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# Language and African Americans

Movin On up a Lil Higher

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It was nearly a generation between *Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children, et al., v. Ann Arbor School District Board* (1979) and Oakland, California, Unified School District Board's "Resolution on Ebonics" (1996). In that time, however, public knowledge of and attitudes toward African American Language (AAL) remained largely unchanged, as was exceedingly clear from the public outcry that greeted Oakland's resolution. The author compares *King* and Oakland and finds that although it is clear that history did in fact repeat itself in many ways, there are also unmistakable signs of progress in language research, pedagogy, and policy. The author points out opportunities for linguists to infuse research on African American educational achievement with the results of Black Language research. For the sake of all children, it is time to act in ways that reflect genuine valuation of language diversity and to implement policies fostering multilingualism and dialect awareness.

**Keywords:** *African American Language; Oakland Ebonics Resolution; King court case; multilingualism; dialect awareness*

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*Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children, et al., v. Ann Arbor School District Board* was formally filed by Michigan Legal Services attorneys Gabe Kaimowitz and Kenneth Lewis on July 28, 1977. Widely known as the "Black English Case," the court action ended nearly two years later, on July 12, 1979, when federal judge Charles W. Joiner, himself a resident of the Ann Arbor, Michigan, community, issued his ruling in favor of the *King* children (see Joiner 1979; the full ruling is also reprinted in Smitherman 1981a). The Oakland, California, school board issued its "Resolution on Ebonics" on December 18, 1996. (The original Resolution as well as the later revised version is reprinted in Perry and Delpit 1998; Baugh 2000, and the special issue of the *Journal of English Linguistics* on Ebonics in 1998.) The *King* case established the legitimacy of African American Language (AAL) within a legal framework and mandated the Ann Arbor School District to take "appropriate action" to teach the *King* school children "to read in the standard English of the school, the commercial world, the arts, science and professions" (Joiner 1979). The Oakland Ebonics Resolution recognized AAL as the "predomi-

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nantly primary language” of its African American students and mandated the use of this language to “facilitate [the students’] acquisition and mastery of English language skills” (Oakland Unified School District Board 1996).

The years 1979 to 1996 were nearly a generation, but the national hysteria that greeted Oakland’s Resolution made it starkly clear that public knowledge about and attitudes towards the language of the African American community had not substantially changed in the intervening years. *King* and Oakland . . . historic moments sharing several significant similarities . . . reflective of the old truism that history repeats itself . . . two major educational events in the panoramic history of the descendants of enslaved Africans in the United States . . . separated by almost two decades . . . the mo thangs change, the more they bees remainin the same.

Both *King* and Oakland centered on the lack of academic progress and educational underachievement of African American students in the nation’s public school systems. Both considered language central to this deleterious state of affairs. To be sure, these two public spaces were some two thousand miles apart, but even in terms of location, the two events share striking similarities. The *King* case occurred in Ann Arbor, an elite college town that is home to the University of Michigan, often touted as the Harvard of the Midwest, located only a forty-minute drive from postindustrialized Chocolate City Detroit. In fact, the four-week trial in *King* took place in downtown Detroit where the U.S. Eastern District, Southern Division courthouse is located. The Oakland Ebonics Resolution was released in the rainbow metropolis of Oakland, California, not far from and on the same side of the Bay as another elite college community, the University of California, Berkeley, often touted as the Harvard of the West.

Both *King v. Ann Arbor* in 1979 and Oakland in 1996 occasioned a barrage of national and international media coverage about an educational issue, the likes of which hadn’t been witnessed since *Brown v. Board*, the 1954 Supreme Court case that legally dismantled the educational apartheid that had reigned in the United States for more than half a century. However, given the decentralized system of education in this country, both *King* and Oakland were, in the final analysis, merely local events with no broader venue for making an impact on national policy about the education of Black children and youth. Since *King* was a federal court case, there was the potential for national impact in that a legal precedent could have been set in a higher federal court. However, the Ann Arbor School District foreclosed this possibility when it voted not to appeal Joiner’s decision to a higher court, thus preventing a broader, legal ruling that could have gone beyond the confines of Ann Arbor, Michigan. Even though Oakland occasioned hearings on Ebonics in the U.S. Senate in January 1997, the hearings did not result in any federal legislation that would have mandated the implementation of language education policies for Black students across the nation.

