

slaved peoples brought with them from West Africa, a widely held though not uncontroversial claim among linguists. Consider the language of the resolution:

WHEREAS, these [scholarly] studies have also demonstrated that African Language Systems are genetically based and not a dialect of English; and

WHEREAS, these studies demonstrate that such West and Niger-Congo African languages have been officially recognized and addressed in the mainstream public educational community as worth of study, understanding, or application of its principles, laws and structures for the benefit of African-American students both in terms of positive appreciation of the language and these students' acquisition and mastery of English language skills. . . .

The intent of the first clause is clarified in the slightly revised version of the resolution to:

WHEREAS, these [scholarly] studies have also demonstrated that African Language Systems have origins in West [African] and Niger-Congo languages and are not merely dialects of English. . . .

The metaphorical use of terms from biology is common in historical linguistics; there is nothing unusual about their use, and certainly nothing biological or genetic about it, except for the obvious fact that it is human beings — creatures of biology — who are moving languages along and in their separate directions. Thus we speak, for example, of the genetic relationship that exists between English and German: that there is a reconstructed “ancestor” language (Proto West Germanic, in this case) from which the “daughter” languages English and German, among other “daughters,” are both descended. In a somewhat different way, the claim goes, AAE is historically derived from certain West African languages as well as from English. West African grammatical structures are superficially masked by English words: a creole account of the origins of AAE.

If Ebonics Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?

(pace James Baldwin, 1979)

WAYNE O'NEIL

The immediate and continuing media response to the Oakland resolution has been, overwhelmingly, one of mockery, ridicule, and outrage. Notice, for example, the common charge that the Oakland resolution is an attempt to elevate “street slang” to the level of Shakespeare, say. This is, of course, a clever but willful category error: Every group has its slang (defined as “the nonstandard vocabulary of a given culture”) — even the media, not to mention the Elizabethans, as a cursory reading of the footnotes to Shakespeare’s plays and poems quickly reveals.

In the media’s brief moments of lucidity, however, linguists (among other specialists) have been invited to the media’s party and asked to shed light on what they imagine to be technical or scientific questions. The two that I address below are the most prevalent in my experience:

LANGUAGE AND GENETICS

First question: How can the victims of specious arguments about genetic difference (with respect to IQ, for example) support the notion “that African Language Systems are genetically based”?

Among linguists, Ebonics is commonly known as Black English or African-American English (AAE — the term used below), names not used in the resolution for ideological reasons: to establish that AAE is a language distinct from English.

As is clear from the resolution, but not from the severely cropped passages of it that the media and the politicians chose to highlight, the claim is that AAE has characteristics that derive from the languages that en-

AAE is thus not in the genes of African Americans, for an Asian-American child growing up in a linguistic environment in which AAE is spoken naturally grows to be an AAE-speaking person — a common enough occurrence in Oakland, I would imagine. Since the capacity for language is part of their genetic endowment, all infants raised under normal conditions learn the language(s) of their environment. But they are not predisposed toward any specific language by the socially constructed categories of race or class, nor is this the claim of the Oakland resolution.

LANGUAGE AND DIALECT

Second question: Is AAE a “legitimate” language or “merely” a dialect of some “legitimate” language (a question of concern to Rep. Peter T. King (R-NY), who quickly introduced a House resolution denying federal funds to “any program that is based upon the premise that AAE is a legitimate language”)?

Behind this question lies the assumption that the technical terms *language* and *dialect* can, in the context of such modifiers as *legitimate* and *merely*, be used to answer the question. But, though the term “language” is used in linguistics, there it stipulatively defines the thing-in-nature that linguists seek to understand: a highly idealized state of the human mind/brain that holds of an individual when we say that she or he has a language — an internal or “I-language,” in the sense of Noam Chomsky. That is, the linguist wants to know what is in the mind (ultimately, in the brain) of a person when we say that she or he knows a language, not what’s out there in the air or on paper — the external (or E-) language that common sense understandably but mistakenly directs our attention to. Thus, the linguist’s term *language* is like the terms *momentum* or *force* in physics, whose stipulated meanings are quite different from those of ordinary language, in the same way that the concepts of science are far removed from folk psychology. For example, linguists take for granted notions that abstract severely away from reality, like “the ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogeneous speech-community,” in the same way that physicists take for granted notions like “frictionless planes” — conditions that do

not and could not hold of nature, though our acceptance of them in science appears to lead us toward a partial explanation of nature.

