

**BLACK ENGLISH AND EDUCATION:
THE OAKLAND SCHOOL BOARD PROPOSAL**

Term Paper
for the Seminar on
Multiculturalism and the Linguistic Situation in the USA and Canada

Professor: Dr. Peter Lucko

Submitted by
Wendy Stollberg

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Summer Semester 2000

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I. THE SITUATION IN INNER-CITY SCHOOL DISTRICTS

A major goal of public education is to increase a child's social mobility and vocational success. In this it has failed with many African American children, especially from inner-city school districts. Many of them never learn Standard English at school and thus are essentially denied the economic, social and vocational success that is the express goal of the public school system.

The following data by the American Dialect Society depicts the situation in the Oakland Unified School District in 1996¹:

- 53% of the total Unified School District's enrollment of 51,706 was African American.
- 71% of the students enrolled in Special Education were African American.
- 64% of students retained were African American.
- 67% of students classified as truant were African American.
- 71% of African American males attend school on a regular basis.
- 19% of the 12th grade African American students did not graduate.
- 80% of all suspended students were African American.

That these facts are representative of many other urban districts in the United States, is proved in a survey by Michael Casserly, Executive Director of the Council of Great City Schools, who presented data before Senator Specter's U.S. Senate Ebonics Panel in January 1997 summarizing the performance of students in 50 large urban public school districts²: He found out that while white students at these schools showed steady improvement in their reading achievement scores as they got older, African American students revealed a steady decline. Casserly furthermore provided data from the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress according to which on a 500-point scale, African American students at the age of nine were an average of 29 points behind the scores of their white counterparts; four years later they were already 31 points behind, and by the age of seventeen 37 points behind.

Such information demonstrating the low level of African American student performance, their high representation in special education, under-representation in advanced placement courses and other depressing facts clearly indicate the massive educational failure among the African American com-

¹ See <http://us.english.uga.edu/~ellenj/synops~1.txt>.

² See Rickford, p. 333.

munity. Such failure is due to a number of reasons – such as socioeconomic and class issues, poor school facilities, problems regarding the availability of books and supplies, the low pay and much more difficult working conditions of teachers at these inner-city schools. But the deciding factors that account for the lack of academic success of African American students are the language that they bring to school and the methods of teaching these students to read Standard American English.

African American children come to school fluent in Black English³, the only way they and everyone else around them has spoken so far. It is, therefore, inevitable that it emerges in the classroom. But the traditional approach of dealing with the vernacular has been to ignore and even condemn it. There have been attempts to eradicate Black English completely and replace it with Standard English. Children's dialect pronunciation has been interpreted as reading errors. Students' dialects have been corrected by the teacher, which has not led to a decrease, but rather to an increase, in vernacular features. Thus, this traditional strategy has not been particularly successful.

Research has shown though that there are some promising approaches. One of them is the Contrastive Analysis Program, a standard dialect instruction that pinpoints the differences between vernacular and standard structures. Hanni Taylor, who teaches at Aurora University, outside Chicago, carried out an experiment with students from inner-city Chicago. These students used a lot of Ebonics features in their Standard American English writing.⁴ She divided the students into two groups: In the first group, she used the conventional techniques of teaching English without making any reference to AAVE. In the other group, she applied contrastive analysis, where she stressed the points on which Ebonics and Standard American English differed. The outcome after a period of eleven weeks was that students from the first group showed an 8.5% increase in their use of Ebonics speech in their writing (although a decrease had been the aim) while the students from the second group had benefited from contrastive analysis by reducing Ebonics features in their writing by 59%.

Butts and Haskins argue that language is an identity label, a reflection and badge of one's culture.⁵ If children are told that they cannot use their nonstandard Black dialect or that their dialect pronunciation is "wrong English"⁶, it means to them that their culture is being criticized. Such criticism, coming

³ The terms Black English, Black Dialect, African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Vernacular Black English, Ebonics (a combination of the two words "ebony" and "phonics"), African Language Systems, and Pan African Communication Behaviors all refer to the informal speech used by many African Americans. (Many linguists prefer the neutral term African American Vernacular English.)

