What the Children Convey: On Matters of Time, Talk, and Ebonics

by

Anne Haas Dyson

A small group of East Bay first graders is discussing the relative size of varied creatures and objects — including God. Among the children are Jameel and Monique, both African American, and Berto, who is Latino. Following is a small excerpt from their talk.

Jameel: But what about God. He’s bigger than everything.
Berto: No he isn’t. (and then more loudly) He AIN’T BIGGER THAN EVERYTHING.
Monique: You don’t know.

...*
Berto: He’s not bigger than Jesus.
Jameel: Jesus his son.
Berto: His baby.
Jameel: Son.
Berto: Baby.
Jameel: Son.

Berto: Daughter!
Monique: Son. Son. He really son. Uh huh. He’s the son. He is.

Jameel, Monique, and Berto are skillful language users, vigorous discussants, successful literacy learners — and speakers of “nonstandard” varieties of English. Although the transcript does not record their ways of pronouncing words, it does show that Berto’s lexical (vocabulary) choices include “ain’t” and that Jameel and Monique’s syntactic (or word arrangement) options allow them to delete, rather than only contract, forms of the verb to be. For example, in the last line of the transcript, Monique moves from calmly pointing out that “he really son,” to more pointedly (and urgently) saying “He’s the son. He is.” Matters of religion can get children, like adults, quite worked up!

*denotes omitted data
It is hard to reconcile the complexity and fluidity of the children’s talk with the confusing public discussion surrounding the Oakland School Board’s public stand (also confusing) on the language of many African Americans. In that discussion, children like Jameel and Monique seldom are represented as skillful users of a complex linguistic system, or as creative and clever speakers, capable of continually learning new ways with words in and out of school. There have been few references to the impact of Ebonics, or African American Vernacular English (A.A.V.E.), on the common culture, nor its literary use by honored artists like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. Indeed many of our great artists have told American stories steeped in this country’s powerful, vivid, and non-standard vernaculars (spoken varieties of English); included among these artists are white men from the American literary canon like Twain and Steinbeck.

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The initial reaction to the Oakland Board’s policy yielded public descriptions of many African American children’s language (which is also the language shared with their families) as “street talk,” “slang,” and even “garbage.” The State Superintendent of Public Instruction said that “it was a mistake to convey to kids that there is an appropriate time for this language” (The Examiner, December 29, 1996). And many high school students seemed simply at a loss. “We are like lab rats,” said one exasperated student (Oakland Tribune, December 20, 1996). “At a white school, you don’t see them talking about White English ... Do I seem like I’m speaking another language? They’re pinpointing the smallest thing. It ain’t no big thing.”

The central issue in the public commentary did not seem to be if children should graduate from public school able to use “Standard English.” There was, to my knowledge, no one who disputed this as a goal. The issues seemed to be, what kind of a thing is “ain’t no big thing,” so to speak? What should teachers “convey to kids” about language? And what does African American vernacular have to do with learning to read and write?

There are many accessible books on these issues, since they are not new ones — although, clearly, they are hardly passe. Among such books are Geneva Smitherman’s (1977/1986) Talkin’ and Testifyin’: The Language of Black America, the National Council of Teachers of English collection Tapping Potential: English and Language Arts for the Black Learner, edited by Charlotte Brooks (1984), and Lisa Delpit’s (1995) more recent Other People’s Children.

In this article, I write from the perspective of a literacy educator and researcher who has spent many years listening closely to children in Berkeley and Oakland primary schools. I hope to contribute to the public discussion by drawing attention to the voices of young children, their power and potential as learners of oral and written language, and some of the ways in which that power can be squandered. In addition, I aim to raise some concern about a demographic group whose linguistic sophistication has not figured in the public discussion to date — the children whose home language is a version of so-called Standard English. I begin, however, with a Berkeley classroom in which the notion of language differences is discussed in a strikingly straightforward way.

On Dep O’s and Deep Ones: Why “Ain’t No” May Be a Big Thing

Concerns about a “standard” English are, to some extent, about having a common written English (including spelling and word order), despite the varied vernaculars of this country’s regions and social groups, not to mention those of the many nations that include English as one of their languages. But those concerns are not only nor even mainly about ease of communication. They are about “standards” and the power to set them and, also, to meet them, about being judged acceptable by society’s gatekeepers, those who control access to colleges, universities, and employment opportunities. “Ain’t” is not less clear than “isn’t,” but its social reverberations are different. And this is why people are so intense, emotional, and ambivalent about some of the children’s ways with words. I say this as one who, as a 10-year-old, became the “ain’t”
police officer in my own family — an ill-fated career move. My sisters, like reasonable people everywhere, resisted arbitrary authority and linguistic arrogance; their “ain’ts” multiplied like the Biblical loaves.

