The goal of the school system in teaching standard English should not be to replace the child's native vernacular but instead—as in second-language teaching—to help him or her acquire command of an additional variety of English, in order to function adequately in settings where the vernacular is not accepted. In this respect, the typical approach to the problem of many African-American school children with standard English has failed and one can only empathize with the Oakland Unified School District Board's decision to seek alternative solutions. The board just did not have to claim that AAE is a separate language.

Conclusions. AAE is definitely not the only nonstandard vernacular spoken in the United States of America. Its excessive stigmatization and the related commitment on the part of some to eradicate it may have to do with negative attitudes inherited from the American colonial past, the period since which African Americans have often been thought of as less intelligent. The very fact that

vernaculars of the White middle class have typically been identified by fiat as standard reflects the prejudice that everyone should adapt to White middle-class norms.

It is true that socioeconomic stratification has imposed a system in which command of either standard or White middle-class English has become a requirement for success in the professional world. However, developing proficiency in these norms need not be at the cost of abandoning one's vernacular for all communicative functions. Vernaculars have their own social identity functions; and many speakers are not ready, and certainly not eager, to renounce that social-indexical role of their vernacular. As observed by Delpit (1998), they see in the humiliations of excessive corrections and in the very style of the corrections themselves aggression against their own ethnic and cultural identities. Children's negative reactions to inadequate approaches to the standard English proficiency problem foster lack of enthusiasm, which in turn produces poor performance not only in standard English but also in the classroom in general, especially when they become self-conscious linguistically.

It remains imperative that school systems teach standard English more successfully to AAE-speakers. What I hope to have shown in this paper is that this effort should be consistent with the development of diverse nonstandard English vernaculars in North America since the colonial period and with the fact that AAE is only one among many nonstandard vernaculars. Perhaps excessive concern with AAE is in itself a negative factor that has ethnicized the more general question of how to teach standard English efficiently to speakers of nonstandard vernaculars in general without bruising their speakers' self esteem and eroding their enthusiasm and interest in being educated.

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NOTE

1. My current research shows that the term “convergence” is not terminologically adequate.