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A Linguist Looks at the Ebonics Debate

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One uncontroversial principle underlying the [Oakland Unified School District's December 18th "Ebonics" resolution](#) is the truism that people can't learn from each other if they don't speak the same language. Anyone who doubts this has only to read the current public debate about the resolution itself. Educators, bureaucrats, and experts have been weighing in on the meaning of the resolution in the last two weeks. You might think all that these people speak the same language, but the evidence contradicts the appearance. All of the key words that keep coming up in these discussions clearly mean different things to different parties in the debate, and that blocks successful communication and makes it too easy for each participant to believe that the others are mad, scheming, or stupid.

As far as I can work it out (not from the language of the resolution but from the board's recent "clarifications"), the pedagogically relevant assumptions behind the "Ebonics" resolution are 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. 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 standard English 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.

It would have been more natural for me to describe the plan with such words as "building on the language the children already have to help them acquire the language they need to learn in school." But instead, I avoided using the word "language," since that is one of the words responsible for much of the confusion in the discussion around the school board's decision. The other words causing trouble are "dialect," "slang," "primary language," and, regrettably, "genetic." Neither side in these debates uses these words in ways that facilitate communication. Perhaps a linguist's view might introduce some clarity into these discussions.

The words "dialect" and "language" are confusingly ambiguous. These are not precisely definable technical terms in linguistics, but linguists have learned to live with the ambiguities. I mentioned "the language of the resolution" where I meant the actual words and phrases found in the text of the board's resolution. We can use the word "language" to refer simply to the linguistic system one acquires in childhood. In normal contexts, everybody grows up speaking a language. And if there are systematic differences between the language you and your neighbors speak and the language my neighbors and I speak, we can say that we speak different dialects.

The word "language" is also used to refer to a group of related dialects, but there are no scientific criteria for deciding when to refer to two linguistic systems as different dialects of the same language, or as different languages belonging to the same language family. There are empirical criteria for grouping ways of speaking to reflect their historical relationships, but there is an arbitrary element in deciding when to use the word "language" for representing any particular grouping. (Deciding whether BBC newscasters 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.)

There is a different and misleading way of using these words for situations in which, for social or political reasons, one dialect comes to be the preferred means of communication in schools, commerce, public ceremonies, etc. According to this second usage, which reflects an unscientific "folk theory," what the linguist would simply call the standard dialect is thought of as a "language," the others as "mere dialects," falling short of the perfection of the real language. An important principle of linguistics is that the selection of the prestige dialect is determined by accidental extralinguistic forces, and is not dependent on inherent virtues of the dialects themselves. But according to the folk theory, the "dialects" differ from the language itself in being full of errors.

I've been reading the San Francisco newspapers these last two weeks, and I see continuing chaos in the ways commentators choose to describe and classify the manner of speaking that is the target of the Ebonics resolution. The resolution and the public discussion about it have used so many different terms, each of them politically loaded ("Ebonics," "Black English," "Black Dialect," "African Language Systems," "Pan-African Communication Behaviors") that I will use what I think is the most neutral term, "African American Vernacular English," abbreviated as AAVE.

(1) Some participants in this debate think that AAVE is merely an imperfectly learned approximation to real English, differing from it because the speakers are careless and lazy and don't follow "the rules." It is "dialect," in the deprecating use of that word, or "slang."

(2) To most linguists AAVE is one of the dialects of American English, historically most closely related to forms of Southern speech but with differences attributable both to the linguistic history of slaves and to generations of social isolation. (For a linguist, to describe something as a dialect is not to say that it is inferior; everybody speaks a

dialect.)

(3) And some people say that while AAVE has the superficial trappings of English, at its structural core it is a continuation or amalgam of one or more west African languages. The views summarized in (1) are simply wrong. The difference between the views identified in (2) and (3) is irrelevant to the issue the board is trying to face.