Our commonsense understanding of the term *language* is quite different, of course; so from this point of view there are languages out there (“E[xternal]-languages”) that we feel confident in naming: American Sign Language, Chinese, French, Haitian Creole, Malayalam, Navajo, Swahili, Yoruba, and so on; and there is a commonsense test for whether a way of speaking or signing is different from or the same as some other way of speaking or signing, a test based on mutual intelligibility: If we can sign or talk to one another, then we have the same language; if we can’t, then we don’t. It’s that simple.

We assume further that there are standard versions of these languages, the pinnacles that each dialect speaker is supposed to aspire to, but that which normally — for reasons of class, or race, or geography — she or he is not able to reach. On this view, dialects are diminished varieties of a standard (“legitimate”) language, a value judgment that has no standing in linguistics. For, on the scientific point of view, all (I-) languages are rule-governed systems of equal complexity and interest — instantiations of the capacity for language that each infant enters the world with.

A second commonsense definition of language, central to this discussion, lies in the quip that a language is a dialect with an army and a navy — or a school system. This definition suggests, correctly, that languages are defined politically not scientifically. For example, Swedish and Norwegian, though mutually intelligible, are counted as different languages (in contradiction with the common-sense test) simply because a political boundary divides Sweden from Norway, while Cantonese, Fujianese, Mandarin, and so on, though not mutually intelligible, are considered to be dialects of Chinese because they are historically related, typologically alike, and located within the national boundary of the People’s Republic of China.

On this definition, then, AAE is clearly a language since — though lacking an army or a navy — it does have one school system, or at least its school board, solidly behind it. Thus, a way of speaking becomes a

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language by declaration — as is usually the case: A way of speaking is a language if you say it is. It is a legitimate language if it has the force of community consensus behind it — a school board resolution, say.

WHY THE OUTRAGE

A third question: Why the outrage over the resolution in the media and among politicians?

In my own view it has to do with the fact that in the United States — as in many parts of the industrialized world — language prejudice remains a “legitimate” prejudice; that is, one can generally say the most appalling things about people’s speech without fear of correction or contradiction. The exercise of this prejudice in the United States is often, but not only, a shield for racism, thus allowing the holders of racist views a freedom no longer readily acceptable in civil society. Let a Fuzzy Zoeller deal with Tiger Woods in an overtly racist manner and he must immediately apologize, drop out of a major golf tournament, and lose his K-Mart endorsements. This is not the case for anyone reviling African Americans in general for their language. This, and its thinly veiled racism, you can continue to get away with as, for example, an examination of many of the more than 3,000 Ebonics Web sites on the Internet quickly reveals.

Couple this freedom to express language prejudice with the fact that the Oakland resolution was promulgated by and in a community of color and the outrage is predictable. For the resolution provides a convenient excuse for politicians and the media to lower themselves once again to an occasion.

It is this language prejudice and its expression rather than the Oakland resolution that ought to be the object of our outrage and our attention. And in part it is toward the eradication of this prejudice that the resolution is directed. For this and for the other sound educational reasons raised in the resolution, the Oakland school board is to be strongly supported.

On June 7, 1997, I participated in a panel discussion at the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ, Region 1) meeting in Boston. The

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panel was formed around a question, so let me pose (and answer) it as the fourth question in this series. However, since answering this fourth question requires nothing of linguistics, but merely the ability to read and analyze the newspapers carefully, I have set it off here in what might be considered a commentary and a guide.

“Ebonics: Did we [the media] do the story justice?”

The short answer: Hardly any.

The details follow, though here I deal only with the print media. Others will have to assess radio and TV, for I have had no time to follow them. However, my impression from talking to those who did and from transcripts sent to me is that there the story was treated with much the same disdain and incompetence. For example, on *Fox News Sunday* (December 22, 1996), Tucker Carlson — asked for his reaction to a gross misrepresentation of the Oakland resolution — responded as follows, with great ignorance and little style:

Well, I think it sounds like something the Klan thought up. I mean, this is — you know, it’s like saying “OK, don’t speak intelligible En-English. You’ll never get a job.” I mean, this is — this is a language where nobody knows how to conjugate the verbs. I mean, it’s ridiculous. . . .

Returning now to the claim that the print media did little justice to the Ebonics story: First of all, it is important to point out that it is often the early coverage that counts. Once the story is gotten wrong, there is little that can be done; for after the wrong story, quickly follow the talk show and op-ed page artists, whose role appears to be to drive spikes into graves. Informed, balanced stories then generally come too far after the fact, and letters of clarification to the editor — always balanced by contrary letters — are not given the credibility lavished on real, live newspapers. Such was the course more or less followed by the print media on the Oakland resolution.

