

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-

ports learning for language minority students. There will still be public, political battles to be fought, but, as all educators know, what goes on behind closed classroom doors is mostly between teacher and student. Below I outline briefly such an agenda for what teachers need to know about language, power, and pedagogy.

Language. Probably the most difficult aspect of language for nonlinguists to accept is variability such as that displayed in text structure or in pronunciation, syntax, or vocabulary. This abhorrence for variability leads to a desire for standardization, resulting in folk notions that there are “correct” and “incorrect” forms, whether in spelling, syntax, pronunciation, or text structure. Of course, communities must have some agreed upon conventions, because I cannot choose my own meanings for words or my own rules of syntax. If I did, I could not communicate. But the desire for uniformity goes beyond agreement on conventions for mutual comprehensibility. The myth of a correct English holds that any deviation from this standard is impoverished and full of error. Historically, English language speakers were more tolerant of variability. In fact, after the Norman Conquest in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Britain, variability was across languages, with French used for literature, administration, and legislation; Latin for the church and scholarship; and English for more local and personal functions. In medieval England, variability in written texts was normal practice; spelling varied from text to text and within texts (often for aesthetic purposes to justify text). Over time, however, spelling and meaning became codified through dictionaries, creating a “standard” such that variations in spelling are less tolerated than variations in pronunciation. Grammar, punctuation, and other aspects of text structure also became prescribed in style manuals, so that adherence to these standards is highly valued.

Ebonics opponents refer to it as slang, broken English, or poor grammar and to its speakers as lazy or sloppy and so demand it not be used in schools (or even recognized as a legitimate communication system). At best, they say, it is nonstandard English. This variety of English, which has been assigned various names (Ebonics, Black English, Black Dialect, African-American Vernacular English [AAVE]), has been found by linguists who have studied it to be rule governed, with its own phonology, lexicon, and grammar (e.g., Labov 1972; Wolfram 1991). Calling it either a dialect or a language is a political question, not a linguistic one. That Standard American English (SAE) is the prestige variety is a result of nonlinguistic forces such as wealth and political power, not of inherent characteristics of SAE. So, the issue cannot be about being in favor of Ebonics or not. As Lisa Delpit so cogently argues, “I can be neither for Ebonics or against Ebonics any more than I can be for or against air. It exists. It is the language spoken by many of our African-American children. It is the language they heard as their mothers nursed them and changed their diapers and played peek-a-boo with them. It is the language through which they first encountered love, nurturance and joy” (Delpit 1997).

An additional dimension of language variation crucial for teachers to understand is the nature of genres, the culturally typical ways of engaging rhetorically with recurring situations. People learn new genres through social contexts. In different communities, ways of representing and presenting knowledge vary. Different communities value different kinds of knowledge and display and package it in ways unfamiliar to those outside the community. One such example is narrative. Research on narratives in different cultural groups (e.g., Michaels 1981) shows us that not all culture's stories have a point; not all give a setting, present a problem, and then its resolution, the structure most common in middle-class America. In Western Australia, for example, Ian Malcolm (1994) has worked with aboriginal children, finding them silenced in the classroom setting but eloquent storytellers outside the classroom. They are silenced in the classroom because they are baffled by their teachers' expectations of them. Equally baffled are their teachers, who think these children have nothing to say. Malcolm recorded young aboriginal children in classrooms and as they told stories to each other in the dormitories of their residential schools. Some of the children he recorded are bilingual, others speak only Aboriginal English. In both cases, the aboriginal children tell stories structured very differently from those of their white classmates. The *story tells* consist of multiple narrations of going from one place to another and what happens when the participants arrive. The story tells are often accompanied by drawing in the sand using a stick or piece of wire. It is claimed that this story structure, with its two components of moving and stopping, reflects the traditional aboriginal way of life—the nomadic life where moving and stopping are salient. Whatever its origin, the structure and values are different from those of the Western narrative, which helps explain the difficulties these children have at school.