On the other hand, if we view these events from the vantage point of the half-full glass, there are differences between these two historic moments that point to Oakland's forward advance over *King*.

The students in *King* represented only one school, not an entire district, and they were a minority among a minority. Only 13 percent of the students at King Elementary School were Black, and most of that 13 percent were middle- and upper-class Black youth who, being speakers of both AAL and "School English," were not experiencing language barriers in their quest for equal education. Hence, they were not in the group of plaintiffs in the court case. Only the Black students from the Green Road housing projects, some twenty-four low-income units isolated in this Ann Arbor neighborhood of large, expensive homes, were having language and education problems at King School. The numbers are significant here. The parents of the children in the lawsuit were a small group of single female heads of households, who did not enjoy the support of the other (middle- and upper-class) Black parents at King School. These Sistas was shonuff underdogs, boldly and bravely taking on the whole Ann Arbor School District.

By contrast, Black students in Oakland were 53 percent of the school district population of 51,706 students, and virtually all—from kindergarten to high school—were adversely affected by language barriers in the educational environment. This more closely parallels the situation of African American students in urban districts nationwide. The Ebonics Resolution was launched by the Oakland School District Board itself, on behalf of the entire district. Thus, the battle for AAL rights did not have to be waged against an unwilling administrative apparatus, for the Oakland Board and its superintendent, Carolyn Gettridge, were solidly behind a renewed vision of language education for Black students in the Oakland public schools. Further, many, if not all, of Oakland's teachers, desperate for instructional policies and strategies to redress the dismal educational underachievement of their Black students, looked to the recommendations from the Task Force on Educating African American Students, including its Ebonics Resolution, as potential winds of change. By contrast, the teachers and principal at Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School and the Ann Arbor School District Superintendent and other administrators resisted the Green Road mothers' pleas for help, vigorously lambasted the court action, and conducted themselves with defensive self-righteousness throughout the two years of the court battle.

Another important difference is the research currently under way in Oakland, made possible by federal funding, to develop a program of language and literacy instruction that has the promise of elevating not only the educational achievement of Oakland's Black students, but also that of other Black youth in school districts who may opt to replicate Oakland's plan. This is in stark contrast to the remedy implemented by the Ann Arbor School District, a half-hearted effort, doomed from the outset. First, the district sought no outside funding and the plan was, by deliberate

design, seriously underfunded. Second, the plan was scheduled to last only one year, during which there were to be twenty hours of in-service language instruction for King School staff, which they would be paid to attend, a library with materials on Black and Standard English, a language arts consultant-specialist with expertise in Black English, and four sessions for reading teachers. Amazingly, the plan specified no special language and literacy instruction for the plaintiff children. Further, Ann Arbor's proposed oversight team included no parent representatives, none of the community and professional folks who had become advocates for the King students ("Friends of King," as we deemed ourselves), none of the nationally prominent team of linguists and educators whom I had organized and who had testified as expert witnesses during the trial, no representatives of the Ann Arbor Student Advocacy Center that had been counseling and assisting the Green Road mothers for years, and no teachers from any other school in the Ann Arbor district.

Reading the plan as the continuation of the same kind of miseducation and language prejudices that had been the focus of our two-year struggle in the court case, attorneys Kaimowitz and Lewis filed a complaint against Ann Arbor's so-called "remedy," requesting several modifications to the plan—for example, that the mothers of the plaintiff children be involved in management team meetings and that the language arts consultant-specialist work in the reading classroom with the children on a regular basis. The Ann Arbor School Board rejected the modifications, and Judge Joiner took the position that the court was not able to rule on the merits of an educational plan. Clearly, the teachers and principal at King School merely gave lip service to the judge's order for a remedy. They circled the wagons and sought escape from the negative glare of public scrutiny and opinion that they had been subjected to since the 1977 filing of the case and particularly in the month-long trial itself in the summer of 1979.

In the case of Oakland, however, there has been an ongoing research project focusing on language, literacy, and culture. The educational community awaits the results of this research, which seems, as mentioned, to hold promise for addressing, at last, the language crises in African American education. (See Rickford, Sweetland, and Rickford 2004 [this issue] for some of the most recent relevant scholarship.)

