

Are nonstandard dialects deficient?

Language Myths and Realities

July 16, 2007

The Oakland resolution

- RESOLUTION OF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION ADOPTING THE REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN TASK FORCE; A POLICY STATEMENT AND DIRECTING THE SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS TO DEVISE A PROGRAM TO IMPROVE THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND APPLICATION SKILLS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS. (No. 597-0063)

The Oakland resolution

- Whereas, numerous validated scholarly studies demonstrate that African American students as part of their culture and history as African people possess and utilize a language described in various scholarly approaches as “Ebonics” (literally Black sounds) or Pan African Communication Behaviors or African Language Systems; and

The Oakland resolution

- Whereas, these studies have also demonstrated that African Language Systems are genetically-based and not a dialect of English; and

The Oakland resolution

- 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 worthy 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; and

The Oakland resolution

- [...] Whereas, the **Federal Bilingual Education Act** (20 USC 1402 et seq.) mandates that local educational agencies “build their capacities to establish, implement and sustain programs of instruction for children and youth of limited English proficiency,” and

The Oakland resolution

- 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 education principles for others whose primary languages are other than English; and

The Oakland resolution

- Whereas, standardized tests and grade scores will be remedied by application of a program with teachers and aides who are certified in the methodology of featuring African Language Systems principles in instructing African American children both in their primary language and in English. The certified teachers of these students will be provided incentives including, but not limited to salary differentials,

The Oakland resolution

- Whereas, the standardized tests and grade scores of African American students in reading and language art 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 in instructing African American children both in their primary language and in English, and

The Oakland resolution

- [...] Be it further resolved that the Superintendent in conjunction with her staff shall immediately devise and implement the best possible academic program for imparting instruction to African American students in their primary language for the combined purposes of maintaining the legitimacy and richness of such language whether it is known as “Ebonics,” “African Language Systems,” “Pan African Communication Behaviors” or other description, and to facilitate their acquisition and mastery of English language skills; and

Reactions

- *New York Times* editorial:
 - “The school board in Oakland, Calif., blundered badly last week when it **declared that black slang is a distinct language** that warrants a place of respect in the classroom. The new policy ... will actually African-American children – while validating habits of speech that bar them from the cultural mainstream and decent jobs.”

Reactions

- Jacob Heilbrunn in *The New Republic*
 - The characterization of Black English as a legitimate language is “professional crackpotism” of academic “Ebonologists” such as William Labov, John Rickford, and Walt Wolfram
 - The new instructional programs will not provide a sounder instruction to the standard language, but are “little more than a means to allow black youngsters to pass through the school system without ever mastering the basics of grammar, spelling and punctuation.”

Reactions

- William Raspberry in *The Washington Post*:
 - “That's the beautiful part,” the cabbie said.
“Ebonics gives you a whole range of options. You can say ‘she wish’ or ‘they goes,’ and it’s all perfectly fine. But you can also say ‘they go,’ and that’s all right, too. I don't think you can say ‘I does.’ I’ll have to check on that, but my brotherin-law tells me you can say pretty much what you please, as long as you're careful to throw in a lot of ‘bes’ and leave off final consonants.”

Reactions

- William Raspberry in *The Washington Post*:
 - As a onetime proof-reader, I couldn't believe my ears. "They'll have teachers learn a language that has no right or wrong expressions, no consistent spellings or pronunciations and no discernable rules? How will that help the children learn proper English? What, precisely, is the point?"

Reactions

- William Raspberry in *The Washington Post*:
 - “Did you know that the federal government spends serious bucks for bilingual programs, including the training of bilingual teachers?” the cabbie said. “And don't you see, now that Ebonics is an official language in Oakland, that we'll finally have a language program the white folks won't be able to test and poke and certify? I mean if this thing catches on, a lot of us could pick up some nice extra cash teaching Ebonics in our spare time.”

Reactions

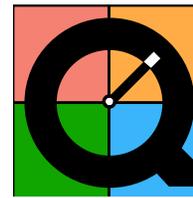
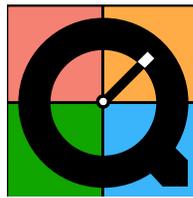
- But what do they really think?
 - “this appalling English dialect”
 - “a mutant language”
 - “gutter slang”
 - “the patois of America’s meanest streets”
 - “the dialect of the pimp, the idiom of the gang-banger and the street thug, the jargon of the public school dropout, a form of pidgin English indicative of African-American failures”

Reactions

- Why such strong reactions to a claim about linguistic variation?
- Four crucial factors:
 - The nature of language standards and variation
 - The linguistic facts of “Ebonics”
 - The social context
 - The educational issues at stake
- The Ebonics debate provides a particular case study of these issues, but they are much more general, and arise throughout the world.