Even as we talk about standard English, we have variability. Which standard? That of Britain, of the United States, of Australia, of Singapore? Kachru (1986) was the first to posit three concentric circles of English to categorize English users, based on their relationship with the language: the inner circle of countries where the majority of speakers use English as a first language (e.g., the United States and New Zealand); the outer circle of countries where English is one language among others in people's repertoires (e.g., India); and the expanding circle where English is learned as a foreign language (e.g., Japan). Graddol (1997) has estimated that there are around 750 million English speakers in the expanding circle, and 375 million in each of the outer and inner circles.⁵ Clearly, some English speakers consider only British and American as legitimate standards, with perhaps some tolerance for Australian or New Zealand standard usage. On a personal note, I was refused English teaching positions in Europe (including England) because I spoke Australian. When I first arrived in the United States and was offered a position teaching adult ESL, for which I had extensive experience and training in Australia, Britain, and Thailand, I was informed during the interview that I

would be hired because of my qualifications and experience, well above those required for the position, but that I would need to lose my accent. McArthur (1997) even posits an International Standard English (which, in retrospect, either I didn't speak or the interviewer didn't recognize) with five strands: international print standard; international media standard; international governmental, administrative, and legal standard; international commercial and technological standard; and international education standard.

Further, even within one national standard, language varies from situation to situation, depending on the speaker-hearer relationship, the topic, and the medium (written or oral). Many speakers competently code-switch orally between SAE and a nonstandard variety but have not developed competence in written SAE, which is not as variable as its oral counterpart, largely because of the codification and prescription of dictionaries and style manuals. Others may use a nonstandard variety in speech but be competent in SAE or the more international variety McArthur refers to.

Power. That one variety either is considered a language or a standard variety is a result of the history of the users of the language or standard variety. English has become a global language as a result of British colonial and industrial power, followed by U.S. economic power. The dominance of English continues even through the Internet, largely because computer technology and the Internet network originated with English speakers, and consequently,⁶ the code used for protocols, called the American Standard Code for Information Interchange (ASCII), was developed for the English alphabet. To create even simple diacritic marks such as the accent on the name of my former university, San José State University, requires several keystrokes, and in transmission is often converted to *Jos?e*. To summarize, English is a global language today because of an accident of history. Similarly, for standard varieties the variety of the elite and powerful becomes the standard. In Australia, for example, Standard British English was long considered prestigious and used to identify speakers as the upper classes. To express solidarity with “real” Australians, a speaker would instead use “Broad Australian.”

The choice and use of a language variety is never socioculturally or sociopolitically neutral, involving as it does the interaction between these two continua of power and solidarity (see, for example, Brown and Levinson 1987) as aspects of social identity. Languages and language varieties may “symbolize group identity and become emblems of that identity, especially when there is contact with other groups whose ways of being are different” (Heller 1982: 3). In describing English as a global language, Crystal (1997) identifies two different functions that bilingualism or bidialectalism can fulfill. One language or variety may provide the symbol of group identity of a community; the other may function to provide intelligibility across a wider range of communities. For speakers of nonprestigious language varieties or languages, there is the power of the in-group in using the

variety, but there is equally the lack of power in situations where the prestigious variety is the only one acknowledged (e.g., schooling). Nelson-Barber (1982), for example, found that Pima Indian children's phonology most closely approximated the SAE of the teachers during grades one through three, but by grade four, even though they could use SAE competently, they chose instead to use the Pima English variety of their local environment. She hypothesized that by grade four students had decided to strongly identify with their own language variety group rather than with those in power, such as their teachers.

In all situations, but especially in education, we need to ask explicitly whose language or variety is accepted for what functions of communication and why. A number of scholars working in language education have begun addressing these questions of power in different aspects of language education: language planning (e.g., Tollefson 1991), language learning (e.g., Peirce 1995), ESL curricula (e.g., Auerbach and Burgess 1985), and the globalization of English (e.g., Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas 1996). Educators need to be ever mindful that our discursive practices perpetuate inequalities because they continually reproduce unequal power relations and social identities.

Sociolinguistic studies have identified attitudes toward speakers of different languages and varieties (e.g., Cazden 1988), attitudes that often shape opportunities for speakers of those languages and varieties. Other studies have examined not only the pronunciation, syntax, and vocabulary differences across varieties, but also the structure of texts both written and oral.