In this context, it should be noted that *King* did reinvigorate linguistically oriented research on AAL, which had become dormant by 1979. In the decade following the culmination of the court case, a number of significant research projects were launched, several of which enjoyed U.S. government funding support in the form of grants from the National Science Foundation. Not surprisingly, one such project was conducted right in Detroit, where, as mentioned, the *King* trial had taken place. Walter Edwards employed social network theory to study the extent of AAL and the Language of Wider Communication (LWC) in a Black East Side Detroit neighborhood. He found significant linguistic differences between neighborhood residents on the basis of whether or not their social worlds included contact with Whites (Ed-

wards 1992). Another important project was William Labov's work in Philadelphia's Black and White communities, which led to his mid-1980s formulation of the "Divergence Hypothesis" (see, e.g., Labov and Harris 1986) and subsequent national public dissemination and discussion. Labov's Divergence Hypothesis had the effect of sounding a national alarm about the separate linguistic development of Black and White speech, which, Labov argued, was occurring despite 1960s and 1970s struggles for racial integration and predictions about the eventual convergence of the Black and White speech communities. John Rickford's research on the copula in AAL and Creole English led to renewed interest in this "showcase variable" (Rickford et al. 1991). Utilizing important new data from East Palo Alto, California, Rickford demonstrated the profound effect on our research results of different methods of analyzing and quantifying copula patterns. What you count is what you get: it was an important call to sociolinguists to tighten up they game. While these and other studies in the Black Language Research Tradition, post-*King*, were significant for advancing theoretical work on AAL, left wanting was a body of work linking Black Language research to Black educational achievement.

The beginnings of such a body of work could have been/may yet be provided by California's Standard English Proficiency Program (SEP). Thinking that California might be next in line for a "Black English Case," in 1981, the California State Board of Education adopted "Black Language: Proficiency in Standard English for Speakers of Black Language." The program, based on contrastive analysis and recognition of the student's home language, is designed for the acquisition of "Standard English" by California students who are speakers of "Black Language" and for the provision of "equal educational opportunities for these students." The SEP was/is operative in some three hundred school districts throughout California. While a number of teachers around the state have, in anecdotal fashion, borne witness to the success of the SEP, what is needed is hard data based on experimental versus control instructional research designs.

Related to and building on the SEP, the Los Angeles Unified School District created the Language Development Program for African American Students in the 1990-91 academic year (renamed the "Academic English Mastery Program" in 1998), under the direction of Dr. Noma LeMoine. The program employs a linguistic and broad-based Afrocentric curriculum approach to address the language and literacy needs of African American students, 80 percent of whom are considered "Limited Standard English-Proficient." Experimental and control studies coming from this program, together with similar studies from other, more traditionally focused SEP programs throughout California, will be invaluable in our efforts to link Black Language research with Black educational achievement.

In terms of our *King*-Oakland comparison, it is crucial to note that both the SEP for speakers of "Black Language" and the Los Angeles Language Development Program for African American Students were up and running post-*King*—since

1981 and 1990, respectively—and long before the issuance of Oakland’s Ebonics Resolution on December 18, 1996. Further, before this date, the SEP had been in use in some schools in the Oakland School District without public outcry or controversy. Thus, there should not have been such a negative reaction to the Oakland Resolution (particularly, not in California). However, the fact that the public responded with such hysterical outrage and sometime *jes plain ignut* pronouncements speaks volumes to the persistence of language myths and misconceptions in the nation’s schools, the continuing legacy of internalized and externalized racism, and the power of media conglomerates in the “manufacturing of consent.” Thus, while some advances have been made in the language wars, progressive language researchers and activists have our work cut out for us. I shall outline some of the fronts on which we should be waging battle.

A critical issue that was raised, but not followed up on in the aftermath of *King*, which is now being taken up, post-Oakland, is the language-dialect debate. It is a fundamental question whether the speech of the Black community constitutes a distinct language in its own right, or merely one of several varieties of English. We did not have to address the language-dialect debate in *King* since the legislation under which the case was filed—1703(f) of the Equal Educational Opportunity Act—did not require that the plaintiffs possess a distinct language, only that the language in question provide a “barrier” to the plaintiffs’ quest for “equal educational opportunity.” This issue was clarified in one of Judge Joiner’s early rulings in the case when he stated,

