

Whose “standard”? What the Ebonics debate tells us about language, power, and pedagogy

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Although some linguists regard the concept of “language” as abstract, even epiphenomenal . . . and they can joke about language being a dialect with an army and navy, the truth remains that for most people the joke is far from frivolous. Regardless of what professional linguists say about the distinction between “language” and “dialect” to the general public the two words have different connotations.

Mchombo 1998

Introduction. As a result of the Oakland Unified School District Board of Education resolution on Ebonics in December 1996, a debate over Ebonics erupted in the U.S. media and was reported in many countries around the world.¹ This media-intense interest provided an opportunity for linguists and language educators to lead the public debate by their demonstrating an understanding of the “different connotations” held by the public and by demonstrating the sociopolitical bases behind assigning the labels language or dialect.² Furthermore, it was an opportunity to change the nature of the debate about the value of different languages and their varieties from an emotional, attitudinally based argument to one based on scientific data from sociolinguistic research. Linguists and language educators were interviewed, wrote op-ed pieces, and appeared on talk shows, a change from the usual media consultation of linguists about the correctness of split infinitives or the derivation of words. Professional associations (e.g., the American Association of Applied Linguistics, the Linguistic Society of America, Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) passed resolutions, wrote articles in their own newsletters and journals, held conferences, and distributed press releases. Smitherman (1999) in her history of language rights policies of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) claims that such activities of professional associations (and I would argue of professionals individually) are essential because policies of professional associations “provide the necessary intellectual basis and rhetorical framework for waging language debates and arguments. Further, since intellectuals provide the ideological rationale for public policy, it was and is important

for organizations like CCCC to go on record as supporting language rights.” (Smitherman 1999: 373).

Yet, neither our professional associations nor our individual efforts seem to have changed the rhetoric of public debates or provided the ideological rationale for public policy. Neither the name Ebonics nor the arguments associated with it remain in public consciousness. Just over a year later, California businessman Ron Unz proposed Proposition 227, the proposition to require structured English immersion as the preferred instructional program for teaching students entering California’s schools with languages other than English. While the debate that surrounded this proposition did not involve differentiating (or not differentiating) between a language and a dialect, it did involve two issues in common with the debate on Ebonics: the pedagogical soundness of the use of a child’s home language as a basis for acquiring the language of the schools—standard English—and the determination of who makes pedagogical decisions about the education of language minority students.³ This second public debate demonstrated again the public’s lack of understanding of the nature of language, language learning, or sound pedagogical practices for language minority students.

Given the high profile of the Ebonics debate, the amount of air and print time devoted to reasoned arguments supported by linguistics research, why did the public still not “get it?” Why did we have to repeat the same arguments presented during the 1974 *Lau v. Nichols* and the 1979 Ann Arbor decisions.⁴ Despite the scientific accuracy of our arguments, “‘scientific’ language, marshaled in the service of informing public policy, often reads and sounds irrelevant to policy and administration; and administration language, marshaled in the service of making things happen, often reads and sounds expedient” (LoBianco 1997). The critical players in the education of language-minority children thus remain divided by their own use of language, a division that can only be breached through frequent interaction. Yet, policy makers, the public, and linguists rarely engage in dialogue, except when an immediate issue grabs media attention. This is especially true because language education issues appear without direct input from linguists, often as the creation of administrators trying to alleviate an immediate educational issue such as the poor performance of African-American students on standardized tests or the perceived low rate of acquisition of standard English by speakers of other languages.

The lack of linguistic understanding starts with teacher-training programs, which rarely include descriptive linguistics, let alone critical linguistics that discusses issues of power and ideology. For those of us involved in linguistics and language education, this should be our first point of advocacy. We will have made some progress toward improving the educational success of language minority students if we can educate future teachers in an understanding of language and power and in appropriate pedagogies for these students, so that teachers’ praxis, that is, their “informed, committed action” (Carr and Kemmis 1986: 190), sup-

