

Ebonics and the Politics of English

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Abstract:

In 1996 the Oakland Unified School District passed a resolution declaring Ebonics to be the primary language of the African-American students in its schools. The resolution further declared Ebonics to be a language in its own right, not a dialect of English. In the face of massive national opposition to the Oakland Ebonics resolution, this radical, separatist move shifted to a conservative, assimilationist one: Oakland retracted its declaration of linguistic independence and reaffirmed the traditional pedagogical goal of teaching students standard English. But the Oakland Ebonics controversy reminds us that, although the English of former British colonies has come into its own in the literary, cultural, and political scene, to the point where we speak of World Englishes, the English varieties of what may be regarded as internal colonies, inner cities and the socially disenfranchised, continues to be stigmatized by speakers of more esteemed varieties.

Introduction

Anyway, what was the use of my
having come from Oakland? It was
not natural to have come from there
. . . . There is no there there.

Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's
Autobiography*, 1937

In December, 1996, the School Board of the Oakland Unified School District, in California, passed a resolution declaring Ebonics to be the primary language of the

African-American students in Oakland's schools. The resolution further declared Ebonics to be a language in its own right, not a dialect of English, and proclaimed that students be taught in ways that would maintain Ebonics as well as introduce them to standard English.

The Oakland resolution and the responses to it that I shall explore in this essay offer a lesson in language politics and language pedagogy. Initially the Oakland resolution was received by the American media, and the American public, as a declaration of linguistic independence, and as such it proved highly controversial. The media circus that instantly surrounded the Oakland resolution continued for several weeks as the School Board, its critics, and its supporters tried to deal with the issues of language, pedagogy, and school success that the controversy raised. In the face of massive opposition, Oakland quickly retracted its declaration of linguistic independence and remodeled it into something more like a request for continued linguistic colonization. The Oakland School Board replaced its initial radical stance on language with a conservative one, assuring the public that its goal had never been to teach Ebonics—after all, students already knew that language. Instead, the intent of the resolution was to teach teachers about the language their students brought to school, and to teach standard English to students who were not fluent in it, employing a methodology with a bilingual flavor that would direct students to translate from their home language into the standard.

Now that some time has passed, scholars have begun to look at what happened in Oakland, this present volume of *World Englishes* being but one example. Since 1998 at least three books on Ebonics have appeared (Baugh 1999, Mufwene et al 1998, and Perry and Delpit 1998), and more studies may be in the

works. But even as we recollect what happened in Oakland in tranquility, there is little agreement on how, or even whether linguistic intervention of the kind proposed by the Oakland resolution can be useful in improving school performance. Moreover, looking closely at the methods of language instruction advocated by the Oakland schools, we can see that teachers are not the radicals that their critics at first took them to be. Instead, most teachers have reconfirmed their mission as linguistic engineers and language guardians. Convinced that their role is to stamp out *error* so their students can gain access to the middle class, they remain committed to a traditional pedagogy of drill and correction as they work toward the elusive if not illusory goal of standard English for everyone.

Perhaps most important, the Ebonics controversy reminds us too that as we extol the diversity of English around the world to the point of pluralizing it as ‘World Englishes,’ language diversity at home can be another matter altogether. The English of former British colonies has come into its own on the literary, cultural, and political scene. But at the same time, despite the attention paid to nonstandard English in literature and film, the ‘real-world’ or day-to-day English varieties of internal colonies, that is to say the English of the inner cities and of the socially disenfranchised, continues to be stigmatized by speakers of more prestige varieties.

What Happened in Oakland?

On December 18, 1996, the Oakland Unified School District unanimously resolved that Ebonics was not only the language of Oakland’s African-American students, it was also ‘*genetically-based* and not a dialect of English’ (OUSD 1996a, emphasis added). The term *Ebonics*, a

blend of ‘ebony’ and ‘phonics’ referring to what is commonly known as ‘black English’, was coined by psychologist Robert Williams in 1973. Ebonics is a term not generally used by linguists, who currently prefer the term *African-American Vernacular English* (AAVE) and use it to refer to the inner-city speech form in question. In its initial resolution, the Oakland School Board ordered the superintendent of schools to implement a 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’ (OUSD 1996a, emphasis added). The Oakland resolution called for federal bilingual education funds to support its Ebonics program, despite the fact that the Ebonics program called for language maintenance, whereas federal bilingual education funds are earmarked only for transitional, not maintenance, programs. The Oakland resolution cited the Federal Bilingual Education Act as mandating programs for children of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) and argued that ‘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.’ The resolution reiterated that African-American pupils were on the same footing as Asian-American, Latino-American, Native American, and other pupils ‘who come from backgrounds or environments where a language other than English is dominant,’ and instructed the superintendent of schools to secure state and federal title VIII bilingual education and ESL funding to address the needs of LEP African-American students.