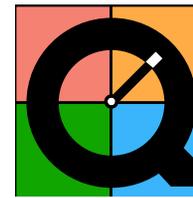
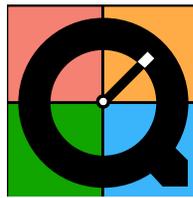
Language variation

- Variation occurs at all levels of grammar:
 - Phonology: **Speaker A** vs. **Speaker B**



Language variation

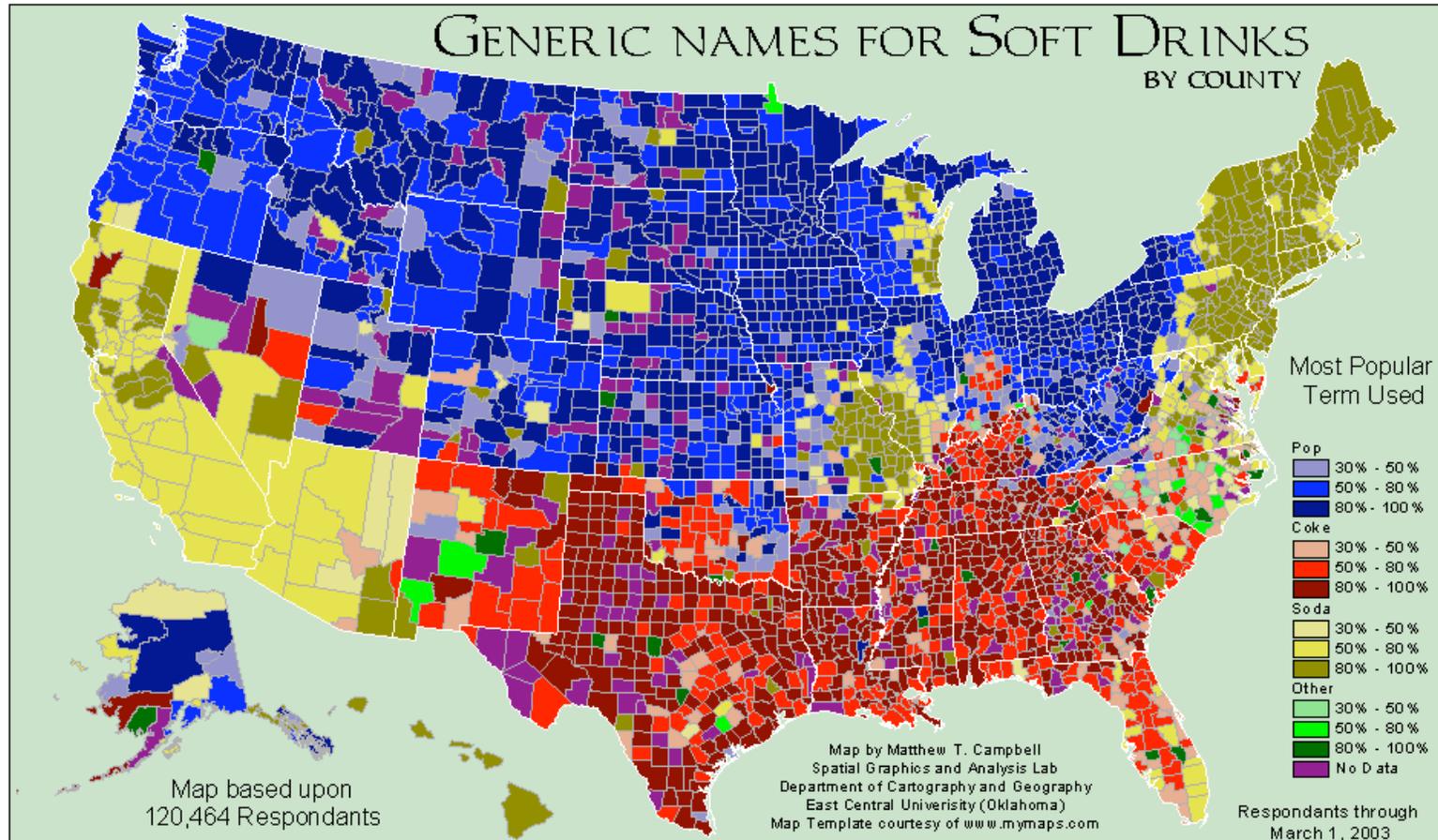
- Variation occurs at all levels of grammar:
 - Phonology: Chicago, IL vs. Concord, NH