⁴ See Rickford, p. 339.

⁵ See Butts and Haskins, p. 46.

⁶ "Wrong English" probably means "wrong Standard English". When African American children speak AAVE they truly do not speak the standard dialect but a nonstandard one. This nonstandard dialect is systematic and obeys to rules like any other dialect, be it standard or nonstandard.

from an overpowering person such as a teacher, is not likely to enhance a small child's self-esteem. In addition to this, such criticism is unfounded from a child's viewpoint. African American children know very well that they can talk in their dialect and be understood by each other and by everyone else in their primary cultural environment. Their dialect serves an important social solidarity function, and students will therefore not discard their community dialect. Moreover, all that may happen from teachers' exhortations to children to adopt a "better" variety of language is an increase in children's linguistic insecurity. For this reason, the consequences may, therefore, be quite negative for the majority of children. One must not forget that learning to read Standard English besides is especially problematic for African American children because, for them, it feels like learning to read a foreign language. Children are required to read words containing sounds that they are either lacking in their auditory repertoires or that are in conflict with the phonetics of their dialect. So instead of criticizing African American children's pronunciation, better methods of Standard English teaching should be provided.

Teachers often show negative attitudes towards the Black dialect and its speakers. The nonstandard dialect the children speak differs from Standard English and is therefore automatically assumed to be inferior by many. Because AAVE is judged inferior and repeated correction does not result in learning Standard English, African American students are often viewed as being retarded in their cognitive development. Frequently, they are not expected to do well, and many of them are assigned to disabled or special education classes. But when tested for cognitive development, African American children are given tasks which require cognitive skills and development derived from a white middle class experience. Because of these unfair conditions, a lot of them fail, causing many testers and teachers to assume wrongly that these youngsters are inferior or deficient in cognitive development.

Apparently, children learn best if teachers respect children's home language and use it as a bridge in teaching the language of the school and society at large. When children's cultural and social backgrounds are valued, their self-respect and self-confidence are affirmed.

II. THE CONTENT OF THE OAKLAND SCHOOL BOARD PROPOSAL

In *A Linguist Looks at the Ebonics Debate*⁷, Charles J. Fillmore summarizes the pedagogical assumptions behind the Oakland Resolution on Ebonics as follows:

The way some African American children speak when they show up in Oakland's schools is so different from standard English that teachers often can't understand what they are saying.

⁷ See <http://cal.org/ebonics/ebfillmo.htm>.

Such children perform poorly in school and typically fail to acquire the ways of speaking that they'll need in order to succeed in the world outside their neighborhoods. Schools have traditionally treated the speech of these children as simply sloppy and wrong, not as evidencing skills and knowledge the children can build on. The proposed new instructional plan would assist children in learning SE by encouraging them to compare the way they speak with what they need to learn in school, and this cannot be accomplished in a calm and reasoned way unless their teachers treat what they already have, linguistically, as a worthy possession rather than as evidence of carelessness and ignorance. An important step toward introducing this new practice is to help teachers understand the characteristics of their students' speech so they can lead the children to an awareness of the difference.

The purpose of the Oakland (California) School Board Proposal of December 18, 1996, is to recognize the language variety spoken by many African American students and to take it into account in teaching Standard English at school. The Oakland School Board's intention has not been to teach Ebonics as a distinct language but to use it as a tool to increase mastery of Standard English among Ebonics speakers. The Board promotes contrastive analysis, which gives experimental evidence that acquiring the command of the standard language is easier if the differences in the student vernacular and Standard English are made explicit rather than being entirely ignored. What the Board seeks to do is to guarantee academic achievement among all of its students. Consequently, it mandates to support African American students by utilizing more effective instructional methods. The Board wants teachers to understand the structural details of the African American Vernacular English, so that they can draw on students' linguistic proficiency. (For instance, there are many homonyms in the speech system of the children that are different from the set of homonyms in the speech system used by the teacher. If the teacher is not aware of these differences, problems in the teaching of reading will occur, but if he does know about them serious problems are not likely to emerge.⁸) Another goal is to overcome teachers' negative attitudes toward the vernacular.