The Oakland resolution was the School Board's response to the report of the Task Force on the Education of African American Students (OUSD 1996b). That thirty-seven member Task Force had been appointed by the Board earlier that year to address serious educational problems arising from the fact that African-American students, who comprised 53% of students in the district, were over-represented in special education classes and under-represented in gifted and talented classes. 64% of students retained, or made to repeat a grade, were African American. 67% of students classified as truants were African American. 80% of suspended students were African American. 19% of African American high school seniors failed to graduate. And African American students had an overall grade point average of 1.80 on a 4.0 scale, the lowest grade point average for any ethnic or racial group in the district. The Task Force produced a twenty-four page report, focusing on a variety of issues, including improvement in family and community relations with the schools; new conflict resolution programs for students; improved nutrition with a focus on vegetarian alternatives to burgers and fries; new community health services; recruitment of African-American teachers; career and college counseling; and neighborhood development. But the one issue that occupied the School Board as it discussed the report on December 18, the issue that resulted in a School Board resolution that day, was the recognition of Ebonics as an independent language.

Responding to a Black English Declaration of Independence

Classifying Ebonics as a language, not a dialect, quickly came to be perceived as the Black English declaration of

independence. As word of the Oakland Ebonics resolution spread—the period from just before Christmas until New Year's Day is often slow in the news media, so the story was quickly picked up by the wire services and reprinted everywhere—the protests began. Ebonics soon became the subject of heated debates around the nation's dinner tables. Newspapers across the country editorialized against Ebonics. The *New York Times* called it a 'blunder' to give 'black slang' a place of honor in the classroom. The *Times* objected that, 'by labeling them as linguistic foreigners in their own country, the new policy will actually stigmatize African-American children—while validating habits of speech that bar them from the cultural mainstream and decent jobs' (Linguistic Confusion 1996). The *San Francisco Chronicle* editorialized that Oakland was 'doing its students a disservice' (Oakland Schools Err 1996), and followed this with an objection that Oakland 'chose a dangerous and academically unproven path toward achieving [their] goal' (Compounding Ebonics Error 1996). Journalists scoffed at the counterintuitive notion that Ebonics was closer to African languages than it was to English. They quoted Africans who confirmed that Ebonics didn't sound like any African language they knew. And a Nigerian journalist writing in the *Detroit News* said, African Americans 'should not be encouraged to cling to a dialect that is bound to increase their alienation from their brothers and sisters in Africa, their fellow Americans and the rest of the English-speaking world' (Abati 1997).

Virginia state representative L. Preston Bryant introduced a bill to prohibit any 'nonstandard or poorly spoken English from being taught in public schools as the equivalent of standard English' (Va. Bill 1997). In the U.S. House of Representatives, Peter King

(R-New York) put forward a resolution to prevent federal funding of 'any program that is based upon the premise that Ebonics is a legitimate language' (Lacey 1997). And California State Senator Ray Haynes introduced a bill to ban the teaching of Ebonics not just in Oakland but in all of the state's public schools (California Senator 1997).

In another form of editorializing, comedians, cartoonists, satirists and journalists began to crack Ebonics jokes. The columnist Mike Royko took potshots at Ebonics in a satirical column in the *Chicago Tribune* (Royko 1997). Internet posters took things even further, setting up satirical and frequently tasteless web sites devoted to Ebonics. One site, the Ebonics Translator, which allowed visitors to enter 'standard English' texts and have them translated into Ebonics, proved so offensive that it was soon taken down. The *Village Voice* ran a nasty satirical piece on 'Ebonics for Travelers' (Hannaham 1997); and *Mad Magazine* did one called 'Hooked on Ebonics' (Hooked 1997).

It had been some time since race could safely be the butt of network television and mainstream print humor, and the enthusiasm with which Ebonics jokes and parodies circulated suggested the release of much pent-up racial hostility in the United States. Eventually the federal government interceded. In July, 1997, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) took a stand against Ebonics jokes as a form of workplace harassment, ruling that 'disseminating derogatory electronic messages regarding 'ebonics' to your co-workers is against the law' (Volokh 1997). Even the more reserved print media focused their racial hostility in terms of linguistic correctness, concluding by and large that Ebonics should not be dignified by capitalization, but should appear in their columns as *ebonics*, lower-cased to discourage any thought that it might be a

language in its own right like French, Spanish, Chinese, or Swedish.