The Oakland resolution 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 it is their home language, the form of speech the children operated in during the first four or five years of their lives, the language they use with their family and friends. An early explanation of the purpose of the new program (*San Francisco Chronicle* 12/20) is that it "is intended to help teachers show children how to translate their words from 'home language' to the 'language of wider communication'."

Understanding this as the meaning of the phrase, it makes sense to ask if something is or is not some particular person's "primary language," but the simple question of whether something is or isn't "a primary language" is incoherent. The people who have expressed such concerns clearly think the term means something other than what I think the school board intended.

The *Chronicle* (12/20) asked readers to send in their opinions "on the Oakland school board's decision to recognize Ebonics, or black English, as a primary language." The *San Francisco Examiner* (12/20) attributed to Delaine Eastin, state Superintendent of Public Instruction, the worry that the decision to "recognize" AAVE could lead students to believe "that they could prosper with it as their primary language outside the home." An *Examiner* writer editorialized (12/20) that "[i]n the real world of colleges and commerce and communication, it's not OK to speak Ebonics as a primary language. Job recruiters don't bring along a translator." The *Chronicle* (12/24) accounts for Oakland's sudden fame as happening "all because the school board voted to treat black English like any other primary language spoken by students."

These commentators were clearly not worried about whether there really are people who have AAVE as their primary language. They all seem to understand the term "primary language" in some different way. Perhaps the term "home language" wouldn't have created so much misunderstanding.

The critics have also worried about whether AAVE "is a language." One way of understanding the question is whether it is a language rather than a mere collection of "mistakes." This seems to be the way Ward Connerly understands the question, and his answer is that it isn't a language. Another is whether it has the full status of a language rather than a dialect, in the folk use of these words mentioned above. This seems to be the view attributed to James Baldwin, in a 1979 article quoted by Pamela Budman, *Chronicle* 12/26. Baldwin thought it "patronizing" to speak of AAVE as a dialect rather than as a full-fledged language.

But on the question of whether there is a definable linguistic system, spoken by many African Americans, with its own phonology, lexicon and grammar (and dialects!), there is already a huge body of research. The question of whether twenty-seven thousand African American children in Oakland schools come from families that speak that language has to be an empirical question, not an issue for tapping people's opinions.

The *Chronicle* (12/20) reports the nation's shock at the news of the resolution by "the Oakland school district's decision to recognize the African American vernacular as a language." Under the headline "Ebonics Isn't a Language" in the *Examiner* (12/25), Education Secretary Riley is reported as warning about the dangers of "[e]levating black English to the status of a language."

When the *Examiner* issued its invitation for readers' opinions (12/23) the phrasing was: "Will recognition of black English as a language help African-American students succeed?" Some readers might have understood "recognition ... as a language" as involving whether there is such a language at all, others as whether it is a language separate from English in the way that French and Hausa are, and still others as whether Oakland was proposing that AAVE join standard English as one of the languages to be used in the city's classrooms. It is amazing to me that the issue was thought of as deserving treatment as a yes-or-no question. It is even more amazing that so many readers felt they were qualified to answer the question.

One of the claims contained in the resolution is that Ebonics is not a linguistic cousin of English, but is really more directly descended from West African linguistic stock. (Though one Oakland teacher was heard on national TV as saying that Ebonics is basically Swahili.) Raising this issue has really muddled the pedagogical problem the schools are facing. Instead of focusing on the cognitive consequences in American schools of students' having AAVE as their primary language, whatever its source or status, the board chose to confuse the world with an irrelevant claim about language classification.

A *Chronicle* editorial (12/20) after surveying what it described as AAVE features, stated that "Such variations amount to a dialect of English -- not a separate language." My Berkeley colleague, John McWhorter, was quoted (*Chronicle* 12/21) as saying, "Black English is a dialect—it is not a separate language." Here I am sure that he meant that it is a dialect of English.

