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Suite for Ebony and Phonics

Last year's media uproar over Ebonics missed the point. What's really important is not what kind of language Ebonics isn't, but what kind it is.

by John R. Rickford
To James Baldwin, writing in 1979, it was this passion, this skill . . . this incredible music. Toni Morrison, two years later, was impressed by its five present tenses and felt that the worst of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language. What these novelists were talking about was Ebonics, the informal speech of many African Americans, which rocketed to public attention a year ago this month after the Oakland School Board approved a resolution recognizing it as the primary language of African American students.

The reaction of most people across the country--in the media, at holiday gatherings, and on electronic bulletin boards--was overwhelmingly negative. In the flash flood of e-mail on America Online, Ebonics was described as lazy English, bastardized English, poor grammar, and fractured slang. Oakland's decision to recognize Ebonics and use it to facilitate mastery of Standard English also elicited superlatives of negativity: ridiculous, ludicrous, very, very stupid, a terrible mistake.

However, linguists--who study the sounds, words, and grammars of languages and dialects--though less rhapsodic about Ebonics than the novelists, were much more positive than the general public. Last January, at the annual meeting of the Linguistic Society of America, my colleagues and I unanimously approved a resolution describing Ebonics as systematic and rule-governed like all natural speech varieties. Moreover, we agreed that the Oakland resolution was linguistically and pedagogically sound.

Why do we linguists see the issue so differently from most other people? A founding principle of our science is that we describe how people talk; we don't judge how language should or should not be used. A second principle is that all languages, if they have enough speakers, have dialects--regional or social varieties that develop when people are separated by geographic or social barriers. And a third principle, vital for understanding linguists' reactions to the Ebonics controversy, is that all languages and dialects are systematic and rule-governed. Every human language and dialect that we have studied to date--and we have studied thousands--obeys distinct rules of grammar and pronunciation.

What this means, first of all, is that Ebonics is not slang. Slang refers just to a small set of new and usually short-lived words in the vocabulary of a dialect or language. Although Ebonics certainly has slang words--such as chillin (relaxing) or homey (close friend), to pick two that have found wide dissemination by the media--its linguistic identity is described by distinctive patterns of pronunciation and grammar.

But is Ebonics a different language from English or a different dialect of English? Linguists tend to sidestep such questions, noting that the answers can depend on historical and political considerations. For instance, spoken Cantonese and Mandarin are mutually unintelligible, but they are usually regarded as dialects of Chinese because their speakers use the same writing system and see themselves as part of a common Chinese tradition. By contrast, although Norwegian and Swedish are so similar that their speakers can generally understand each other, they are usually regarded as different languages because their speakers are citizens of different countries. As for Ebonics, most linguists agree that Ebonics is more of a dialect of English than a separate language, because it shares many words and other features with other informal varieties of American English. And its speakers can easily communicate with speakers of other American

English dialects.

Yet Ebonics is one of the most distinctive varieties of American English, differing from Standard English--the educated standard--in several ways. Consider, for instance, its verb tenses and aspects. (Tense refers to when an event occurs, aspect to how it occurs, whether habitual or ongoing.) When Toni Morrison referred to the five present tenses of Ebonics, she probably had usages like these--each one different from Standard English--in mind:

1. He runnin. (He is running.)

2. He be runnin. (He is usually running.)

3. He be steady runnin. (He is usually running in an intensive, sustained manner.)

4. He bin runnin. (He has been running.)

5. He bin runnin. (He has been running for a long time and still is.)

In Standard English, the distinction between habitual or nonhabitual events can be expressed only with adverbs like usually. Of course, there are also simple present tense forms, such as he runs, for habitual events, but they do not carry the meaning of an ongoing action, because they lack the -ing suffix. Note too that bin in example 4 is unstressed, while bin in example 5 is stressed. The former can usually be understood by non-Ebonics speakers as equivalent to has been with the has deleted, but the stressed bin form can be badly misunderstood. Years ago, I presented the Ebonics sentence She bin married to 25 whites and 25 African Americans from various parts of the United States and asked them if they understood the speaker to be still married or not. While 23 of the African Americans said yes, only 8 of the whites gave the correct answer. (In real life a misunderstanding like this could be disastrous!)

Word pronunciation is another distinctive aspect of dialects, and the regularity of these differences can be very subtle. Most of the rules we follow when speaking Standard English are obeyed unconsciously. Take for instance English plurals. Although grammar books tell us that we add s to a word to form a regular English plural, as in cats and dogs, that's true only for writing. In speech, what we actually add in the case of cat is an s sound; in the case of dog we add z. The difference is that s is voiceless, with the vocal cords spread apart, while z is voiced, with the vocal cords held closely together and noisily vibrating.

Now, how do you know whether to add s or z to form a plural when you're speaking? Easy. If the word ends in a voiceless consonant, like t, add voiceless s. If the word ends in a voiced consonant, like g, add voiced z. Since all vowels are voiced, if the word ends in a vowel, like tree, add z. Because we spell both plural endings with s, we're not aware that English speakers make this systematic difference every day, and I'll bet your English teacher never told you about voiced and voiceless plurals. But you follow the rules for using them anyway, and anyone who doesn't--for instance, someone who says bookz--strikes an English speaker as sounding funny.