Connections:
Research and Practice

Disrespectful attitudes interfere with children’s literacy learning much more than does nonstandard speech in and of itself.

Given the strong emotions that surround language differences, it is quite remarkable that, in Rita Davies’ East Bay classroom, first graders who themselves speak varied versions of English often discuss language differences quite directly. They point out word pronunciations that strike them as different — and “Miss Rita” points them out as well, explaining that those different pronunciations have a common English spelling. For example, while discussing with her children their thank you letters to the folks at Berkeley’s Depot for Creative Re-Use, Rita wrote the name of this recycling center on the board and then commented:

Ms. Rita: This [Depot] is a funny word, isn’t it? It looks like “de pot,” doesn’t it? But we don’t pronounce the t, and we say “de po.” Actually, ... we say “dep o” ... but here you say “de po.”

Erin: What if I went home and said to my mom, “We’re going to the dep o!” (much delight as children turn to each other and play with the sound of “deep” O’s and “dep” O’s).

Moreover, when Rita orally reads a sentence, making small changes in the sentence’s grammar — as we all do when we read something new and slip into our usual ways with words — she points out that an idea may be expressed differently in different kinds of English, even though books written in America usually “say it” in a particular way. And in reading to her children, she has been heard to comment that the people in a book talk in ways that make her think they might be from her home place.

Rita’s straightforward, nonpatronizing attitude is just the stance that teachers should have during literacy lessons for young children, or so say most professional educators, including those previously referenced. But her attitude sharply contrasts the emotional turmoil — which is a substitute for the usual uncomfortable silence — that has accompanied the issue of language differences in the Bay Area. How can this be?

Rita is an experienced and skilled teacher ... and she has a secret classroom ingredient — her candor about her own linguistic and cultural difference. This candor would cause no alarm among the many passionate participants in the discussion about the Oakland language policy statement. And this is because Rita was born in England; her home language (i.e., the variety of English she uses) is not stigmatized in a way that denies its speakers’ intelligence nor the authenticity of its history. Rather it is regarded as an important part of the complex story of English and of our own country.

Attitudes toward varieties of English reflect the history of power relationships in a particular society. Varieties of American English that are associated with the working class and with ethnic and racial minorities are considered “nonstandard” and less prestigious, despite the fact that linguists consider them as complex and complete as varieties considered “standard.” Educators and other adults might judge children who speak nonstandard English as “unintelligent” or “unlikely to do well in language arts.” In fact, adults might “hear” nonstandard forms spoken by children of color, even when the children do not use them (Williams, Hopper, Natalicio, 1977; more recently, attitudes toward children’s storytelling have been studied — see Cazden, 1988, and, for discussion, Delpit, 1995). These disrespectful attitudes interfere with children’s literacy learning much more than does nonstandard speech in and of itself.

Listening Anew to the Children:
The Seeds of Linguistic and Literary Power
Jameel and Monique’s home language linked them to the complex historical, social, and political processes of language use and change. Some of their language forms, like double negatives, are found in many varieties of English all over the globe (and were acceptable
in Shakespeare’s England). Other forms are particular to A.A.V.E. and reflect its own unique origins. Ain’t as a substitute for isn’t is very common in English varieties, but ain’t for didn’t seems to be particular to A.A.V.E; the linking of multiple negatives (not just two) to express strong negation also seems particular to A.A.V.E.

Jameel: This bird is very interesting.... This is a crocodile bird that cleans out the little stuff stuck up in his (the crocodile’s) teeth. The crocodiles will never eat him. They will never eat their dentist! (turns page) ... Now this is a duck. It’s a member of the duck family. (Dyson, 1993, p. 126)

When children have the opportunity, as they do in Louise’s and Rita’s classes, to use language for many different purposes — to discuss with their peers, to tell stories, to teach — they reveal the language power that the most sophisticated literary artists exploit. Consider, for example, a book that is a favorite among many Bay Area children I know, Eloise Greenfield’s Honey I Love (1978). Her poem about Harriet Tubman begins this way:

Further, like all of us, Jameel and Monique speak more formally or less, depending on the situation — and middle-class African American professionals may control a wider range of styles than do most other Americans (Whatley, 1981). In first grade, when I knew them, Jameel and Monique were not from socioeconomically middle-class homes, and, like all 6-year-olds, they were still developing the patterns of their home language; but they had the language flexibility and sensitivity necessary to learn to control their speech styles.