The . . . list of persons covered . . . is only merely illustrative but could well include students whose “language barrier” results from the use of some type of non-standard English. . . . The statutory language places no limitations on the character or source of the language barrier except that it must be serious enough to impede equal participation by . . . students in . . . instructional programs. Barring any more legislative guidance to the contrary, 1703(f) applies to language barriers of appropriate severity encountered by students who speak “Black English” as well as to language barriers encountered by students who speak German. (Joiner 1978)

Yet, as I argued in my analysis of *King* (Smitherman 1981b), the language-dialect issue never left the court case, nor the minds of the lay public. In a number of community forums over the years, I have been confronted with this question, and I have addressed it from time to time in my work (see, e.g., “A New Way of Talkin’: Language, Social Change, and Political Theory” [1989], reprinted in Smitherman 2000b). The classic linguistics position, as stated, for instance, in the Linguistic Society of America’s 1997 resolution in support of Oakland’s Ebonics Resolution (reprinted in Perry and Delpit 1998, Baugh 2000, Rickford and Rickford 2000), is that

languages are a matter of sociopolitical construction. Nonetheless, this is a critical issue in the minds of the people, and I am happy to see linguists now seriously taking up this matter in the aftermath of Oakland.

In the minds of the lay public, languages have high status, dialects do not. A given language can easily be seen to be legitimately different from another language, whereas dialects are viewed as mere corruptions of or departures from a given language. In his very powerful essay, “Ebonic [*sic*] Need Not Be English,” linguist Ralph Fasold (2001b, 277-79) makes a compelling point:

Given the yawning chasm between the linguistic and folk ideas, “standard” and “dialect,” for linguists to attempt to convey what we have learned about Ebonic while using terms like “standard English” and “African-American English dialect” starts us off immediately with a double handicap. . . . On the other hand, if Ebonic were a language and presented as such, much of the mismatch in presuppositions can be avoided. The Ebonic language would not be a dialect and would therefore not be assumed to be a corruption of anything, but something real in its own right. As a language, the question of its “rising up” to the standards of English would not even come up. A language has its own standards, and the standards . . . of some other language would be simply irrelevant. . . . I do know that I have been able to get across the linguistic perception of the nature of Ebonic much more efficiently by framing its relation to English as one of language-to-language. This newer discourse just seems to work better.

Taking up the language-dialect issue from the perspective of implications for classroom literacy instruction, with numerous concrete examples of applications in his first-year college writing classroom, linguist Arthur Palacas (2001) makes a strong case for “liberating American Ebonics from Euro-English.” Employing a Chomskyan grammatical theory approach, he argues that “Ebonics is both English and another language and deserves a name of its own” (p. 339). He goes on to demonstrate that this approach has facilitated the advancement of the

academic cause of African Americans . . . we all believe that Spanish is a different language from English; we take it without argument that, of course, the exam results would be skewed downward for Hispanic Americans taking a test in standard English. Once liberated from English . . . Ebonics poses exactly the same reason why the authors should have retreated from their pursuit of negative claims about African American intellectuality—Ebonics is a different language too. . . . The tide begins to shift . . . when we accept as a reality that Ebonics is structurally (and often semantically) another language. Taking the reality seriously can revolutionize our attitudes and approach to-

ward our Ebonics-strong students—it has mine, to be sure—because the conclusion is based on objective analysis, not subjective pressures to think well of Ebonics. . . . This good news about Ebonics as a language, a contrasting type of English—once embraced—immediately inspires us to elevate our vision of the linguistic capabilities of our students. (Palacas 2001, 344-47)

While a full elaboration of the language-dialect argument is beyond the scope of this commentary, two points can be stated here. First, AAL constitutes a way of speaking that employs English words with lexical and grammatical meanings different from those of LWC. Thus, even though the words may look the same, indeed, may look like “English,” the meanings may be totally different from “English.” Everyone now understands that when Muhammad Ali once said “There are two bad white men in the world, the Russian white man and the American white man. They are the two baddest men in the history of the world,” he was using the word “bad” with a particularly unique Black meaning and employing uniquely Black rules of rhetorical discourse. The statement “He been married” can refer to a man who is married or divorced, depending on the pronunciation of “been.” And the contrast in meaning between the following sentence pairs cannot be rendered in LWC with a word-for-word translation:

- (1) Can't nobody be in the room.
- (2) Can't be nobody in the room. (Sistrunk 1998)

Such linguistic differences and language practices illustrate the bilinguality of African Americans, or at the very least, make us what Palacas calls “bi-English” speakers.