One reason people might regard Ebonics as lazy English is its tendency to omit consonants at the ends of words--especially if they come after another consonant, as in tes(t) and han(d). But if one were just being lazy or cussed or both, why not also leave out the final consonant in a word like pant? This is not permitted in Ebonics; the rules of the dialect do not allow the deletion of the second consonant at the end of a word unless both consonants are either voiceless, as with st, or voiced, as with nd. In the case of pant, the final t is voiceless, but the preceding n is voiced, so the consonants are both spoken. In short, the manner in which Ebonics differs from Standard English is highly ordered; it is no more lazy English than Italian is lazy Latin.

Only by carefully analyzing each dialect can we appreciate the complex rules that native speakers follow effortlessly and unconsciously in their daily lives.

Who speaks ebonics? if we made a list of all the ways in which the pronunciation and grammar of Ebonics differ from Standard English, we probably couldn't find anyone who always uses all of them. While its features are found most commonly among African Americans (Ebonics is itself derived from ebony and phonics, meaning black sounds), not all African Americans speak it. The features of Ebonics, especially the distinctive tenses, are more common among working-class than among middle- class speakers, among adolescents than among the middle-aged, and in informal contexts (a conversation on the street) rather than formal ones (a sermon at church) or writing.

The genesis of Ebonics lies in the distinctive cultural background and relative isolation of African Americans, which originated in the slaveholding South. But contemporary social networks, too, influence who uses Ebonics. For example, lawyers and doctors and their families are more likely to have more contact with Standard English speakers--in schools, work, and neighborhoods--than do blue-collar workers and the unemployed. Language can also be used to reinforce a sense of community. Working-class speakers, and adolescents in particular, often embrace Ebonics features as markers of African American identity, while middle- class speakers (in public at least) tend to eschew them.

Some Ebonics features are shared with other vernacular varieties of English, especially Southern white dialects, many of which have been influenced by the heavy concentration of African Americans in the South. And a lot of African American slang has crossed over to white and other ethnic groups. Expressions like givin five (slapping palms in agreement or congratulation) and Whassup? are so widespread in American culture that many people don't realize they originated in the African American community. Older, nonslang words have also originated in imported African words. Tote, for example, comes from the Kikongo word for carry, tota, and hip comes from the Wolof word hipi, to be aware. However, some of the distinctive verb forms in Ebonics--he run, he be runnin, he bin runnin--are rarer or nonexistent in white vernaculars.

How did Ebonics arise? The Oakland School Board's proposal alluded to the Niger-Congo roots of Ebonics, but the extent of that contribution is not at all clear. What we do know is that the ancestors of most African Americans came to this country as slaves. They first arrived in Jamestown in 1619, and a steady stream continued to arrive until at least 1808, when the slave trade ended, at least officially. Like the forebears of many other Americans, these waves of African immigrants spoke languages other than English. Their languages were from the Niger- Congo language family, especially the West Atlantic, Mande, and Kwa subgroups spoken from Senegal and Gambia to the Cameroons, and the Bantu subgroup spoken farther south. Arriving in an American milieu in which English was dominant, the slaves learned English. But how quickly and completely they did so and with how much influence from their African languages are matters of dispute among linguists.

The Afrocentric view is that most of the distinctive features of Ebonics represent imports from Africa. As West African slaves acquired English, they restructured it according to the patterns of Niger-Congo languages. In this view, Ebonics simplifies consonant clusters at the ends of words and doesn't use linking verbs like is and are--as in, for example, he happy--because these features are generally absent from Niger-Congo languages. Verbal forms like habitual be and bin, referring to a remote past, it is argued, crop up in Ebonics because these kinds of tenses occur in Niger-Congo languages.

Most Afrocentrists, however, don't cite a particular West African language source. Languages in the Niger-Congo family vary enormously, and some historically significant Niger-Congo languages don't show these forms. For instance, while Yoruba, a major language for many West Africans sold into slavery, does indeed lack a linking verb like is for some adjectival constructions, it has another linking verb for other

adjectives. And it has six other linking verbs for nonadjectival constructions, where English would use is or are. Moreover, features like dropping final consonants can be found in some vernaculars in England that had little or no West African influence. Although many linguists acknowledge continuing African influences in some Ebonics and American English words, they want more proof of its influence on Ebonics pronunciation and grammar.