Language variation

- Variation occurs at all levels of grammar:
 - Phonology: Chicago, IL vs. Concord, NH
 - Lexicon: carbonated sugar water

Language variation



Language variation

- Variation occurs at all levels of grammar:
 - Phonology: Chicago, IL vs. Concord, NH
 - Lexicon: soda – pop – coke

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- Variation occurs at all levels of grammar:
 - Phonology: Chicago, IL vs. Concord, NH
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 - Syntax: The car needs to be washed.

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Language variation

- Variation occurs at all levels of grammar:
 - Phonology: /ɪDn't/ v. /ɪzn't/ – /kə/ v. /kɑr/
 - Lexicon: urine – pee – piss
 - Syntax: the person to whom I spoke to
- Language varies both across speakers and within individuals.

Sociolinguistic variables

- Linguistic features which show variation based on geography, social class, gender, context, etc.
 - Some are stigmatized and some are not (British vs. American ‘r-lessness’)
 - The ones that are stigmatized tend to shift under linguistic insecurity
 - The ones that are not tend not to (coupon v. cyoopen)

Standard language

- A “standard language” is an abstraction: a compilation of norms and rules which constitute the ideal way that a language should be spoken according to some authority.
 - Written language typically closest to the standard
 - Likewise for prestigious dialects

Standard language

- Often based on a particular local dialect, typically for historical/political reasons:
 - Tokyo Japanese
 - Florentine Italian
- But can even be based on no one's (native) dialect!
 - Classical Arabic (the language of the Qur'an)

Modern Standard Arabic



Standard American English

- Conforms to the language of educated, white, Midwestern or western (and some eastern), (upper)-middle-class Americans
- Abstracts away from stigmatized features
- Does not describe an actual dialect; is an abstraction itself
- Used in/aimed at the media

Dialects and languages

- But if Standard English is an abstraction, what is it that we each speak when we speak 'English' in America?
 - Different dialects of the same language?
 - Different but related (or not) languages?

Dialects and languages

- What's the difference? Typically it has more to do with politics and culture than with particular linguistic features of the systems:
 - 'Languages'
Serbian+Croatian, Hindi+Urdu,
Swedish+Norwegian
 - 'Dialects'
Mandarin+Cantonese, Yiddish+German,
Sicilian+Italian

Dialects and languages

- In fact, even linguists aren't completely settled on the distinction, though we've learned to live with it, relying primarily on the notion of **mutual intelligibility**, though even this is inherently vague:
 - “Deciding whether BBC newsreaders and Lynchburg, VA radio evangelists speak **different dialects of the same language or different languages in the same language family** is on the level of deciding whether **Greenland is a small continent or a large island.**”
(Charles Fillmore, UC Berkeley linguist)

Back to Oakland

- By the ‘mutual intelligibility’ criterion, the linguistic system referred to as ‘Ebonics’ etc. would seem to be a dialect of English:
 - African-American Vernacular English (AAVE).
- However, characterizations such as ‘black slang’, ‘gutter slang’, ‘the patios of American’s meanest streets’, etc., not to mention ‘a language that has no right or wrong expressions, no consistent spellings or pronunciations and no discernable rules’ show that for many people, what’s at issue here is whether AAVE is even a language in the first place.

The LSA Resolution

- The distinction between “languages” and “dialects” is usually made more on social and political grounds than on purely linguistic ones. For example, different varieties of Chinese are popularly regarded as “dialects,” though their speakers cannot understand each other, but speakers of Swedish and Norwegian, which are regarded as separate “languages,” generally understand each other. What is important from a linguistic and educational point of view is not whether AAVE is called a “language” or a “dialect” but rather that its systematicity be recognized.
(Resolution of the Linguistic Society of America, Jan 1997)

Nomenclature

- There are numerous ways of referring to AAVE:
 - Black English Vernacular
 - Pan African Communication Structure
 - Ebonics (an unfortunate blend of ‘ebony’ and ‘phonics’)
- It is estimated that 80-90% of African Americans use it sometimes, but race is obviously (or perhaps not) not a fully deterministic factor for speaking it: it is a function of speech community.