The second point to note in the language-dialect debate has to do with the sociopolitical construction of language. Languages evolve from peoplehood and nationhood. Fasold (2001a) points us toward the work of linguist Heinz Kloss, who noted that there are “abstand” and “ausbau” languages. According to Kloss (1967, 29), the former is a “language by distance,” that is, one so distinctly different from other related grammars that “a linguist would have to call it a language.” By contrast, an “ausbau” language is a “language by expansion,” one that is socially and sociopolitically constructed, such as Swedish and Norwegian. This is a message that is important to convey to members of the lay public when they pose the language-dialect question about AAL. I would argue that irrespective of whether there is an “abstand” factor operative in the case of AAL and LWC, descendants of Africans enslaved in the United States constitute a nation within a nation, whose collective will can bring about the declaration and acceptance of U.S. Black speech as a language, in much the same way, for instance, as a unified Black Nation,

during the Black Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, brought about fundamental legal, social, and cultural changes in American society.

In neither the post-1979 nor post-1996 period have we seen a major campaign to go public with our knowledge, to take linguistics and educational research out of ivory—and ebony—towers, and to advocate on behalf of African American youth and their/our language out there in the public trenches. This is another front on which we need to be waging war. And we need to act NOW!!! That is, act, instead of reacting, not wait for the next *King* case or Ebonics Resolution. Large and in charge, we should bum rush the media with our own Master Narrative. In so doing, we need to reconceptualize and broaden our notion of AAL. We need to stress the generational, class, and gender similarities in Black Language use (see, e.g., Smitherman 2000a). For AAL is not only language structure, it is also language use and discourse practices. It is not just the language of Black children and youth in the public schools, but also the language of the Black Church, of everyday folk, of seniors, of the working class, of preachers, of Nobel and Pulitzer Prize winners, of a long line of “race” women and men. And it is long past time for us to produce a film/video on AAL, one that would speak both to the Academy and the Street.

While venturing into the public arena is crucial, there is a tremendous need to continue the struggle in K-12 institutions because everybody goes through school, and it is in school that myths and misconceptions about language are reinscribed and reaffirmed. If language attitude is tantamount to changing a world view as Gere and Smith (1979) have argued, then we need to get to work on these attitudes quick, fast, and in a hurry. Education about and recognition of language diversity has to start early on—and with *all* students across the nation. No one has done more in this area than Wolfram (e.g., 2001, 2004), whose work on AAL dates back to his 1969 publication, *Detroit Negro Speech* (which came out of the 1966-68 Detroit Dialect Study, conducted under the auspices of the Center for Applied Linguistics). In recent years, Wolfram has worked in Baltimore, Maryland, and with the Ocracoke and Lumbee communities in North Carolina, both in the schools and in community institutions (e.g., museums), to launch language/dialect awareness campaigns that seek to promote linguistic understanding and preservation, acceptance and celebration of language diversity. His experimental curriculum, *Dialects and the Ocracoke Brogue* (Wolfram, Schilling-Estes, and Hazen 2000), provides a multimedia model for addressing language attitudes and questions about dialects for middle school students—although Wolfram is quick to note that even this level is “way too late,” adding that he has simply had to take advantage of teachers and schools receptive to his dialect awareness campaign (personal communication, 2003).

A summing up of the historical experience around AAL warrants the conclusion that progress in research, pedagogy, and language policy has been made. Like, don't nobody in they right mind now argue that “Black Dialect” is the “last barrier

to integration” (Green 1963), speech therapy for AAL speakers no longer rules, the mainstream done crossed over to AAL (to paraphrase Hip-Hop artist Jay-Z), and yes, Oakland, 1996, represents an advance over *King*, 1979. We are now positioned to advocate for new generations of Black youth to be not simply “bi-English,” as both *King* and Oakland called for, but to also become fluent in Spanish, Arabic, Xhosa, Yoruba, Swahili, Zulu, and other languages (a position that neither *King* nor Oakland advocated). Multilingualism is the way of the world, in Africa and elsewhere around the globe. And so it is time to move the Black Language conversation to a higher level.

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