Some black leaders and intellectuals went so far as to assert that Ebonics was neither a language nor a dialect but little more than slang or 'bad' English. They portrayed the Oakland resolution as an attempt to limit rather than encourage the achievement of black schoolchildren. The Rev. Jesse Jackson, appearing on CBS television's *Meet the Press*, chided Oakland for becoming a national laughingstock over the Ebonics issue. Jackson attacked the resolution promoting Ebonics as 'making slang talk a second language,' 'teaching down' to students, and 'an unacceptable surrender, borderlining on disgrace' (Rojas 1996). NAACP head Kweisi Mfume weighed in against Ebonics, as did James Meredith, the man who thirty-five years earlier had been the first black student at the University of Mississippi. Meredith announced the creation of an institute to teach black American males to abandon black English (School 1997). The columnist William Raspberry said Ebonics 'sounds rather like what our mothers used to call Bad English' (Raspberry 1996). He predicted that Ebonics would fail in the same way black English reading texts 'about tenements and rats and roaches, and—I'm not kidding—black math' programs had failed earlier (Raspberry 1997b). Raspberry also noted that black parents had objected in the past to any attempts 'to confirm their children in Ghettoese' (Raspberry 1997a). And Shelby Steele faulted Ebonics—which he characterized as 'broken English'—for emphasizing self-esteem rather than academic performance (Steele 1997).

The columnist Debra Saunders saw the Oakland resolution as unfortunately separatist in its intent: 'Apparently the board hasn't noticed that many black students speak English just fine, thank you. Their parents may not

want their kids forced into a linguistic ghetto' (Saunders 1996). Similarly, the poet Maya Angelou argued that "the very idea that African-American language is a language separate and apart' could encourage young black students not to learn standard English' (Golden 1997). And as recently as October, 1998, an ad signed 'Speak out against ebonics' and sponsored by a group called Atlanta's Black Professionals appeared in the *New York Times* implying that Ebonics represented a return to the pre-Civil Rights era (I Has a Dream 1998). In this ad, behind the legend 'I has a dream,' an accompanying graphic shows Martin Luther King turning his back on Ebonics. The text continues, 'if you think [Ebonics] has become a controversy because white America doesn't want us messing with their precious language, don't. White America couldn't care less what we do to segregate ourselves.'

Other critics perceived the Oakland resolution as an inappropriate attempt to claim a share of federal bilingual education funding. For black *Chicago Tribune* writer James Hill, this move turned Oakland's linguistic argument about the African roots of Ebonics 'into a gimmick and not even a cleverly crafted one' (Hill 1996). U. S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley quickly ruled that Ebonics was not a language, and was therefore not eligible for federal bilingual education funding (Bennett 1996). And Pennsylvania Senator Arlen Specter announced hearings on the question of Ebonics for his Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, a subgroup of the Senate Appropriations Committee.

Oakland Retreats to a Safer Position

The negative national response to the Ebonics resolution caught the Oakland

School Board by surprise. Some Board members—including its president—claimed they had never read the original resolution, which they characterized as 'hurriedly passed' at the urging of a community activist after 11 p.m. at the tail end of a long meeting full of 'long-winded tributes to outgoing board members' (Applebome 1997). Complicating things further, a new board took office two weeks after the resolution's passage, on January 1, with a new president, some continuing members, and some new ones who had not voted on the original resolution. Bombarded by calls from the press and attacks from a broad spectrum of critics, the School Board hired a public relations consultant and one month later, on Jan. 15, 1997, it passed an amended resolution retracting its initial claim that Ebonics was an independent language genetically encoded in the DNA of African Americans. Instead, the new resolution represented Ebonics as genetically descended from—that is, based on or related to—African languages and not merely a dialect of English. The Board soft-pedaled its claim on bilingual education funds, though it repeated the parallel it saw between African-American students and other students classified as having limited proficiency in English. And the Board insisted that it never intended for Ebonics to be *taught* in the classroom. Instead, it hoped to educate teachers in the language their students brought with them to the classroom, so that these teachers would be better able to lead their students from Ebonics toward standard English (OUSD 1997).