A second view, the Eurocentric--or dialectologist--view, is that African slaves learned English from white settlers, and that they did so relatively quickly and successfully, retaining little trace of their African linguistic heritage. Vernacular, or non-Standard features of Ebonics, including omitting final consonants and habitual be, are seen as imports from dialects spoken by colonial English, Irish, or Scotch-Irish settlers, many of whom were indentured servants. Or they may be features that emerged in the twentieth century, after African Americans became more isolated in urban ghettos. (Use of habitual be, for example, is more common in urban than in rural areas.) However, as with Afrocentric arguments, we still don't have enough historical details to settle the question. Crucial Ebonics features, such as the absence of linking is, appear to be rare or nonexistent in these early settler dialects, so they're unlikely to have been the source. Furthermore, although the scenario posited by this view is possible, it seems unlikely. Yes, African American slaves and whites sometimes worked alongside each other in households and fields. And yes, the number of African slaves was so low, especially in the early colonial period, that distinctive African American dialects may not have formed. But the assumption that slaves rapidly and successfully acquired the dialects of the whites around them requires a rosier view of their relationship than the historical record and contemporary evidence suggest.

A third view, the creolist view, is that many African slaves, in acquiring English, developed a pidgin language--a simplified fusion of English and African languages--from which Ebonics evolved. Native to none of its speakers, a pidgin is a mixed language, incorporating elements of its users' native languages but with less complex grammar and fewer words than either parent language. A pidgin language emerges to facilitate communication between speakers who do not share a language; it becomes a creole language when it takes root and becomes the primary tongue among its users. This often occurs among the children of pidgin speakers--the vocabulary of the language expands, and the simple grammar is fleshed out. But the creole still remains simpler in some aspects than the original languages. Most creoles, for instance, don't use suffixes to mark tense (he walked), plurals (boys), or possession (John's house).

Creole languages are particularly common on the islands of the Caribbean and the Pacific, where large plantations brought together huge groups of slaves or indentured laborers. The native languages of these workers were radically different from the native tongues of the small groups of European colonizers and settlers, and under such conditions, with minimal access to European speakers, new, restructured varieties like Haitian Creole French and Jamaican Creole English arose. These languages do show African influence, as the Afrocentric theory would predict, but their speakers may have simplified existing patterns in African languages by eliminating more complex alternatives, like the seven linking verbs of Yoruba I mentioned earlier.

Within the United States African Americans speak one well- established English creole, Gullah. It is spoken on the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia, where African Americans at one time constituted 80 to 90 percent of the local population in places. When I researched one of the South Carolina Sea Islands some years ago, I recorded the following creole sentences. They sound much like Caribbean Creole English today:

1. E. M. run an gone to Suzie house. (E. M. went running to Suzie's house.)

2. But I does go to see people when they sick. (But I usually go to see people when they are sick.)

3. De mill bin to Bluffton dem time. (The mill was in Bluffton in those days.)

Note the creole traits: the first sentence lacks the past tense and the possessive form; the second sentence lacks the linking verb are and includes the habitual does; the last sentence uses unstressed bin for past tense and dem time to refer to a plural without using an s.

What about creole origins for Ebonics? Creole speech might have been introduced to the American colonies through the large numbers of slaves imported from the colonies of Jamaica and Barbados, where creoles were common. In these regions the percentage of Africans ran from 65 to 90 percent. And some slaves who came directly from Africa may have brought with them pidgins or creoles that developed around West African trading forts. It's also possible that some creole varieties--apart from well-known cases like Gullah--might have developed on American soil.

This would have been less likely in the northern colonies, where blacks were a very small percentage of the population. But blacks were much more concentrated in the South, making up 61 percent of the population in South Carolina and 40 percent overall in the South. Observations by travelers and commentators in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries record creole-like features in African American speech. Even today, certain features of Ebonics, like the absence of the linking verbs is and are, are widespread in Gullah and Caribbean English creoles but rare or nonexistent in British dialects.

My own view is that the creolist hypothesis incorporates the strengths of the other hypotheses and avoids their weaknesses. But we linguists may never be able to settle that particular issue one way or another. What we can settle on is the unique identity of Ebonics as an English dialect.

So what does all this scholarship have to do with the Oakland School Board's proposal? Some readers might be fuming that it's one thing to identify Ebonics as a dialect and quite another to promote its usage. Don't linguists realize that nonstandard dialects are stigmatized in the larger society, and that Ebonics speakers who cannot shift to Standard English are less likely to do well in school and on the job front? Well, yes. The resolution we put forward last January in fact stated that there are benefits in acquiring Standard English. But there is experimental evidence both from the United States and Europe that mastering the standard language might be easier if the differences in the student vernacular and Standard English were made explicit rather than entirely ignored.

To give only one example: At Aurora University, outside Chicago, inner-city African American students were taught by an approach that contrasted Standard English and Ebonics features through explicit instruction and drills. After eleven weeks, this group showed a 59 percent reduction in their use of Ebonics features in their Standard English writing. But a control group taught by conventional methods showed an 8.5 percent increase in such features.

This is the technique the Oakland School Board was promoting in its resolution last December. The approach is not new; it is part of the 16-year-old Standard English Proficiency Program, which is being used in some 300 California schools. Since the media uproar over its original proposal, the Oakland School Board has clarified its intent: the point is not to teach Ebonics as a distinct language but to use it as a tool to increase mastery of Standard English among Ebonics speakers. The support of linguists for this approach may strike nonlinguists as unorthodox, but that is where our principles--and the evidence--lead us.

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