

# Language that dare not speak its name

**Proposals by a school board in California to recognize the dialect used by most of its pupils unleashed a ferocious media attack. Why did the press get things so wrong, and why were the proposals so virulently ridiculed?**

Geoffrey K. Pullum

Every columnist in the English-speaking press seems to have had a say about last December's resolution by the governing board of the Oakland Unified School District in California. The board's proposal was to recognize the native tongue of most of its pupils as a language, which triggered an astonishingly ferocious media attack. But little was heard in the press of the factual matters about language and learning that underlie the controversy.

The *New York Times*<sup>1</sup> (echoed by the *Economist*<sup>2</sup>) reported that the board "declared that black slang is a distinct language". The board did nothing of the kind. Slang, in any language, consists of a finite list of words or idiomatic phrases, highly vivid and informal, in the most casual stratum of its lexicon. The resolution neither stated nor implied an interest in the ephemera of street slang. It was about a perfectly ordinary variety of English spoken by a large and diverse population of Americans of African descent, by no means all of whom are slang-users.

The board mentioned several names for this language, one of which came to dominate the headlines: "Ebonics", introduced in 1975 by the African-American scholar Robert L. Williams<sup>3</sup>. This term's blend of 'ebony' and 'phonics' suggests confusion: phonics is a literacy teaching method, not a language, and racial characteristics such as ebony skin do not correlate with linguistic boundaries<sup>4</sup>. The misbegotten name was a public-relations disaster, lending itself to endless puns and perversions — such as rhetorical questions about whether Jewish speakers of English would declare a new language called "Hebonics".

Much ink was wasted on the question of whether the speech of African-Americans should be classified as a language separate from English. Defining a language is not a trivial problem, especially as political considerations are often involved. For example, what was once a single language called Serbo-Croat is being split into three separate languages (Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian) to serve political constituencies. And although one standard source recognizes more than 15 separate Romance languages in Italy, another recognizes just three.

But essentially all linguists agree that what the Oakland board was dealing with is a dialect of English. I will refer to it as African-American English (AAE) — though of course it is not spoken by all African-Americans; many speak only standard English.

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**Linguistic ghetto: to dismiss African-American English as 'bad' English reflects a lack of understanding of the nature of language.**

The general public seems unaware that AAE is regular, stable and governed by rules of grammar and pronunciation that are as consistent as those of any other spoken language. It differs strikingly from the standard dialect, but there is no more reason for calling it bad standard English than there is for dismissing western dialects of English as bad eastern speech, or the reverse.

Yet AAE is constantly described as if it were English with mistakes and omissions. For example, it is alleged that the copula (*am, are, is,* and so on) is 'omitted' in AAE — carelessly left out, critics seem to imply — or incorrectly used in the uninflected form *be*. This is a jumble of falsehoods. The rules regarding the AAE copula are quite detailed and specific. If it bears stress, as it always does at the end of a phrase, it must be pronounced. So it is obligatory in *Couldn't nobody say what colour he is*, meaning 'Nobody could say what colour he is' (examples in this paragraph are from the utterances of Larry, a speaker studied by William Labov<sup>5</sup>). If the copula is negated, it cannot be omitted; it is pronounced *ain't*, as in *You ain't goin' to no heaven* ('You aren't going to any heaven'). There is a special habitual aspect that standard English lacks, and for this *be* is used and must never be omitted: *they be sayin'* means 'they habitually say'. The copula is also obligatory when it is in the past tense. Only when the AAE copula is not marking habitual aspect, not negated, not stressed and in the present tense can it be unpronounced (*he good* means 'he's good'). Russian, Hungarian and other languages have a very similar rule (see box overleaf).

Something similar is true of the multiple

marking of negation, misleadingly termed 'double negation', and treated as an illogicality. This feature is also found in Romance languages. There is a direct analogy between AAE's *Ain't nobody called* and the equivalent Italian *Non ha telefonata nessuno*, literally 'not has telephoned no one'. Both mean 'No one has telephoned'. It is a rule in both languages that under certain conditions indefinite words with meanings like 'someone' or 'anyone' must be replaced by their negative counterparts when they occur in a negated clause. No grammatical or logical mistakes are involved; multiple negation marking is a grammatical requirement like number or gender agreement.

Having known such facts for decades, linguists were dismayed to see writers of all persuasions (several of them black) falling over each other to publish angry and offensive attacks on AAE in the wake of the Oakland board's announcement. Confusing lexicon with syntax, accent with dialect, difference with deficiency, and grammar with morality, commentators clarified little except the deep hostility and contempt whites feel for the way blacks speak ("the patois of America's meanest streets", columnist George Will<sup>6</sup> called it, as if AAE could only be spoken in slums), and the deep shame felt by Americans of African descent for speaking that way (a *Los Angeles Times* column<sup>7</sup> by Eldridge Cleaver, a former Black Panther party official, compared the official acknowledgement of AAE with condoning cannibalism).

Vying with each other to express their fury at AAE, columnists, both black and white, ignored the genuine issues of educational policy that had motivated the Oakland board. One persistent confusion was perhaps stimulated by an ambiguity in English: 'instruction in French' has two meanings: instruction on how to speak French; and instruction given via the medium of French. The press never figured out the difference. The Oakland board members talked about using AAE to deliver instruction; but this was discussed in editorials as if the proposal had been to make AAE a school subject. The board never suggested adding AAE to the curriculum. Its plan was to acknowledge that many Oakland schoolchildren speak AAE, to alert teachers to the implications this might have, and to contrast AAE with standard English in language classes, but not to hold classes on how to speak AAE. (The whole point, after all, is that no such classes are necessary, since the children arrive speaking it.) The need to direct children toward a command of standard English was a paramount concern.