This amended resolution appeased many Ebonics opponents. It put forth a doctrine of language deficiency that the critics of Ebonics could live with, since it represented what to them was an obvious truth: Black English is not standard English, and for African Americans to succeed, they must acquire the language of

success, standard English. On the defensive, the Oakland schools put out the message that what they were really advocating was the Standard English Proficiency program, or SEP, a twenty-year old California program in use in many schools in the state and, in some instances, actually funded by the federal government. SEP uses the methodology of foreign language teaching to move students from nonstandard to standard English. Stressing contrastive analysis, teachers take the language that their students produce and ask them to 'translate' it into standard English. Teachers 'value' the students' home language, but make students aware of what they conceive of as its limits and deficiencies. If SEP sounds familiar, that is because it echoes the bidialectal educational programs of the 1960s, with their contrastive drills designed to take students from black English to the standard, programs so eloquently challenged at the time by William Labov and James Sledd. The difference between Oakland's SEP and other versions of the California program was Oakland's insistence that Ebonics was a separate language and not a nonstandard variety of English (Terry and Delpit 1998).

But the new version of the Oakland resolution was just what Jesse Jackson wanted. Even before the amended resolution was passed, Jackson met in Oakland with School Board leaders to confirm that their primary interest was teaching what he called 'standard, competitive English.' Jackson confirmed as well the common assumption that black English is bad English: 'Just as you go from Spanish to English, you must go from improper grammar (ebonics) to English,' and he called on the Department of Education to fund Oakland's proposal (Asimov 1996). By the time Arlen Specter held his Senate subcommittee hearings on Ebonics, on January 23, 1997, a week after

the amended Oakland resolution was passed, the standard view seemed to be that Oakland had righted itself after an initial mistake, whether one thought that mistake was the claim that Ebonics was a separate language, or that the problem lay in a poorly-worded, hastily passed resolution that did not reflect the intent of Oakland school administrators. At the start of the Specter hearings, subcommittee member Senator Lauch Faircloth denounced Ebonics as 'absurd,' found the School Board's recognition of it in classrooms to be 'political correctness gone out of control,' and then walked out (Sanchez 1997; the full hearings were broadcast on CSPAN). However, Carolyn Gettridge, the Oakland school superintendent, accompanied by school board member Toni Cook, a classroom teacher, and an Oakland high school senior, all testified to Specter's satisfaction that their goal was to move students toward standard English. The sociolinguist William Labov confirmed in his testimony to the subcommittee that African-American Vernacular English, the term linguists prefer to Ebonics, was an important and valuable social dialect, and he supported Oakland's SEP efforts, suggesting that since previous attempts to improve the school performance of African-American students were unsuccessful, using foreign-language methodology was certainly worth considering. According to Labov, 'It's the present, not the past, that's creating this division.' (Holmes 1996). Labov described two schools of thought concerning nonstandard English: one school bans nonstandard English from the classroom, fearing that legitimizing it will only encourage students to use it instead of standard English, while the other school argues that it is important to accept the language children bring with them to the classroom, since 'children learn most rapidly in their home language.' He

concluded, ‘The essence of the Oakland school board resolution is that the first method has not succeeded and that the second deserves a trial’ and he supported the Board’s efforts (Labov 1997).

The term *Ebonics* itself disappeared from a third and final modification of Oakland’s plan, released in May, 1997, a move that seemed necessary to calm public opinion, but which also signaled Oakland’s admission that it had lost the language battle. The *San Francisco Chronicle* praised this new revision: ‘In a wise move, the Oakland School District has decided to put the ebonics controversy behind it and get on with the real task of giving its students the speaking and writing tools needed to prosper in American society’ (Editorial 1997). But an accompanying news article made it clear that Oakland was committed to increasing the scope of the SEP plan, and hoped to commit a significant amount of money toward using foreign-language methodologies to teach standard English. The article further accused the School Board of violating the California public records law by refusing to release copies of the December Oakland Task Force Report, the ultimate source of the Ebonics controversy, until the May 2 School Board meeting (Olszewski 1997). By the Fall of 1997, a proposed boycott of Oakland schools for failing to carry through on Ebonics and SEP drew little response from parents, and the Oakland schools ran afoul of the federal government for not hiring enough bilingual education teachers. And in the Spring of 1998, California voters wary that recognizing any language but standard English in classrooms represented a call to linguistic insurgency, put an end not just to Ebonics but to bilingual education as well by passing Proposition 227, which required English immersion programs and the linguistic mainstreaming after one year of all non-English-speaking or LEP students.