The intention of the Oakland School Board is apparent in the following excerpts from the Amended Resolution on Ebonics⁹:

...Whereas, the interests of the Oakland Unified School District in providing equal opportunities for all of its students dictate limited English proficient educational programs recognizing the English language acquisition and improvement skills of African American students are as fundamental as is application of bilingual or second language learner principles for others whose primary languages are other than English. Primary languages are the language patterns children bring to school; and...

What this passage boils down to is that the School Board aims to provide every student with the same opportunities. Thus, it places African American students on a par with students for whom English is a second language. The Oakland Unified School Board holds the view that limited English

⁸ See Labov, p. 244.

⁹ See <http://linguist.emich.edu/topics/ebonics/ebonics-res2.html>.

proficient educational programs should be available for both of these groups to support them in acquiring and mastering Standard American English. It, furthermore, asks that the schools acknowledge that AAVE is the „primary language“ of many of the children who enter Oakland schools. What this means is that AAVE is their home language, the form of speech children operate in during the first four or five years of their lives, the language they use with their family and friends.

...Whereas, the standardized tests and grade scores of African-American students in reading and language arts skills measuring their application of English skills are substantially below state and national norms and that such deficiencies will be remedied by application of a program featuring African Language Systems principles to move students from the language patterns they bring to school to English proficiency; and...

Here, the poor school performance of African American students is cited. As a solution to high academic failure rates the Oakland Unified School Board promotes a program based on contrastive analysis. The program uses, as an aid, the linguistic system the children bring to school. At the same time, their language background serves as a resource to facilitate the acquisition of Standard American English.

...Whereas, standardized tests and grade scores will be remedied by application of a program that teachers and instructional assistants, who are certified in the methodology of African Language Systems principles used to transition students from the language patterns they bring to school to English. The certified teachers of these students will be provided incentives including, but not limited to salary differentials;...

Teachers should receive an extensive linguistic training on Ebonics features. That way, they would become aware of major systematic differences between vernacular and standard language. It would be easier for them to know the mistakes African American learners of Standard English make, to deal with them and to efficiently teach students Standard English. Teachers with that kind of training would receive a raise in salary and other incentives.

...Be it further resolved that the Superintendent in conjunction with her staff shall immediately devise and implement the best possible academic program for the combined purposes of facilitating the acquisition and mastery of English language skills, while respecting and embracing the legitimacy and richness of the language patterns whether they are known as “Ebonics,” “African Language Systems,” “Pan African Communication Behaviors” or other descriptions...

The Oakland Unified School Board demands a program which makes the acquisition and mastery of Standard English easier for African American students and respects and recognizes their Black dialect as a systematic and rule-governed English variety.

III. PUBLIC DISCUSSION ON THE OAKLAND SCHOOL BOARD PROPOSAL

After the Oakland Unified School Board approved the resolution, a very pervasive and passionate discussion was triggered off. There have been many reactions by the public and the media, most of them overwhelmingly negative. Much of the criticism of Oakland's policy has viewed the students' language as "lazy English," "bastardized English," "poor grammar" and "fractured slang."¹⁰ Many people regarded Oakland's decision to recognize Ebonics and use it to facilitate mastery of Standard English as "ridiculous, ludicrous, very, very stupid" or as a "terrible mistake," and the predominant public response was¹¹, "Stamp out Ebonics, or if you can't do that, ignore it, leave it alone, and hope and pray that it will go away. Bury your head in the sand; cover your ears with mufflers. Hear nothing. Don't let that virus anywhere near the classroom." Among the public, there is the belief that AAVE is without value, that it should be remediated and that vernacular features should be corrected even at home. But this is the traditional approach that has had such limited success.

The discussion reveals that, on the one hand, it seemed hard for many people to accept the notion that attention to vernacular dialect has any place in schools, let alone that students' proficiency in it does, indeed, offer a valuable language learning resource. On the other hand, it becomes clear that most of what was written and said in the media represented a misapprehension of the nature of the problem and the kind of the solution which Oakland was proposing. According to the American Dialect Society these misconceptions include:¹²

- The Oakland Unified School District has decided to teach Ebonics in place of English.