History

- 150 years ago, white and black speech was very similar, particularly in the south where the majority of blacks lived
- Two migrations from south to northern cities:
 - 1910-1930 (failed cotton crops): 1 million
 - 1940s-1970s (war/postwar): 6 million
- Blacks and whites more isolated from each other in north than in south
- Speech patterns develop separately for 50 years

Linguistic structure

- Is AAVE a dialect (and therefore a language), or just a loose collection of slang?
- To provide a positive answer, we would need to show that it has the same kinds of systematicity as other languages.
 - Syntax: null copula, negative concord, BE
 - Phonology: cluster simplification, IZ-infixation

Null copula

- Perhaps one reason this seems unsystematic to many people is because it's variable:
 - Your mother **is** a Phil D. Basket.
 - Your mama's a weigght lifter.
 - Your mother **∅** a ass, period.
 - Because he **∅** old, he's old, that's why!
- (‘sounding’ data collected by William Labov)

Null copula

- But that's also true of SAE contraction.
- What's more, the environments in which AAVE **forbids** \emptyset -copula are the same in which SAE forbids contraction:
 - Nonfinite contexts:
 - You got to be good, Rednall!
 - *You got to \emptyset good, Rednall!
 - *You've got to'b/e good, Rednall!

(All data from Emily Bender's (2005) Stanford PhD thesis)

Null copula

- But that's also true of SAE contraction.
- What's more, the environments in which AAVE **forbids** \emptyset -copula are the same in which SAE forbids contraction:
 - Imperatives:
 - Be cool, brothers!
 - * \emptyset nice to your mother!

Null copula

- But that's also true of SAE contraction.
- What's more, the environments in which AAVE **forbids** \emptyset -copula are the same in which SAE forbids contraction:
 - Ellipsis:
 - (You ain't the best sounder, Eddie!) I ain't! He is!
 - *They said he wild, and he \emptyset .
 - *They said he's wild, and he's.

Null copula

- But that's also true of SAE contraction.
- What's more, the environments in which AAVE **forbids** \emptyset -copula are the same in which SAE forbids contraction:
 - Inversion:
 - It ain't a flower show, is it?
 - *It ain't a flower show, \emptyset it?
 - *It isn't a flower show, it's?
- Whether the phenomena are the same or not is irrelevant; the main issue is systematicity.

Negative concord

- AAVE uses ‘double negatives’ to express negation:
 - Ain’t nobody called.
- But so do Italian, Greek, Russian, ...
 - Non ha telefonata nessuno.
- This is nevertheless an important difference between AAVE and SAE:
 - *Nobody called* \neq *Nobody didn’t call.*

BE

- Another difference concerns the use of uninflected BE, which William Raspberry disparages here:
 - “my brother-in-law tells me you can say pretty much what you please, as long as you’re careful to throw in a lot of ‘bes’ and leave off final consonants.’

BE

- In fact, BE is a *habitual aspect marker*:
 - They usually be tired when they come home.
*They be tired right now.
 - When we play basketball, she be on my team.
*The girl in the picture be my sister.
 - *James be coming to school right now.
James always be coming to school.
 - Wanda be going to school every day.
*Wanda be in school today.

(Data collected by Walt Wolfram; acceptability judgments of 6th graders)

Cluster simplification

- A common process in many languages:
 - Japanese: ‘strike’ > suturaiku
- Totally systematic in AAVE: requires identity of ‘voicing’ in adjacent consonants:
 - ‘test’ > tes
 - ‘hand’ > han
 - * ‘pant’ > pan

IZ-infixation

- “...The surgeon is Dr. Dr[IZ]e (*Dre*) / so I[IZ]ay (*lay*) and pl[IZ]ay (*play*) / with DO double G[IZ]ee (*G*) / the fly human being...” (Snoop Doggy Dog, *Tha Shiznit*, 1993)
- “...WV[ILZ]e (*we*) [ILZ]are (*are*) pl[IZ]aying (*playing*) d[IZ]ouble (*double*) d[IZ]utch (*dutch*)...” (Frankie Smith, *Double Dutch Bus*, 1981)

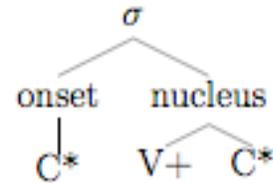
IZ-infixation

- Frankie Smith (in *Slang Thang*): “...Now take the first letter of every word. Put an [IZ] behind it... Then say the rest like it was ‘posed to be hears... Then you almost got it... Now any word that starts with AEIOU, put an [IZ] before it...”
- In fact, it’s more complicated – and more systematic – than that.