The Role of Linguistics in the Ebonics Controversy

Although after the revision of the Oakland resolution the public quickly became satisfied that the Ebonics controversy had been appropriately thwarted or at least contained, if not resolved, there remain some interesting loose ends. For one thing, linguists complained about their inability to influence school language policy, both at the national and at the local levels. Oakland did not consult linguists in formulating its position on Ebonics, although it did refer obliquely and to some extent inaccurately to linguistic scholarship connecting black English to African languages. But as Geoffrey Nunberg (1997) points out, the press did consult linguists in reporting the Ebonics controversy, presenting their explanations more or less accurately. About ten days before Oakland modified its resolution, the Linguistic Society of America, at its annual meeting in January, issued a statement confirming the rule-governed status of African-American Vernacular English (LSA 1997). The LSA statement, reported widely both in the press and on television, stressed the contingent nature of definitions of *language* and *dialect*. It confirmed the usefulness of both *diversity* and *standard language*. And it stressed the advantage of recognizing the legitimacy of nonstandard language varieties in terms of teaching the standard. In addition, a number of linguists—including John Baugh, William Labov, James McWhorter, Salikoko Mufwene, John Rickford, and Geneva Smitherman—were interviewed by the media or wrote op-ed essays assuring the public that black English was valid, and that standard English was a legitimate goal. The *New York Times* and other newspapers ran articles detailing the colorful nature of Black English and its important contributions to the ‘standard’

vocabulary of the language (Jefferson 1997), and many writers and opinion makers weighed in with support for black English, now that it was to be considered not as a separate language, nor as a replacement for the standard, but as a valid form of cultural expression.

Unfortunately, this expert testimony on a national issue did not do much to sway the public's suspicion of Ebonics. What linguists say about language variation contradicts what people feel they know about standardization and the rightness and wrongness of language use. Educators, legislators, and the public at large are not yet ready to buy into the notion that stigmatized varieties of a language may be rule-governed, let alone useful anywhere but on the street. Even more disturbing to the public equilibrium is the observation that the acquisition of standard English, however it is defined, may in fact be insufficient to guarantee admission into the economic mainstream. Experts, even when their opinion was sought out, didn't have much impact on the Ebonics controversy because the experts didn't necessarily agree with one another (some going so far as to sidestep language issues altogether and call for a return to phonics in reading instruction), and because the position of linguists seemed so far out of line with the popular sentiment on the issue. There is a popular mistrust of expertise afoot, a sense that linguists are neither speaking, nor studying, the language everyone else is using. One thing everyone did agree on, however, was that the schools were failing to graduate students who could read and write effectively, but few people, including linguists, were convinced that a linguistic approach, particularly the kind advocated by Oakland, could effectively address this situation.

Is Ebonics a Language or a Dialect?

The public discussion of Ebonics drew attention to the idea that languages can be defined politically or culturally as well as structurally. The examples of Chinese and Scandinavian were cited in the LSA statement and elsewhere to illustrate this concept. Although Cantonese, Mandarin, Hakka, Wu, Xiang, and the other varieties of Chinese are not mutually intelligible, Chinese is considered to be a single language because the Chinese consider themselves to be one people, because mainland China is conceived of as a single political and cultural entity, and because the varieties of Chinese throughout the world share a common script. On the other hand, Danish, Swedish, Icelandic and Norwegian, which can be mutually intelligible (much like Hindi and Urdu), are considered separate languages rather than dialects of an all-embracing Scandinavian language, because they are used in distinct though neighboring countries which have not always gotten along in the past. But despite this explanation of the political and cultural aspects of language naming, the linguists generally confirmed the popular feeling that Ebonics did not need to be a separate language, since structurally and historically it was, for linguists and AAVE speakers alike, a dialect or variety of English. This view made sense to the public, since most speakers of Ebonics tend to move seamlessly among several varieties of English, a phenomenon known as code switching, and since non-Ebonics speakers can usually understand Ebonics without too much difficulty.

In addition to rejecting the politics behind classifying Ebonics as an independent language, some linguists noted as well that Oakland's equation of language variety with race would not work: there are African Americans who do not use Ebonics, just as there are non-

blacks who do use it. Furthermore, black English is not a single, monolithic variety of English. It varies from group to group and region to region (see Hinton and Pollock, this volume), by age, gender, social class, and context, just as all forms of language do. This linguistic information fueled some of the discussion of the Oakland controversy. For example, the legal scholar Patricia J. Williams, writing in the *New York Times*, picked up on the complexity of black English: ‘Can the notion of a singular black vernacular (if that is what ebonics purports to be) account for the enormous variations in black American speech?’ Williams noted wryly that black English is understood by those who don’t use it: ‘The contorted battles over rap lyrics as political speech—however densely vernacular the language is—have not been about the failure of the larger society to understand the words as English.’ She went on to challenge the equally problematic notion that there is a single agreed-upon variety of standard English: ‘Is so-called Received Standard American English what most Americans speak anyway?’ (Williams 1996). The linguist Geoffrey Nunberg cites a bill introduced into the Virginia legislature in response to the Oakland resolution to change the state’s official language from English to *standard* English. This legislation does not mention Ebonics by name but defines standard English as ‘the written and spoken language which is accepted by generally recognized authorities as grammatically correct in the United States and shall not include any dialect, patois, or jargon based on the English language,’ a definition which Nunberg rightly suggests strains the notion of what we mean when we say ‘standard English’ (Nunberg 1997).

