

Ebonics and All That Jazz: Cutting Through the Politics of Linguistics, Education, and Race

by

MICHELE FOSTER



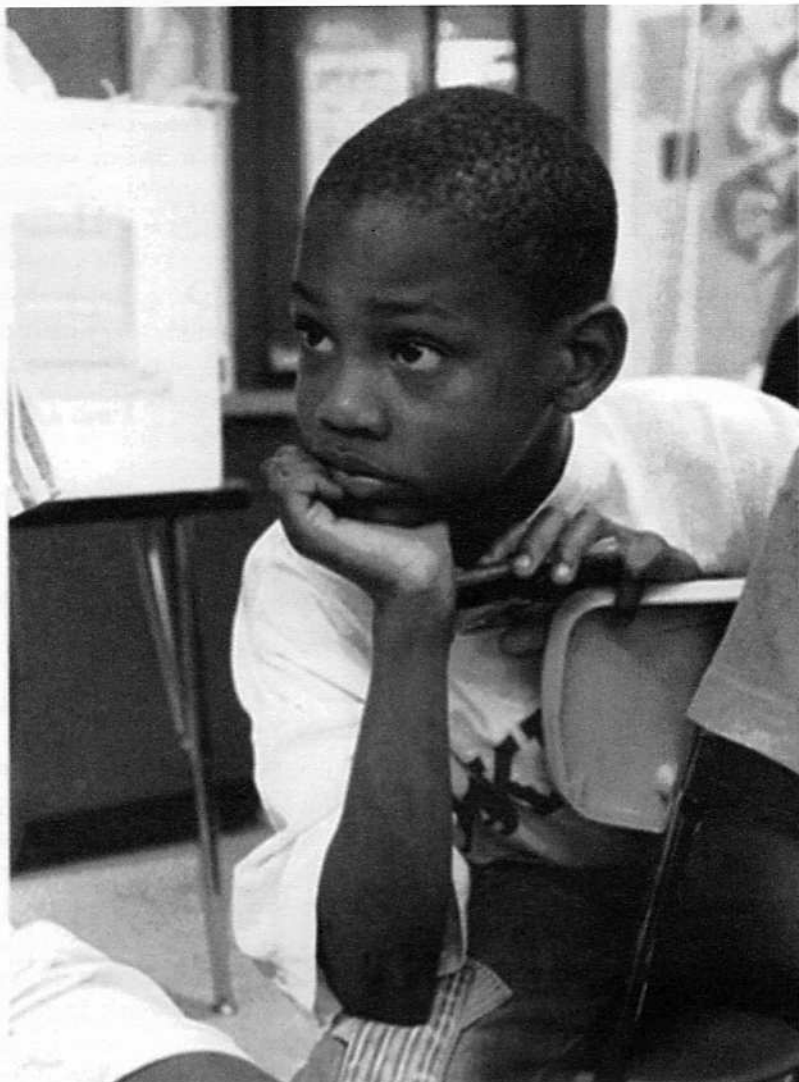
Minutes after the Oakland School Board passed its resolution acknowledging Ebonics as the primary language of the majority of its African American students and vowing to take it into account in instruction, a media frenzy began. As the days and weeks passed, it became clear that everyone, informed or not, had a point of view about the Oakland School Board's decision. Politicians, economists, ministers, and writers offered their opinions. And as some have commented, although everyone has a right to an opinion, not everyone's opinion is right. Reading the articles, editorials, op-ed pieces, and letters to the editor in newspapers and magazines, and listening to the remarks and often vitriolic commentaries on various radio programs, I concluded that most pundits had already decided what they believed; they were saying, "Don't confuse me with the facts, I've already made up my mind." And they wouldn't change their minds even if they were presented with the linguistic facts, because the controversy over Ebonics is about more than language; it is about politics.

In this article I'll begin by reviewing the linguistic history of Ebonics, pointing out the valuable yet often misunderstood resources of this language variety. Next I'll discuss several successful instructional approaches for promoting facility with standard American English while honoring the rich language tradition of Ebonics, and I'll conclude with a reflection on the complex politics surrounding this issue.

Linguistically Speaking...

A number of little-known linguistic facts are pertinent to the school board action. Ebonics, more commonly known in the research literature as Black English or African American English, isn't, as Jacob Heilbrunn claimed in an article in *The New Republic* (January 20, 1997), something cooked up by a group of Afrocentric academics. In fact, observers of 18th and 19th century American life noted the existence of Black English. And frequently, as in the contemporary case, racist cartoons often portrayed Blacks speaking African American English in order to depict them as unlettered and ignorant.