Although the study of language varieties has a long history, there is still much we do not know, especially about the use of dialect across different social settings and modes of communication. Although many educators (e.g., Delpit 1995) have advocated adding the standard to the repertoire students bring with them to the classroom in order to give them upward social mobility, we do not have research that shows the "costs and benefits associated with dialect choice" (Adger and Wolfram 2000: 393). We do not know whether a nonstandard variety is acceptable in certain settings, but we do know that the acquisition of a standard variety does not guarantee social mobility and success for language minorities. Further, we cannot assume that the language of the home is the child's language of affiliation, and it may not be the child's dominant language. Many adolescents, for example, claim a language affiliation other than their mother tongue and demonstrate expertise in yet another (Mobbs 1997). And, for second-language learners, the language of affiliation may be a nonstandard variety of English or of the mother tongue.

Pedagogy. A number of crucial pedagogical issues arise from the Ebonics debate: which variety is to be the explicit object of instruction; which variety should be used as a medium for instruction; which varieties are used for which functions; and which varieties should students have as part of their linguistic repertoire. These issues are important not only for the education of Ebonics

speakers, but also for the education of any learner who does not use the prestige variety, such as:

- speakers of varieties of World Englishes,
- students coming to the United States and other English-dominant countries speaking an English-based creole,
- students speaking indigenous dialects (e.g., Aboriginal English),
- second-language learners who have acquired a nonstandard variety of English because of where they live or with whom they interact,
- students who may be able to code-switch between dialects in speech but who have not mastered SAE for writing, and
- students who speak a nonstandard variety of their mother tongue.

Language educators know that the most appropriate instruction builds on what the learner already knows, and so it is appropriate to begin with the language (or language variety) that students bring with them to the classroom. One of the misperceptions the public and media had of the Oakland School District approach to teaching Ebonics speakers was the belief that they intended to teach Ebonics to the children, just as Spanish, for example, is taught to Spanish-speaking children. Such teaching was not their intent. Rather their goal was to teach through the medium of Ebonics and use a curriculum that used the language already spoken by the students as a resource. Work on language awareness (e.g., Fairclough 1992) has shown that explicitly teaching learners to see differences between their language or variety and the standard, most powerful variety “gives students a knowledge base for developing a second language or dialect” (Adger 1997: 14). Wolfram, Schilling-Estes, and Hazen (1996) have shown that upper elementary and middle school students are fascinated by dialect awareness curricula and that they become aware that dialect prejudice is not justified by linguistic data. Through such study they also become aware of the rule-governed nature of their variety, of its viability, and of their own expertise as competent users of the variety. They come to realize that the standard is the standard for historical, political reasons, not because of any intrinsic attributes. They no longer feel a loss of self-esteem because others view their speech as slang or lazy.

But such contrastive study should not be confined to the curriculum for students who use a nonstandard variety; rather, contrastive language study should be part of the curriculum for all learners. Thus, speakers of prestige varieties come to realize the communicative effectiveness of all varieties, while speakers of languages other than English come to understand the variability of the English language they are learning. To provide the most appropriate instruction, educators need to understand the language and language varieties learners use in different situations, whether they be speakers of World Englishes, English-based Creoles, indigenous dialects of English, or their mother tongue.

It is precisely because of the role of a standard variety of English as a gate-keeper to better jobs and education in many societies that educators must take their responsibility seriously. In an ESL situation, it is essential for immigrants to learn the codes for success. The aboriginal story tell will not help those young aboriginal learners become successful in their academic subjects where a different genre is required. Similarly, an international student who uses extensive background information because in her culture it is related to politeness may not be successful in writing or conversation in U.S. mainstream culture. It is not that there is anything intrinsically better about the more direct, less background information genre privileged in U.S. education. However, the student who fails to use the appropriate genre will find her papers marked up in red pen and people not listening to her conversation, considering it to be rambling or not coming to the point. The very terms used to describe the writing of students who do not conform to the SAE written genre are value-laden. Educators have the responsibility not to withhold the knowledge of the genres and culture of power from students but to assist them in learning the languages and culture of power. At the same time, however, educators must help students to learn the arbitrariness of those standards and to understand the power relationships they represent and then let *them* choose.