Oakland faces an issue similar to the dilemma of, for example, a Norwegian school with many Swedish-speaking students. Swedish and Norwegian are similar enough that both could be considered dialects of a single language. They are mutually intelligible for adults, but different enough to cause some learning difficulties for a monolingual Swedish child confronting a Norwegian-speaking teacher for the first time. So would it be better to start the Swedish children off with a teacher who acknowledges the Swedes' linguistic background and explains things in Swedish where necessary? Or should one trust to the 'total immersion' philosophy and plunge the students into a Norwegian-only environment from day one?

These are empirical questions. And for some time there has been empirical evidence that alternatives to total immersion may work better. Teaching children to read first in their nonstandard Swedish dialect and then transitioning them to standard Swedish speeds and improves the acquisition of reading skills<sup>8</sup>. African-American college students in Chicago who received instruction concerning the contrasts between AAE and standard English grammar showed improved standard English writing skills as compared to a control group<sup>9</sup>. And in Oakland itself it was found nearly 25 years ago that teachers who condemned AAE pronunciations and interpreted them as reading errors got the worst results in teaching black children to read, while teachers who used AAE creatively in class got the best results<sup>10</sup>. These and other results in the education literature (cited by Stanford AAE researcher John Rickford; see <http://www-leland.stanford.edu/~rickford/ebonics>) suggest that the Oakland school board's policy decision had some clear motivation and scientific support.

The board's reward, however, was a month of unrelenting ridicule, needling and abuse from politicians, poets and pundits in editorials, features, talk shows, news programmes, speeches and policy statements (the US Department of Education pointedly announced that no federal bilingual education funds would be spent on AAE).

The horror with which Americans react to the idea of using AAE in the classroom reveals a lot about the prejudice still targeted on America's black citizens, whose variety of English is decried as if it were some repellent disease (the *Economist* actually entitled its article "The Ebonics virus"). Educational conservatives often deny that prejudice is involved, dismissing linguists' objective attitude toward nonstandard dialects as if it were just left-wing propaganda. But it is not. Even conservative linguists acknowledge the facts mentioned above. When the Linguistic Society of America voted in January on a resolution in support of the Oakland school board, the vote was unanimous.

**Expression of the copula in three types of natural language**

**Zero copula languages**

(present-tense copula unexpressed under certain grammatical conditions)

African-American English (Indo-European)	● unexpressed in nonemphatic nonhabitual present affirmative when not stranded
Arabic (Afroasiatic)	● unexpressed in nonemphatic present affirmative
Hungarian (Uralic)	● unexpressed in third-person present indicative affirmative
Russian (Indo-European)	● unexpressed in nonemphatic nonexistential present indicative affirmative
Swahili (Niger-Congo)	● unexpressed in nonemphatic present affirmative

**Variable copula languages**

(present-tense copula amalgamates with adjacent word)

Colloquial standard English (Indo-European)	● reduced to single consonant in nonemphatic affirmative present tense; independent verb elsewhere
Turkish (Altaic)	● reduced to suffix in present tense; independent verb elsewhere

**Overt copula languages**

(copula always overtly expressed as an independent word)

French, German, Italian (Indo-European), Abkhaz (Northwest Caucasian), Japanese (Japanese-Ryukyuan), and so on

African-American English (AAE) is dismissed as 'bad' English because the speakers sometimes 'omit' the copula from predicative clauses. But this is not random carelessness. AAE exemplifies a widely attested grammatical pattern: the copula is always expressed if emphasized, negated, in the past tense, marking the habitual aspect, or stranded (at the end of a clause, as in *I don't know who he is*). A similar pattern is found in many languages in the Afroasiatic, Indo-European, Niger-Congo and Uralic families. (These families are *not* known to be related, so the similarities are typological rather than traceable to common origins.) Standard English shows a different pattern, rather like Turkish, where the present-tense copula is not completely omitted but is radically reduced in pronunciation (in Turkish, to a suffix, and in English, to a single consonant, as in *he's tall*). In a third group of languages the copula is always overtly expressed.

Linguists agree that standard English has prestige and AAE does not. They merely note that this is not because of the grammar of AAE. Grammar does not underpin social distinctions or justify morally tinged condemnation of nonstandard dialects. AAE has nothing inherently wrong with it as a language; it is an accident of history that it is not the standard language of the United States. Standard English lacks multiple negation marking, but has syllable-final consonant clusters and interdental fricative consonants. In Italy the facts are the reverse: standard Italian lacks syllable-final consonant clusters and interdental fricative consonants but exhibits multiple negation marking, exactly as in AAE.

But the feeding-frenzy in the press over the Oakland resolution alarmed enough parents that, fearing linguistic ghettoization of their children, they pressed the school board to reconsider. And so on 15 January the board revised its statement, dropping the reference to AAE as the "primary language" of many of its schoolchildren, and the idea of using that language as a medium of instruction. Yet it retained some misguided references to alleged African origins of AAE (the dialect did not originate in Africa, and shows few clear signs of any influence the original African languages of slaves may have had on its early history). Carefully saving some Afrocentric bathwater, the board publicly threw out the baby of a sensible change in language policy.

However, the Oakland school system is apparently still intent on using AAE to assist the learning of standard English, despite the

board's apparent backdown. This should not be surprising. Several other school districts in California and elsewhere have long operated such programmes. And of course teachers have some discretion, and many Oakland teachers are African-Americans who speak AAE natively; it would be difficult to police classrooms tightly enough to prevent them from using their native tongue when speaking all day to children who share it.

African-American English will continue to be heard in Oakland's classrooms, just as German and Chinese accents will continue to be heard in the physics lecture halls at the University of California campus just up the road in Berkeley. In practice it will matter very little whether official policies (or newspaper columnists) laud or deplore the linguistic diversity of which the United States sometimes seems so ashamed. □

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