The *Examiner* (12/24) referred to the School District's attempts to explain "its decision to adopt black English as a separate language" but the next day (12/25) quoted board member Jean Quan as saying, "We never said it was a separate language." What turns on the answer to this question? One possibility is that if AAVE can be recognized as something other than a variety of English, that fact should allow the school district to qualify for funds earmarked for bilingual education. Whether or not this was the intention of the board, it is certainly true that many people assumed that it was. An early report in the *Chronicle* (12/20) stated quite straightforwardly that "[t]he educators hope to win federal bilingual dollars to help pay for the program." On the next day the *Chronicle* added: "Education officials in some districts, including San Francisco and Los Angeles, say they are intrigued with what Oakland did and might do the same -- primarily to seek federal bilingual education funds." San Francisco school board member Dan Kelly too "would support a move to have the federal government recognize Ebonics as a separate language for purposes of funding bilingual education." Whatever the

intentions of the board might have been, observers across the nation read a local policy decision urging the recognition of AAVE as the home language of many students as a step in justifying a request for federal funding. (A *Chicago Tribune* editorial, quoted in the *Chronicle* 12/28, assumed that giving AAVE "the status of a language" would entail "qualify[ing] the children who speak it to receive federally funded bilingual education.")

The intentions regarding funding are somewhat unclear, but the resolution did suggest that they intended to use AAVE as a language of instruction. Explaining things to children in a language they understand is one thing; teaching that language to the children is something else, and this is the possibility that raised some alarms.

The resolution declares that "the Superintendent in conjunction with her staff shall 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 ... and to facilitate their acquisition and mastery of English language skills." Here the source of ambiguity is the word "maintaining": it could refer to defending the belief that the language is legitimate and rich, or it could refer to preserving the language from decline. The second (and I would suspect unintended) interpretation is the one that led some people to think that the district intended to offer classes in AAVE. (A belief that this is what they meant led Jesse Jackson to say that children would be better off studying Spanish.)

To resolve these various misunderstandings, the board has hired the PR firm of Darolyn Davis, whose job, according to the *Chronicle* (12/24) is "to help them explain that they have no intention of teaching children to speak black English -- ebonics -- or applying for federal bilingual dollars to their program under false pretenses." This has been done in the form of a statement of "legislative intent."

The questions until now have been: "is it a primary language?"; "is it a language?"; and "is it a separate language?" The next word to worry about is whether AAVE is simply "slang." This term is usually used to refer to ephemeral faddish locutions usually associated with schools, sports, music and entertainment, and gang life, existing mainly for expressing group solidarity, especially among the young and hip. But it has been one of the favorite dismissing words of the critics of the school board's actions. Jesse Jackson is quoted in the *Examiner* (12/22) as saying, "In Oakland some madness has erupted over making slang talk a second language." To which he added, "You don't have to go to school to learn to talk garbage."

The *Chronicle* reported (12/21) that "[s]ome scholars call it slang, criticizing Oakland for legitimizing error-ridden speech." ("Some scholars"? What are these people scholars of, if they can decide that something is slang?) We learn that in addition to the Rev. Jackson, Ward Connerly calls it slang, and complains that the board's action will "legitimize" it. Shelby Steele (*Chronicle* 12/20) calls black English "merely slang." Listeners to talk shows (*Chronicle* 12/21) learn "that Oakland is giving up on conventional English and diverting black kids into classes taught in slang." A Debra Saunders piece (*Chronicle* 12/24) writes that black parents "may not welcome a philosophy that elevates slang." All of these quotations suggest that their authors do not believe that there exists anything deserving to be treated as an actual linguistic system in the speech of the students in question. The most stunning such judgment comes from Ward Connerly (*Chronicle* 12/21): "These are kids that have had every opportunity to acclimate themselves to American society, and they have gotten themselves into this trap of speaking this language -- this slang, really -- that people can't understand. Now we're going to legitimize it." Mr. Connerly seems not to believe that the children in question have acquired a way of speaking through the normal process of language acquisition.