First there was some simple and brief reportage, in the *Boston Globe* of December 20, 1996, for example (A3): “A California city’s schools stand

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behind black English," quickly followed by more culturally correct views, editorial denunciation, and columnal outrage. Thus on December 23, 1996 (also in the *Boston Globe* [B1]) — in a column partly written in AAE, "Ebonics ain't proper answer," the syndicated columnist Patricia Smith opposed the resolution with a version of the argument now widely used against bilingual education:

We learned because we have the capacity to learn, so how can we say that our children don't possess that same capacity? . . . As Black kids, we were introduced to a world we had to enter in order to survive, and then we were offered the tools to get there. What they're saying in Oakland is that those kids are too dumb to learn the way we did, and that's insulting.

She struggled and won, so why make life any easier for the students of today? But not everyone won; in fact, relatively few did. Moreover, it's no longer Smith's imperfectly remembered mythic Golden Age — if there ever was one, for as Benjamin Franklin observed, "The Golden Age never was the present age" (Poor Richard's Almanack] Improved 1750). And in Oakland the fact is that 71 percent of the students in special education are African Americans, who also make up 64 percent of the students held back each year — in a 96 percent people-of-color school system (African American, Asian American, and Latino). Quite obviously, since so many of these students can't be academic failures, it must be that they are not being offered the tools. Thus there should be Smith's "panic in the air. . . . The answer? Ebonics!" Perhaps — if by *Ebonics* is meant the educational measures that the Oakland school board has in mind. For clearly, Oakland needs to do whatever in its wisdom it deems necessary even if it offends the sensibilities of an outraged columnist and her romanticization of the past.

So it goes with the syndicated columns, whose titles often give some of the flavor of the attack: William Raspberry's uninformed characterization of AAE: "no right or wrong expressions, no consistent spellings or pronunciations and no discernible rules" (*Washington Post*, December 26,

1996); Ellen Goodman's "A 'Language' for a Second-Class Life" (*Boston Globe*, December 27, 1996); Mary McGrory accusing the Oakland board of "legitimizing gibberish."

On the *New York Times* editorial page, an enraged Brent Staples makes an early Afrocentrism charge — one of many that will follow ("The 'Trap of Ethnic Identity: How Africa Came to Oakland," Editorial Notebook, January 4, 1997), raising in a later editorial the fear that the resolution will "drive out the middle-class families that keep schools and other city institutions afloat" [with "their mainstream values and ideas"] (Editorial Notebook, January 24, 1997). Obviously, the middle class is the savior of us all. Frank Rich, also in the *New York Times* ("The Ebonic Plague," January 8, 1997) observed, "There isn't a public personage of stature in the land, white or Black, left or right, Democrat or Republican, who doesn't say that the Oakland, Calif., school board was wrong . . ." So don't be bold enough to draw your own conclusions in the face of all this political posturing.

Mike Royko (*Chicago Tribune*, January 8, 1997) carried on as expected: "Some momma, she writes me and ax why I don't write no column in Ebonics. I tell the hoe that be wack because I don't know how to talk Ebonics," as did Shelby Steele ("Indoctrination Isn't Teaching," *New York Times*, January 10, 1997) and Jeff Jacoby ("Ebonics: The Self-Esteem Movement Goes Off the Deep End," *Boston Globe*, January 23, 1997), with Jacoby's confusions between the status of immigrant English and AAE and his unhelpful, invidious comparisons between American Jews and African Americans.

A SAD RECORD

A sad, accusatory record, all in all. There were some exceptions, of course. For example, very early on the *Boston Globe* ran a fairly balanced editorial ("English Lessons in Oakland," December 21, 1996), which, however, was undone by its subsequent barrage of op-ed commentary. And the *New York Times* ran an excellent op-ed piece by Patricia J. Williams ("The Hidden Meanings of 'Black English,'" December 29, 1996). Margo Jefferson, in her [cultural] Critic's Notebook "The 2 Faces of Ebonics: Disguise and

not part of the curriculum. When they acquire official patronage, they're on the way to the museum." Menand seems not to understand that there is nothing "sub" about AAE in Oakland.

The in-depth stories came later, too much later: Rene Sanchez's "Ebonics — Without the Emotion" (*Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, January 13, 1997); Peter Applebome's "Dispute Over Ebonics Reflects a Volatile Mix That Roils Urban Education" (*New York Times*, March 1, 1997, at 10); and others. These are the kind of thoughtful, daunting, densely packed stories that occupy whole pages and that readers set aside to read later only to find that they have disappeared into the recycling bin. They are too late and too much, especially for readers who have heard it all already.

GETTING IT RIGHT

The NABJ panel ended on a fifth question: How to do things better?