Today most linguists accept the idea that African American English, as well as other African New World varieties such as those spoken in Jamaica, Barbados, and Haiti, originated during the period of European colonial expansion, first developing as a pidgin and later as a creole language. A pidgin is a speech system developed to facilitate communication between two groups that do not share a common language. A pidgin does not have native speakers; rather it is learned as a second language for specific purposes. When a second generation learns a pidgin as a native language, it becomes a creole. For many years white dialectologists refused to acknowledge the African influences on African American English, arguing instead that African American English was merely a poor imitation of the language spoken by British



"dialects." However, the linguistic distinction between a language and a dialect isn't that neat. Mandarin and Cantonese are not mutually intelligible, but they are called dialects of Chinese. On the other hand, Norwegian and Swedish, although mutually intelligible, are called languages. The truth is that the designations applied to different varieties are a matter of social practice that often have more to do with power and politics than with any inherent characteristics of the varieties themselves. The linguist Max Weinrich commented that a language is a dialect backed by an army and a navy. For this reason, I prefer the term "variety" because it is more neutral, less politically charged, and less value laden.

Linguists have conducted research on African American English for over 30 years. They have documented the fact that like other varieties of English, African American English is rule governed and systematic. Children learn these patterns from their parents in the context of the community in which they are born. African American English is the primary variety of working class African Americans, but it is also spoken by many middle class African Americans who are

white colonists from East Anglia. However, in 1949 when Lorenzo Dow Turner published his study *Africanisms in Gullah Dialect* (a variety spoken in the Sea Islands, off the coast of Charleston) and documented the fact that there were 6000 Africanisms in the language, it became difficult to maintain that there was no African influence on the language spoken by Blacks in the United States. As with the case of the origin of African American English, most linguists also acknowledge that there is a continuum of Black English varieties that run from Krio of Sierra Leone, to Gullah, to the present African American English.

I use the term "varieties" because the terms "dialect" and "language" are imprecise and politically laden. Laypeople usually make distinctions between a dialect and a language, the former usually being understood as inferior to a language. Laypeople, moreover, often call two varieties that are mutually intelligible

bidialectal. A social dialect, a variety spoken by a particular social or ethnic group, African American English traveled northward and westward as Blacks migrated to regions of the country outside of the south and, consequently, may vary according to region. As with any dialect, African American English has unique grammatical characteristics and unique pronunciations. Thus, when African American students pronounce the initial /th/ in *then* as *den*, or the final /th/ in *with* as *wif*; when an African American student asks, "Can I *axe* a question"; or when an African American student says, "My sister *be* working" to indicate that her sister works every day, or "She *mad*" to denote that someone is mad at the moment but is not usually mad, they are all adhering to the pronunciation and grammatical rules of African American English. So when Walter Williams, a conservative African Ameri-

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can economist, writes, "Today I be writing this article" to parody African American English in a Boston Globe op-ed piece, he is breaking the rules of the variety he sought to ridicule.

But many laypeople don't realize that in addition to the unique grammar and pronunciations most often associated with African American English, this variety also has particular prosodic and rhetorical features. Prosody includes variation in pitch, intonation, pace, volume, stress, and vowel length. Rhetorical strategies are the devices speakers use to structure discourse or talk; these include repetition, alliteration, metaphor, and other creative uses of language. In fact, the prosodic and rhetorical features of African American English can be heard in the speech of educated African Americans like Martin Luther King, Jr., Johnnetta Cole, Cornel West, Eleanor Holmes Norton, Maya Angelou and Jesse Jackson. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech has the cadence, rhythms, metaphors, and analogies that characterize the rhetorical styles of many African Americans. King's expanded metaphor of the bank of justice being bankrupt and having insufficient funds to honor African American's demands for freedom and justice is one example. He also uses repetition with variation in several places in his speech, finally rising to a crescendo at the end when he proclaims:

So let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania. Let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado. Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California. But not only that. Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia...

And when Jesse Jackson intones, "It's not your aptitude, but your attitude that determines your altitude," he is employing repetition, alliteration, rhythm, and rhyme — several of the elements characteristic of a Black discourse style. Finally, although the media rarely mentions the fact, African American English has made major contributions to the lexicon of American English with words — *jazz, yam, tote* and *funky* — as well as expressions — *bad-mouth, jam session, and have a ball* — that have all enriched American English.

Regardless of what some may think about African American English, it is not substandard or deficient, nor does it in and of itself interfere with students' cognitive abilities, as some extremists have claimed.

Old Wine in New Bottles?:

Instructional Approaches & Possibilities

The Oakland School Board's decision to help teachers learn about the structure of African American English in order to teach students better is not a radical proposal. In fact, their proposal is similar to the 1979 decision issued by a federal judge in *The Black English Case, Martin Luther King vs. Ann Arbor School District*. Judge Joiner ordered the school district to take Black English into account when teaching African American students the language of the school, commerce, and the marketplace.