Louis Menand, writing in *The New Yorker*, also rejected the essentialism of Oakland’s position on Ebonics: ‘it associates language with skin color, it

smacks of cultural separatism, and it standardizes a pattern of speech that is regarded as purely colloquial even by most of the people who use it’ (1997). But Menand rejects the linguistic explanation of Ebonics as one that is politically motivated:

The initial resolution of the Oakland school board was a reminder that linguistics has often been as much ideology as science ... Politics march right alongside the ‘scientific’ conclusions. The notion that African-Americans speak an underdeveloped form of the speech of Southern whites who emigrated from England connotes racial condescension; the notion that they speak an independent dialect connotes racial pride; and the notion that they speak a distinct language connotes cultural separateness. Everything seems to turn on which explanation you prefer.

Ebonics: A Minority View

Menand cites political agendas dismissively in order to devalue linguistic analysis and to make his point that Ebonics is not *language* but merely *slang*. But it is the political agenda behind naming Ebonics as a language that may be the most interesting aspect of the entire Oakland resolution. If as Max Weinreich suggested, ‘a language is a dialect with an army and a navy,’ Oakland was clearly and deliberately trying to become the mouse that roared by going up against the most heavily armed language in the world, as the following summary shows:

- the School Board selected language status for Ebonics out of a whole range of recommendations to focus on for its resolution

- naming Ebonics as a language sparked a strong national reaction which began to dissipate once the assertion was retracted
- claiming language status for Ebonics underscores the helplessness of Oakland, the only school district in California with a majority black student population, in the face of massive student underachievement
- and the failure of the attempt to supply Ebonics with an army and a navy forces us to consider the ambiguous position of black English in the United States.

Neither the public nor the linguists who focused on Ebonics devoted much time to exploring the fact that some people in Oakland clearly had felt the political need to classify Ebonics as a separate language. Indeed, the motivation of these Oakland residents was not just to grab bilingual education dollars, but instead possibly to counter the powerlessness they felt when confronted by the poor performance of their African-American students, or perhaps to express their frustration at having their language both unconsciously embraced and openly rejected by American popular culture. Williams (1996) touches on this frustration, observing that black English in the United States is both emulated as the height of creative linguistic style and reviled as the embodiment of illiteracy:

Perhaps the real argument is not about whether ebonics is a language or not. Rather, the tension is revealed in the contradiction of black speech being simultaneously understood yet not understood ... There are enough standard-English speakers who just love to 'talk black,' who at the drop of a hat break out in 'basketball' ... This phenomenon is part minstrelsy,

part presumptuousness and, most complicated of all, part of the mainstream's assimilation of black speech patterns that, once incorporated, are promptly forgotten as such.

Considering black English as a separate language was not a view invented in Oakland. Indeed, it is not a new phenomenon: a small but significant number of African American students whose education was not particularly afro-centric have reported to me over the past twenty-five years that they were told, by teachers in high school, that black English was not a dialect but a separate language. More recently, though, in discussions of the Ebonics controversy in the winter and spring of 1997 at the University of Illinois and elsewhere, while the black faculty tended to accept Ebonics as either a dialect of English or even a separate language, a surprising number of African American students reported that they had never been exposed to the concept of a racialized language variety at all, either in school or at home. Instead, they had been told by parents and teachers that there wasn't 'white English' or 'black English,' just 'good English' and 'bad English.' For example, one African-American high school senior in California told reporters, 'We don't say, 'I be.' That's slave language ... The last time I checked, black people just speak English' (Asimov and Olszewski 1996). Denial of a separate, black English is not a new phenomenon. Hale (1998: 19) reports that, consistent with the black post-Civil War self-consciousness regarding the culture of slavery days, one resident of the Georgia Sea Islands, where the Gullah dialect replete with Africanisms still survived, insisted to an anthropologist collecting folklore in 1919, 'Dere is not'in de matter wid us but bad grammar.'