My simple advice:

1. Do the story right the first time, for that is often the only time there is. It is not generally the case that a story appears in a fallow news season the way the Ebonics story did, giving the media so many chances to get the story right, or seriously wrong.
2. Talk to people who might know something about the issues, the way you would when dealing with an issue about the economy.
3. Realize that in education, there is very little of importance that is without a history and politics. Ebonics, by other names, has been with us for a very long time. And it is not going to go away any time soon.

There is also advice for persons who get contacted on such matters: Be willing to spend a lot of time with reporters or to make them spend time with you. For example, I talked for an hour with a *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter and offered more time if she needed it. I tried to make sure she got the story right, and she did. Of course, that doesn't necessarily work; I also spent a lot of time with a freelance writer who turned out to be preparing an article for the right libertarian journal *Liberty*. He didn't get it right, but then, he didn't want to.

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"Giveaway" (January 7, 1997), wrote, "It is easy to dismiss the subject [Ebonics] with glib gibes or to enshrine it in sentimental bombast. It's hard work to start making sense of all the contradictions." She then proceeded to take on the hard work of sorting through the contradictions.

Other exceptions to the hard-hitting syndicated columns and editorials came in the form of an occasional story written by someone who bothered to talk to persons (linguists and educators) who might be presumed to know something about the issues; that is by a reporter who approached it the way one might approach an issue about the economy or medicine. E.g., Pamela Burdman's "Ebonics Tests Linguistic Definition; Politics, Tempers Rule, Scholars Say" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, December 26, 1996, A1), and Jeremy Pawloski's "Mass. Legislator Files Bill Barring Ebonics" (*Bay State Banner*, January 9, 1997, at1).

As for the left liberal press — weeklies generally: It has the habit of lapsing in the face of tough cultural issues involving, as this one does, race and class. For example, *The Nation* gave its editorial space on the issue over to A. J. Verdelle ("Classroom Rap," January 2, 1997), the author of *The Good Necessity* — a novel that celebrates the advantages of learning "the King's English." Verdelle's view of the resolution is very little different from Patricia Smith's:

The pedagogical strategy advanced by ebonics adds unnecessary steps to our children's already complicated path toward learning, a path obstructed in most cases by the widespread belief and unrelenting message that African-Americans lack intelligence — a position that ebonics seems, unwittingly, to support. . . . To name African-American misstatement as a kind of pseudo-phonic is to legitimize it, to bronze it. Couldn't we just as accurately call it classroom rap? . . . Quite frankly, the Oakland strategy seems to be pedagogy run amok. (Ebonics: gone nuts, looking foolish.)

And Louis Menand in *The New Yorker's* weekly "Comment" ("Johnny Be Good: Ebonics and the Language of Cultural Separatism," January 13, 1997), concludes that "subcultures flourish when they are just part of life,

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I know that it is not the English language that hurts me, but what the oppressors do with it, how they shape it to become a territory that limits and defines, how they make it a weapon that can shame, humiliate, colonize.

bell hooks
Teaching to Transgress

In the study of language in school, pupils were made to scoff at the Negro dialect as some peculiar possession of the Negro which they should despise, rather than directed to study the background of this language as a broken-down African tongue — in short to understand their own linguistic history. . . .

Carter Godwin Woodson
from *The Mis-Education of the Negro*

What Is Black English? What Is Ebonics?

ERNIE
SMITH

The features of the language of African Americans — U.S. slave descendants of West and Niger-Congo African origin — have been recognized, described, and discussed for decades. While in recent years the appellations *Vernacular Black English*, *Black Vernacular English*, *Black English Vernacular*, and *African American Vernacular English* have gained some popularity, the phrase most prevalently used is *Black English*.

In the 1970s and 1980s, several books appeared on the language of slave descendants of African origin with *Black English* as their title. These include *Black English: Its History and Usage in the United States*, by Joseph Dillard (1972); *Black American English: Its Background and Its Usage in the Schools and in Literature*, edited by Paul Stoller (1975); *Black English: A Seminar*, edited by Deborah Sears Harrison and Tom Trabasso (1976); *Black English: Educational Equity and the Law*, edited by John Chambers Jr. (1983).

Conspicuously, in none of these works is “Black English” defined. By using the word *English*, these works inherently posit that the language of African Americans is “English.” And they also tacitly postulate that, being a variant of English, there is a genetic kinship between the language of African Americans with the Germanic language family to which English belongs. Yet, from a historical linguistic perspective, in terms of the “base” from which the grammatical features of “Black English” derive, nothing could be further from the truth. As a number of scholars have argued since the 1930s, African-American speech is an African Language System — the linguistic continuation of Africa in Black America.

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