Several school districts already use contrastive analysis to help students learn to translate their home speech into school speech. Using a contrastive analysis approach a teacher might query, "Where I'm at? African American English or Standard English?" and the student would respond, "African American English" and provide the Standard English equivalent "Where am I?" Such an approach is currently being used in several California School Districts and in elementary schools in DeKalb County, Georgia. Taught to intermediate grade students, Dekalb's "Bidialectal Communication Program" has been in operation for a decade. The National Council for Teachers of English has designated the Dekalb program a center of excellence and last year the students enrolled in it made gains on standardized tests of verbal achievement. An instructor who teaches a broadcast-speech class at Columbia College in Chicago has also used the contrastive analysis approach with her classes that include a number of African American students. Using contrastive analysis will not harm students; at the very least it will increase their metalinguistic awareness. However, there are other approaches that may be even more instructionally powerful.

When I lived in North Carolina, I visited an elementary school whose principal and faculty had adopted an approach similar to that used by the instructor at Columbia College. Each week the fourth and fifth grade classes produced, wrote, and staged a news program that was broadcast to the entire school and taped for future analysis. The idea behind this curricular program was to provide students with an authentic

social and speech context in which to use more mainstream forms of English. Before producing their news program, the students watched and analyzed newscasts and discussed the variety of language used by the news anchors; students visited local television stations to learn what was entailed in producing a news show, and several local news anchors visited the classrooms to talk with students.

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When I taught African American English speaking students developmental writing and English composition, I explicitly pointed out the differences between the grammars of African American English and Standard American Written English. We reviewed and practiced finding these grammatical differences until students could detect them and transform them on their own. But I also combined the dynamic, creative and artistic aspects of African American English evident in African American preaching styles, in the verbal art of African American males and adolescents, and in the stories and playsongs of African American children with more static and structured grammar instruction. These two aspects of language were blended into a satisfactory *mélange* of pedagogical techniques that I now employ and constantly reshape in my classrooms.

When I began teaching in all-black urban classrooms, I instinctively drew upon the rich verbal traditions of the African American community. For instance, my recognition of the salience of public performance and the rich oral tradition of the African American community inspired me to include multiple opportunities for students to read their work out loud and to hear their own work, as well as that of others, read aloud. Moreover, I also insisted that whoever was reading do so with “expression.” Over the years, I have found that reading in this way has helped students extract more meaning from the text because the prosodic features of stress, pitch, and intonation provide cues beyond those available from the text alone. Out loud readings introduce students at all levels to unfamiliar

vocabulary, unusual sentence constructions, new discourse features, and different patterns of organization. Reading aloud helps students hear sentences that are unclear, tangled and just plain don’t make sense. Reading aloud helps students whose first variety is African American English to hear where the syntax needs to be transformed in order to conform to the conventions of standard American written English. I have also tried to show African American students at all levels of schooling how various sentence elements can be manipulated to mimic the prosodic features in their speech, something I worked hard to teach myself when I was a graduate student trying to find my voice and a distinctive writing style.

Most of these approaches focus on the word- or sentence-level characteristics of a particular variety. But additionally, instructional strategies need to be developed which turn students’ attention to the dynamic and creative aspects of language use in African American communities, nurturing the rhetorical and discourse features — evident in the oratorical styles of King and Jackson — that I believe show the greatest promise of promoting the highest levels of literacy among African American youth.

The Politics of Ebonics

The controversy surrounding Ebonics is as much about the politics of education, the politics of race, and their intersection as it is about linguistics. A recent editorial in *The Wall Street Journal* (January 1997) assailed the Oakland School Board decision, calling it just another academic fad like whole language and constructivist mathematics. And the Georgia Legislature and California Assembly recently introduced legislation to ban using African American English in school districts.

But in my view, the reason that African American English has drawn such fire is not because it is inferior, but because it is spoken by Black people. The Linguistic Society of America has adopted a resolution and numerous books have been published that unequivocally demonstrate that African American English is not slang, nor is it broken English, nor is it inferior to standard English, but a variety with its own history, rules of grammar, discourse practices and rich oral literature that is worthy of respect. Nonetheless, many people still refuse to accept this, because this would mean accepting the humanity and integrity of a people that America has denied from its

inception. Racist diehards have seized upon the Oakland decision as just another opportunity to disparage and deride African Americans, this time under the cloak of linguistics. Thus, while I believe it is important for African American students to become proficient in Standard English, I am not naive enough to believe that this will end discrimination, prejudice, and injustice.

In a provocative essay published almost thirty years ago, James Baldwin wrote:

The brutal truth is that the bulk of white people in America never had any interest in educating black people, except as this could serve white purposes. It is not the black child's language that is in question, it is not his language that is despised: it is his experience. A child cannot be taught by anyone who despises him, and a child cannot afford to be fooled. A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiate his experience, and all that gives sustenance, and enter a limbo in which he will no longer be black and in which he knows that he can never become white. Black people have lost too many black children that way.

Still applicable today, these words sum up the underlying intent of the Oakland School Board's decision. Against great odds and extreme bigotry, the Oakland School Board is trying to advance a different and more positive view about African American pupils, a view that honors their intelligence, linguistic abilities, and cultural integrity. For this they are to be commended.

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Michele Foster is a Professor in the Center for Educational Studies at the Claremont Graduate School. She is the author of Black Teachers on Teaching, recently published by The New Press.