These competing views of Ebonics—as language, dialect, bad English—are not necessarily exclusive, for even the radical independent language position on Ebonics may remain connected to the deficit model of black English. For example, Oakland fifth-grade teacher Carrie Secret, herself a member of the Oakland Task Force and a supporter of the initial Oakland resolution, classifies Ebonics as an independent language: ‘We see and understand that our language patterns and structure come from a family of languages totally unrelated to the Germanic roots of English ... The view is, ‘We are teaching you a second language, not fixing the home language you bring to school’ (Perry and Delpit, 1998: 80). But while Secret insists that she values the students’ home language, in performance she clearly shows a preference for standard English as correct English. The *San Francisco Chronicle* reports Secret telling her students that their ‘home language’ is their ‘L1,’ the conventional linguistic shorthand for a first language, or mother tongue, a practice consistent with a bilingual approach. She tells her students that the ‘L2’—the second language—is standard English (Walker 1996). Secret comments, ‘Telling them that black English is different, not wrong, makes them feel better about themselves.’ She adds, ‘If a child says, ‘You was sitting in my chair,’ I say to them, ‘L2 please—you were sitting in my chair.’” So far, so good. But if part of the goal of SEP is to counter linguistic insecurity, I’m not sure that goal can be achieved by telling English-speaking students that they are really speaking a foreign language, an idea that is patently a fiction to students and teachers alike.

Moreover, the pretense that SEP methodology deals with a relative difference in linguistic form rather than an absolute notion of right and wrong quickly falls away in actual practice, as we

can see from the following *San Francisco Chronicle* vignette from Secret’s class, where she emphasizes ‘correctness’ rather than ‘translation’ from L1 to L2:

Yesterday, Secret had her students read essays aloud and told them to *enunciate*.

‘jist for seven days ... ‘ one boy began.

Secret interrupted him. ‘You said, ‘jist.’ Use it *right*.’

The boy *corrected* himself using ‘just,’ the standard English *translation*.
[Walker 1996; emphasis added]

The problem here is that ‘jist’ is not necessarily an AAVE form. Indeed, the pronunciation indicated by spelling the word *jist* is not even marked as deviant, nonstandard, or dialectal by any of the leading English dictionaries. Perhaps this is a slip on the part of the instructor, but Secret repeatedly maintains that English, not Ebonics, is the appropriate language to use in school. Her support of students’ L1 is little more than a sop, as it becomes clear that her instructional goal is not translation but correctness. Similar examples of SEP pedagogy, with students dutifully ‘translating’ from what they or their teachers called slang or home language into what is conceived to be standard English, were presented in various television news reports whose intent was to allay public fears that the Ebonics revolution signaled some sort of social insurrection. In these demonstrations, saying it in standard English was always characterized as saying it correctly. The illustrations assured viewers that it was clearly business as usual in Oakland’s classrooms, with teachers grading the students on their

ability to approach a linguistically correct target form.

More problematic still in the Oakland fallout is the fact that no one called into question the SEP methodology as a bridge to standard English. Unfortunately, this sort of translation drill from source to target language may not be the most effective way to learn a language or a language variety. Foreign language methodologies may work with small, highly motivated groups of students, using well-trained teachers, but most American schools have not had great success in imparting required French or Spanish to their students. Even native speakers of Spanish in American schools may do so poorly in formal Spanish instruction that they require special Spanish classes for students who know the language but fail the tests. Nor does bilingual instruction for non-English speaking school children yield rave reviews—while California's rejection of bilingual education may reflect xenophobia, it also reflects a lack of confidence in a methodology that may work more often in theory than it does in practice.

The last, and what is likely to be the least popular of my observations, is that the acquisition of standard English, problematic as it may be in terms of pedagogy, has never guaranteed success in life or even access to the economic mainstream. Discrimination—on account of their language—against people who speak non-standard English usually masks other, more sinister forms of prejudice. Women and members of every ethnic and racial minority have found that mastering the mainstream varieties of English—say, legal language, business English, or technical jargon—by itself will not guarantee them equal treatment. Even if your language is irreproachable, if teachers, employers, or landlords want to discriminate against you, they will find another way to do so. Standard English

may be necessary, but it is seldom sufficient, for school and workplace success. And if our sports heroes, media celebrities, and public figures are anything to judge by, success is often achieved without standard English. In addition, few of the success stories of first-generation immigrants to this country involve the learning of impeccable standard English. As teacher's aide Yolanda Hernandez cynically put it when asked by a reporter to comment on the furor generated by the Ebonics resolution, 'Proposition 187, Proposition 209, and now this. It's easy to see a pattern. They don't want immigrants here, and they don't want us to get jobs. But they want us all to talk the same' (Rojas 1996).