But the Board is not replacing the teaching of Standard American English with any other language. It is not teaching Ebonics. The School Board, though, is aware of the fact that non-standard dialects are stigmatized in the larger society and that Ebonics speakers who have no command of Standard American English are less likely to be successful in school and in their jobs. Therefore, the Board seeks to support Ebonics speaking students in their acquisition of Standard English with the help of special programs.

- The District is trying to classify Ebonics speaking students as Bilingual.

The District likens Ebonics speaking to bilingual students in order to stress that limited English proficient educational programs are helpful and necessary for both of them. Special language pro-

¹⁰ See Rickford, p. 320.

¹¹ See Rickford, p. 337.

¹² See <http://us.english.uga.edu/~ellenj/synops~1.txt>.

grams that have already aided bilingual students in learning Standard English could certainly do the same for African American students.

- The District is only attempting to pilfer federal and state funds.

There was money available for language purposes at schools, such as second language learner programs. The School District is accused of stealing those funds. Although from a linguistic and educational point of view, it does not matter whether AAVE is called a “language” or a “dialect”. What is important rather is that its systematicity is recognized. Any student who either speaks a foreign language or Ebonics as his mother tongue should be helped through these federally and state-funded programs.

- The School District is trying to create a system of perverse incentives that reward failure and lower standards.

The Oakland Unified School District is providing its teachers with the tools to address the diverse languages the children come to the classroom with. As research has shown these methods increase students’ abilities of learning Standard English. Financial and other incentives for teachers are likely to foster this approach.

- Oakland is condoning the use of Slang.

The District is recognizing the legitimacy and richness of the Black dialect. Its objective is to build on African American students’ language skills without devaluing students and their diversity.

- There is no statistical evidence to support this approach or that this approach will improve student achievement.

There is clear evidence from the United States (for example from the contrastive analysis experiment by Hanni Taylor) and also from other countries that speakers of other varieties can be aided in their learning of the standard variety by pedagogical approaches which recognize the legitimacy of the other varieties of a language. From this perspective, the Oakland Unified School Board’s decision to recognize the vernacular of African American students in teaching is reasonable or, as linguists at the annual meeting of the Linguistic Society of America in January 1998 put it, “linguistically and pedagogically sound.”¹³

¹³ See <http://linguist.emich.edu/topics/ebonics/lsa-ebonics.html>.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Many African Americans are denied access to academic achievement, social mobility, and vocational success because schools have failed to provide a suitable education. African American students usually do worse at school than their white counterparts. They are more likely to drop out of school at an early age and to be assigned for special education classes, and they show further deficits in connection with school life. A major drawback is their Black English Dialect, which is not welcomed and recognized at school but treated as pronunciation and grammar mistakes by the children. Moreover, AAVE is associated with learning deficiencies in general.

The schools of Oakland have addressed this twofold failure: the refusal to recognize nonstandard Black English as a legitimate form and the lack of successful methods to teach Black children Standard American English. While the Oakland Unified School Board found it very important that negative attitudes toward the Black vernacular and its speakers by teachers and the public be overcome it furthermore suggested another teaching method – the contrastive analysis. This approach compares features of students' dialects with features of the standard dialect, and thus stands in stark contrast to the methods which have been applied so far and which only had the result that the gap between African American and white students' proficiencies more and more increased. Contrastive analysis has been proved very successful in several experiments.

The Oakland Resolution on Ebonics of December 1996 aimed at providing equal opportunities for all of its students has stirred up a huge public discussion. Unfortunately, most reactions were negative, which, to a large extent, was due to a misapprehension of the basic sociolinguistic issues that the school district was addressing.

So far, the resolution by the Oakland Unified School Board has not been implemented. Experiments no doubt showed that the new approach of taking the vernacular into account and comparing it with the standard language works and actually improves African American students' reading and writing skills. It is a shame that despite the existence of these innovative methods and the obvious failure of traditional approaches the use of the latter continues. Probably, there are just too many misunderstandings and prejudices concerning the Black dialect that prevent Oakland's resolution from coming into force.

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