On the one hand, we need to advocate respect for difference, difference in language, difference in varieties of English, differences in culture. On the other hand, we need to recognize that as we empower through teaching a standard, we also disempower. As Edge (1996: 16) says for teaching English to speakers of other languages, "Every time our students are successful in getting that TOEFL score that means that they can study at a U.S. college, we celebrate this step towards personal liberation. And, at exactly the same time, we have put another little brick in the wall that holds back all those other people who would have wanted to be a doctor, an architect . . . in their own country, but whose aspirations will be blighted because they failed to learn enough English".⁷

Conclusion. All language educators, whether we teach Ebonics speakers or not, need to understand these issues of language because they impact on our decisions about which variety or language should be taught explicitly, which should be the medium of instruction, what are the socioculturally appropriate situations for using one variety or language or another. These decisions are not unique to the United States or other English-dominant countries. They are relevant to all countries with multilingual and multidialectal populations.

What we need to focus on is intercultural communication, rather than multicultural education. The former involves communication across cultural boundaries; the latter is often "based on a prescriptive notion that multicultural education is a remedy for controlling students of color and other marginalized students in the classroom, [and] . . . instructional programs that view students as deficient and in need of compensatory models of instruction" (Grant 1999: 7). We need what

Zarate (quoted in Crozet and Liddicoat 1997: 3) calls “knowing how to relate to otherness.” To achieve this, we need to make visible both the many varieties of otherness and of oneself. Such an approach removes what has been an exclusive focus on the model native speaker of standard English as the norm for education, including English language teaching and learning. Instead, we need to prepare learners to communicate outside their own linguistic and cultural boundaries, teaching how to make the home language and culture relate to the target language and culture so they are freed from a singular view of the world. So, the more appropriate norm is a bilingual-multilingual or bidialectal-multidialectal position, which we can think of as creating an intercultural space for the learner. But this needs to be taught *explicitly*. Education and even language learning does not *automatically* result in intercultural sensitivity and the breaking of stereotypes.

Meanwhile, we can, as Wong and Thomas (1993: 25) have observed about Malaysian English, “empower our students by building on these nativized items; in doing so, our students will be able to find their own personal and cultural voices, and at the same time will learn to transform their meaning into a language that is understandable to a larger audience. The classroom will therefore become an arena where, through an evolving dialogue with their inner selves, their peers and their teachers, learners will see themselves gradually becoming a part of a larger community whose strength lies not in its homogeneity but in its rich cultural diversity.”

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NOTES

1. The term Ebonics was coined from Ebony and Phonics by Robert Williams in 1973.
2. I will use the term language as it is commonly accepted in linguistics, to describe languages that are termed such by their users. Except when contrasting language with dialect, I will use the

term variety for all language variation, including standard and nonstandard varieties. I will not capitalize standard except when referring to specific standard varieties by name.

3. I use the term language minority throughout this article to refer to native speakers of nonstandard English and native speakers of languages other than English because both are not native speakers of national Standard American English. John Baugh (1998) makes a similar case. I acknowledge, however, the arbitrariness of the term native speaker.
4. The former case supported the right of limited-English-proficient students to an equal educational opportunity and instructed educational agencies to overcome language barriers that might prevent that equal access. In the Ann Arbor case, Judge Joiner directed the Ann Arbor School District to use the home language of Black English-speaking children in teaching them to read Standard English.
5. Such estimates vary depending on whether the definition of English includes pidgins and English-based Creoles and what measure of proficiency is used for non-native English speaker.
6. The Analytical Engine originated with Charles Babbage and the Universal Machine with Alan Turing, both English. The Internet was an outgrowth of ARPANET, the network developed by the U.S. Department of Defense to connect it with research universities involved in defense research.
7. TOEFL, the Test of English as a Foreign Language is the test used by most U.S. universities to determine (standard American) English proficiency for entrance.