Conclusion

Language in Oakland, as it often does elsewhere, masked deeper issues. The Ebonics resolution opened discussions on race relations, education, and a variety of social problems. Many people viewed the Oakland resolution as a declaration of independence, a separatist move going beyond language. When Oakland reversed course and tried to make its focus on Ebonics seem more like an assimilationist move, critics were appeased. But it seems to me that the Oakland resolution, both in its original and its modified form, also seemed to resist official or standard English, a move guaranteed to strike people as revolutionary. There is a perception abroad that privileging any voice other than standard English, even alongside standard English, even as a bridge to standard English, disrupts the intellectual and moral as well as the social order.

The response to the Oakland Ebonics resolution further suggests the continued existence of internal colonies in a postcolonial world, the existence of

subaltern peoples, an underclass whose voice remains unheard. That in itself seems to be one reason for Oakland's attempt to define itself out of English into its own language. The other, more practical reason, was surely to get funds equivalent to what was being spent on ESL students. Nativism came to the fore as some African-American community activists in Oakland must have wondered, 'Are we going to sit idly by while immigrants get a special education deal from the federal government?' Such thinking would seem to underlie that fact that in the Fall of 1997, Oakland budgeted some \$400,000 to support the SEP program while angering federal authorities by not hiring enough bilingual education teachers.

But critics and some supporters of the Oakland resolution as well noted that even if SEP programs bolster students' self-image, they have not been demonstrably successful at improving test scores. Complicating things further for those who see standard English as the only voice that is listened to, the paths to linguistic assimilation are not simple ones. Then there is James Sledd's (1973) criticism of bidialectalism and its relation to social mobility to consider: not everyone wants to move into the middle class, at least not on the terms that seem to be available. Even for the many whose goal is economic success, there is the realization that second language teaching techniques don't seem very effective in teaching second languages; how will they be effective teaching first languages? Translations from home language to standard English are wooden, mechanical, just another example of school busy work that doesn't match how language operates in the world outside the classroom.

The Oakland Ebonics controversy brought into relief not just the plight of underperforming school children. It

focused the nation's attention, for a brief time, on the political issues that can underlie questions of language. Ebonics foregrounded the struggle over who gets to name language. It forced Americans to consider how language varieties struggle for privilege and against stigma. And it showed as well that language pedagogy is, at best, an uphill battle. Most important, perhaps, it brought to the public arena, if fleetingly, the notion that standard English and Ebonics are constructed categories, just as class and race are. The world is always already multilingual (Calvet 1974) and multidialectal—as are individuals. Putting these notions together we see that the constructions we make of language are temporary and fluid, shifting as context and power bases shift. The American public did not take to this idea very readily—no surprise there—for that public sees language variation as fine so long as standards are maintained and the political order is not challenged. In this view, home language is valued so long as it is confined to the home, or the streets.

But Oakland's declaration of linguistic independence challenged those conventional standards and that linguistic order, with predictable results: Ebonics was not recognized as a language, nor were bilingual education dollars allocated for African American students. The fallback position Oakland moved to in response to the public outcry against Ebonics restored the status quo but left us with the unsettling reminder that language colonies continue to exist in a world that sees itself, politically, as very much a postcolonial one.

The Oakland School Board may have had an inkling that an independent language of Ebonics might not prevail even within the progressively multicultural but beleaguered city of Oakland. Their radical December 18 resolution provided an alternative, a concession to the old way of doing things that was overlooked by

the media and the linguists alike. According to the resolution, parents could have their children's speech classified not as a foreign language but as a pathological or deficient form of English: 'African-American parents who view their child's limited English proficiency as being non-standard English, as opposed to being West and Niger-Congo African Language based ... [may] have their child's speech disorders and English-language deficits addressed by special education and/or other district programs.' This remedial approach exemplifies how schools have been treating the language of black children for years, and in the end it did not differ all that much from how teachers supporting the Oakland Ebonics resolution, and armed with bilingual methodologies, treated their students' first language. It is clear that Oakland's linguistic 'revolution' failed because it was seen as too radical by the American media and public. But what added to its failure was the fact that, despite their revolutionary sloganeering, the teachers and administrators of the Oakland schools share with the public a conservative view of language that focuses, in the end, not on the language students bring to school, but on vague, idealized, and poorly understood standards of correctness that students are told to acquire. As the Task Force argued in its report, the problems of Oakland's underachieving African-American students are complex and require multiple solutions, attention to language being only a small part of the overall picture. It is unfortunate that the language issue drew so much negative attention to Oakland. A true linguistic revolution might have been just what Oakland needed, but I'm not sure what such a revolution would look like, and in any case, it was not to be.

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