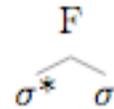
IZ-infixation

- Some basic prosodic units:

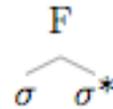
- Syllable structure:



- Trochaic foot:



- Iambic foot:



IZ-infixation

- Based on a corpus of 165 infixated words from rap and hip hop music, online content, print and spontaneous speech, Joshua Viau (Northwestern; collaboration with Alan Yu at Chicago) has deduced the following patterns.

IZ-infixation

- Infixation of monosyllables occurs between onset and nucleus:

– at	[IZ]at
coast	c[IZ]oast
dream	dr[IZ]eam
straw	str[IZ]aw

IZ-infixation

- Bisyllables: [IZ] aligns with stressed vowel:
 - bottle b[IZN]ottle
 - dollars d[IZ]ollars
 - Google G[IZ]oogle
 - soldiers s[IZ]oldiers
 - ahead ah[IZ]ead
 - behave beh[IZ]ave
 - effect eff[IZ]ect
 - surprise surpr[IZ]ize

IZ-infixation

- Stress preserved with trochees; shifts with iambs:

– bottle	b[IZ.'N]ottle
dollars	d[l.'Z]ollars
Google	G[l.'Z]oogle
soldiers	s[l.'Z]oldiers
– ahead	a.'h[IZ]ead
behave	be.'h[IZ]ave
effect	e.'ff[IZ]ect
surprise	sur.'pr[l.Z]ise

IZ-infixation

- As it turns out, the phonological analysis of this phenomenon is pretty complex (it's a case of 'counter-feeding opacity').
- What's relevant to us is that (like many language games) it is based in core phonological regularities of the source language, and reflects another aspect of the systematicity of AAVE.

The LSA Resolution

- The variety known as “Ebonics,” “African American Vernacular English” (AAVE), and “Vernacular Black English” and by other names is systematic and rule-governed like all natural speech varieties. In fact, all human linguistic systems – spoken, signed, and written – are fundamentally regular. The systematic and expressive nature of the grammar and pronunciation patterns of the African American vernacular has been established by numerous scientific studies over the past thirty years. Characterizations of Ebonics as “slang,” “mutant,” “lazy,” “defective,” “ungrammatical,” or “broken English” are incorrect and demeaning. (Resolution of the Linguistic Society of America, January 1997)

Social issues

- AAVE is highly stigmatized; low ‘overt’ prestige
- SAE has high overt prestige, and facility with it is typically a prerequisite for success in American society
- However, AAVE can have high ‘covert’ prestige, especially among bidialectal speakers: a form of identity, solidarity, etc.

Oprah

- Won't condemn AAVE (defends it to callers) but denigrates its use
- Knows learning SAE is crucial, but has attachment to native dialect
 - Hay et al. (1999): analyzed 229 tokens involving [ay] (SAE) vs. [a:] (AAVE)
 - Oprah is significantly more likely to use [a:] when referring to a person or topic identifiably associated with African Americans

Educational issues

- The linguistic reality of AAVE and the social reality are quite different; what about the educational reality?
- 1974 Federal Law: The Equal Opportunities Act requires each school district to “take appropriate action to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by its students in its instruction programs”.
- Is this what the Oakland resolution was aiming for? Or was the goal to milk the federal gov’t for second-language instruction money?

Oakland again

- Whereas, numerous validated scholarly studies demonstrate that African American students as part of their culture and history as African people possess and utilize a language described in various scholarly approaches as “Ebonics” (literally Black sounds) or Pan African Communication Behaviors or African Language Systems; and
- Whereas, these 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 worthy 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; and

Negatives

- Claims that AAVE is an African language, which is:
 - Probably incorrect (most likely a creole)
 - Irrelevant
- Use of phrase ‘genetically based’
 - Probably meant ‘historically derived from African languages’, but this created a big uproar for obvious reasons
- Revised resolution eliminated the latter problem, but mostly retained the former

Positives

- Recognizes systematicity of AAVE and differences from SAE both as a language issue and as an educational one.
- Central claim is that acknowledging and working with a bidialectal situation in the classroom rather than ignoring or suppressing it will aid in learning SAE (and all that goes with it – scores, etc.).

The LSA Resolution

- ...[S]peakers 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 School Board's decision to recognize the vernacular of African American students in teaching them Standard English is linguistically and pedagogically sound. (Resolution of the Linguistic Society of America, Chicago 1997)

Reaction papers

- Assess the claim that it is pedagogically advantageous to make use of a non-standard dialect in the instruction of the standard form. What are potential advantages of this approach and potential pitfalls? Justify your position with explicit references to the readings or the lecture.