The most controversial paragraph of the resolution introduced the word "genetics" into the debate. It is really difficult to know what the writers of the phrase had in mind. In the language of the resolution, "numerous validated studies" have demonstrated "that African Language Systems are genetically based and not a dialect of English."

This passage was interpreted by many as claiming that Black English is biologically innate in its speakers. Now there is a metaphorical linguistic concept of "genetic" relationships, as when we say that Spanish and Italian are genetically related to Latin, but neither the language of the resolution nor the board's later clarifications have brought their usage any closer to the linguistic notion.

The board has since explained (*Chronicle* 12/25) that they were not claiming "that black people have a unique biology" but merely (*Examiner* 12/22) that AAVE has a "historical and cultural basis." A clarification appearing on the OUSD's web page states that "[t]he term 'genetically based' is a synonym with genesis ... used according to the standard dictionary definition of 'has its origins in.' It is not used to refer to human biology." There is no easy way to substitute either "genesis" or "has its origins in" into the phrasing of the resolution and come up with something coherent. In the first place, something is missing: what would follow the "in" of "has its origins in"?

The efforts to explain the bit about genetics have not been effective. As late as December 31, we read Clyde Haberman in the *New York Times* challenging the board to explain the graceful English of the Ghanaian Kofi Annan, the new United Nations Secretary General. The implication is that Kofi Annan's genes clearly didn't destine him to be a speaker of AAVE.

There is a common-sense core to the Oakland school board's plans. All over the world children show up in school speaking a variety of language that differs in some great or small way from the variety they're about to start learning. Where the discrepancy is slight, and where (as in most parts of the world) nobody would think of telling the children to give up their home language, the difference can be easily bridged. But in all cases it is natural for teachers to do whatever they can to make students aware of the differences.

The case made by the board is that this bridging from the home language to the school language should be done in a way that isn't demeaning to the children. Such elementary concern for the children's self-esteem has been ridiculed by some as a meaningless gesture of "political correctness," and a belief that children should never be corrected. But clearly, a child who can say freely, "In my dialect we say it like this" is better able to profit from a language-learning experience than a child who is simply always told that everything he says is "wrong." (And is anybody thinking about the parents of AAVE-speaking children who have been listening to all this talk about "garbage" and "nonsense"?)

The language used by the Oakland school board in formulating the resolution has occasioned great and continuing misunderstandings, leading to worries about whether the city of Oakland's reputation has been so seriously damaged that employers will stay away. Yet board members, insisting that they will never modify the language of the resolution, have instead hired a PR firm to help them justify the language they already have.

I think the board should practice what they preach and should do what they say they want their students to do: learn the language of the larger community so that they can achieve their goals in that community. Why not start over with the language of the resolution? And maybe in the work of changing the way they communicate what they originally wanted to say, they might even consider making some changes in what it was that they originally wanted to say.

In the board's public statements they should show a clearer understanding of what they are getting into. The changes needed will not be trivial, and will have to include the daunting job of sensitizing teachers to a language many of them have wanted to believe does not exist. Much of the public debate suggests that the new classroom practice will be mostly a matter of displaying respect for the children's home language, and making students aware of the pronunciation of "with" as "wif," the uses of "be," and multiple negation. But anybody who has looked at the linguistic structure of the African American vernacular knows that there's a lot more to it than that.

The OUSD school board has made an important proposal: that the work of helping speakers of black English to learn the language of the school will be easier and more effective if it is seen as building on a home language whose properties the children are encouraged to examine, rather than as an endless process of "correcting mistakes." If that's all the new policy achieves, it will have been worth it. If teachers can attain precise understandings of the nature of that language, that will be even better. If all of this discussion encourages everyone involved to make whatever other changes need to be made to improve the school performance of African American students in the district, Oakland will achieve a new and more welcome kind of fame.

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