Do Ebonics Critics Miss the Point?

Back in the days when most people might have thought “Ebonics” was some sort of medical specialty, Bob Fecho, who then taught and still teaches English at Simon Gratz High School in Philadelphia, began examining the language patterns and language concerns of his African American students. In “Learning From Laura” a study that became a chapter in the NWP book Cityscapes: Eight Views From The Urban Classroom (1996), Bob took a close look at one student who thought carefully about the very issues that were to move front and center nationally on a slow news day just before the Christmas vacation. We asked Bob to reflect once again on the topic of black English for this issue of The Voice; his response follows. In the box to the right, we present some of what his student Laura had to say, excerpted from the original study.
The language question, perhaps more so than any other issue, sharply divides the Afro-American nation, with working and underclass blacks on one side, middle-class and professional blacks on the other, and intellectuals and scholars vacillating somewhere in between.


Geneva Smitherman here speaks to questions I have had as I have inquired into the way language study has played out in my classroom. In particular, she gives insight into the mixed messages I have received from African American colleagues and students as I have tried to make sense of the best ways to teach children whose dialect differed markedly from the mainstream power codes. Older black teachers, ones whose lives have been spent primarily or entirely within the middle class, have usually been adamant that black dialect, while not to be demeaned, is also not to be accepted in the language classroom. They see standard English as the language of mainstream access, and they believe that teachers who do not insist on standard English assume an inability to learn on the part of black children and therefore marginalize these students. Yet, younger black colleagues, many of whom have been raised as children of the working class, and a large majority of my students, again primarily from working class backgrounds, share my belief that black dialect has a niche in a language arts classroom. They support the belief that understanding the language of the home opens ways to teach standard English to students who frequently resent the acquisition of the mainstream code.

Smitherman reminds us that language is intimately tied to identity, to the way we construct ourselves for others and the way others construct us. That while our language identity may be uniquely linked to our racial identity, so, too, is it linked to our class, generational, experiential and political identities, and — although Smitherman doesn’t explicitly say so — our gender and sexual identities. Therefore, we filter language study through attitudes bound to evidence a range of beliefs and intentions.

Language is one of our most personal possessions. The growing infant occupies herself deciphering the language code transmitted by immediate caregivers — in most cases her parents — and in the process creates a link between herself and her heritage. As the child’s world expands, peers become greater language influences, binding her to a community. By the time most children enter school, they possess the grammar of a dialect which is embedded in their ethnic, cultural, and familial discourses. Any teacher, particularly one whom the child perceives as an outsider, who attempts to alter the child’s language sets up a dynamic fraught with identity issues. The teacher finds himself involved in a process infinitely more complex than merely substituting one construction for another.
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All of this leads to the recent debate over the Oakland School District decision concerning Ebonics. Considering the range and the vociferousness of argument, one might be led to think that the Oakland School Board had advocated nude sensitivity training sessions for all elementary schools. If one doubts the assertion that language is frighteningly personal, then how does one explain the rage of the attacks denouncing the Oakland decision? In large numbers and with barely contained anger, pockets of the American middle and professional classes—both African and European Americans — decried this move as a lowering of standards and an attempt to further marginalize blacks.

It is these two charges—that understanding and using Ebonics in the classroom leads to a lowering of standards and is a means to keep blacks from accessing mainstream power venues— that I find upsetting and wrongheaded. I am open to an argument, such as the one Lisa Delpit makes, that students whose dialect differs from the mainstream must be schooled in the power codes in order to access the social, economic, and political power of the mainstream. But Delpit herself goes on to argue that the language of the home must be both celebrated and seen as a means for understanding the power code. She further explains that students whose home dialect differs from the mainstream must become critiquers of language in order to comprehend how this standard acquisition both affects them and the lives of others in their community.
In essence, students are learning and becoming fluent in two languages, one of which is frequently viewed as belonging to the oppressor. When students understand how these dynamics play out in the classroom and the world, they can gather insight into the language choices they are asked to make. They are not submitting to a lowering standards, but instead creating for themselves opportunity and access. Learning standard English is no indication of superior intellect. It is a choice of political, social, academic, and/or economic expediency.

If Ebonics is not about lowering standards, it is also not about marginalization. Students aren’t asked to use their home dialect in every
situation nor are teachers required to teach what students already know better than we do. Instead, teachers and students are being asked to understand the grammar of Ebonics and the ways this home dialect both supports and obstructs acquisition of standard English. If a student comes from a community where subject/verb agreement rules differ from standard rules, the teacher's and student's knowledge of this can help them understand the struggle this child will go through in school. Because the language is so tied to home and the community and doesn't interfere with communication even in the mainstream community, the child has little incentive to go through that struggle to change, especially if that change is too frequently associated in the working class black community as selling out to the white power class. If a teacher is aware of this, she or he will be more willing to continue to help the student rather than seeing the student as incapable of learning. If the child is aware of this, she or he will be more likely to try to bring this dilemma to some personal resolution.

Therefore, Ebonics is not an attempt to marginalize black children, but instead allows these students to more fully understand the ways standard English acquisition is and will continue to be a force in their lives. It is not intended to keep black children out of the lines of access to mainstream power, but instead intends to show these students that the language they bring to school is a vibrant one and they need not sacrifice one language for the other. Finally as Ebonics becomes a classroom tool, particularly as students become aware of the ways the dialect is used with such skill and pride in the works of African American writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Alice Walker, August Wilson, and John Edgar Wideman, they can come to see themselves as belonging in the wider academic community. The study of Ebonics does not exclude or marginalize, but rather welcomes all learners to the table.
My own classroom studies with my working class African American students show me that most of my students resent having to acquire standard English. While those who intend to enter the mainstream via employment and/or college acknowledge that fluency in standard English is necessary in order to make this transition, they are reluctant to become fluent because it signals separation from family and community. Here, for instance, is the way Cria, one of my former students, describes her standard English speaking aunt: “I think she lost her whole background...When I see her, I don’t see a black aunt, I see a white aunt.” Any student viewing standard English from this perspective is going to need many discussions about the impact of language choice before she will consider crossing the racial and class boundaries set before her. By acknowledging the legitimacy and vibrancy of Ebonics, we create classrooms where such discussions can take place. I believe that the result of such discussions will be a greater understanding of all language, and the beginnings of movement toward a more inclusive, more representative power code.

— Bob Fecho
Learning from Laura:

ON HOW CHILDREN ACQUIRE LANGUAGE:
"...language is formed from the society in which you live. I think children who hear slang speak it because it’s natural and it’s not to them as being wrong. ... You pick up things that aren’t necessarily good or bad, but because you see it and hear it, it becomes a part of you."

ON CODE SWITCHING:
"As a child, I also spoke (slang). Being part of more than one environment, I had to adjust myself. I had to know when and where was the time to speak this way. I was brought up speaking proper English, and to hear me speak (in slang) was sort of a shock.... Mother always thought that if I spoke (slang) continuously, I would soon adapt to this way of speaking. She knew that this was how the children were talking, but the difference was her child was not allowed to talk like this. I didn’t associate with many people, but at times when I did, I wanted to be in, be part of the crowd. This was how and why I began to speak like the other children."

ON THE LABEL "BLACK ENGLISH":
(From an interview): "Well first, my objection was why label black English black English. I mean, people speak slang all over. Now they say they have standard English and nonstandard English. There’s slang. Why label something — OK, there’s slang or nonstandard English that a white person might speak. It’s not labeled white English. It’s just called, non-standard English. And then it seems our world consists of so many racial problems as there is, I don’t understand why would they label a black person speaking non-standard English, why put a label on it?"