

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