For example, when Jameel was teaching others (including me) about class lessons, he appropriated the language (i.e., the vocabulary and phrasing) of his teacher Louise Rosenkrantz, another skilled Bay Area educator. Here is Jameel explaining a picture of a strange bird to me; he uses both the language of science and of metaphor, which may be particularly strong among children of African American cultural heritage (Scott, 1990; Smitherman, 1977).

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Harriet Tubman didn’t take no stuff
Wasn’t scared of nothing neither
Didn’t come in this world to be no slave
And wasn’t going to stay one either

Greenfield could have written, “Harriet Tubman didn’t take any stuff / Wasn’t scared of anything either”—but those lines do not mean the same thing. They are not as forceful, nor as particular to the African American experience. After all, Greenfield was not writing an essay about, or biography of, Harriet Tubman; she was using the sound and sense of the language to convey aesthetically Tubman’s strength. On the other hand, in another poem, Greenfield used the familiar (and quite “standard”) cadence of somebody “doesn’t live here anymore” to convey a little sister’s gentle indignation:

It’s summertime
And Reggie doesn’t live here anymore
He lives across the street
Spends his time with the round ball

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It’s summertime
And Reggie doesn’t live here anymore
He lives across the street
Spends his time with the round ball
Jump, turn, shoot
Through the hoop
Thinks he’s Kareem
And not my brother

Taking a long view, then, the overriding goal for language education throughout the school years should not be the mastery of any one genre or language variety but the capacity to negotiate among contexts, to be socially and politically astute in discourse use.

Clarifying Teaching Goals:
Reading, Writing, and Speaking
As I understand the public commentary, one reason educators and the public might reject flexibility as a goal and, instead, convey that there is no time and no place for any voice but a “standard” one is a fear that children who speak nonstandard dialects cannot learn to read. But this is simply not true (Piestrup, 1973; Sims, 1982; Simons & Johnson, 1974).

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Jameel and Monique, for example, both became good readers and writers in first grade ... although, it is true that A.A.V.E. potentially could have interfered with their learning. In learning to read and write, young children must pay close attention to how their oral words yield a written message, and vice versa. Confusion can result if teachers ask children to pronounce words and, then, “listen real hard” for sounds that they simply do not pronounce (e.g., the d in “old,” and other final sounds in words ending in consonant clusters). Similarly, teachers might continuously interrupt children as they read, attempting to teach “pronunciation” instead of “reading” (the ability to make sense of written codes) — another confusing “instructional” strategy that teaches children not to trust their own good language sense. Moreover, Jameel, Monique, and their peers might have increased their use of nonstandard patterns, rather then adopting a more standard speech in the official school world, if their teacher had constantly corrected their speech, which is different from straightforwardly discussing differences in phonics lessons and, as children progress, in editing sessions for writing.

Even the “translation” method (i.e., the deliberate comparison of “home language” and “standard English” forms) has its limits. Sometimes children’s oral reading (and writing) errors are not evidence of their home language patterns at all but, rather, of their efforts to control English in new ways (Scott, 1992). For example, children who, when speaking, tend not to use the -s ending on third person singular verbs (e.g., “He get”) may, when reading, overuse the -s (e.g., “You gets...”). The frustration for both teachers and children caused by well-intentioned but ill-fated “instructional” strategies were vividly captured years ago by Ann Piestrup (1973), in her study of “Black Dialect Interference and Accommodation in Reading Instruction in First Grade”— a study completed in the Bay Area. In her words:

Efforts to find deficits in children or to focus on their language differences may only confound the problems of negative teacher expectations and evade the problem of functional conflict between teachers and children with different cultural backgrounds. Teachers can alienate children from learning by subtly rejecting their Black speech. They can discourage them by implying ... that the children lack potential.... Teachers can also involve children in learning to read in a way that capitalizes on their lively speech. They can deal with confusion as it arises without dwelling on language differences. This requires the kind of attentiveness shown by the Black Artful teachers [the name Piestrup gave to teachers] who seemed to thoroughly understand their Black students, and to have no difficulty teaching them to read. (Piestrup, 1973, p. 170)

The Need for Times and Places for Talk about Talk
To me, as an academic in language and literacy, a former urban first grade teacher (and a child-sized “ain’t” police officer), the public dialogue of the last month has been a stark display of limits. First, it has made clear the limits of the university as a community intellectual center, as a place for educational talk...
about talk. These issues about children’s language differences and literacy learning are hardly new. And yet, a public call for teacher respect for, and knowledge about, children’s language provoked a public outcry; and in both call and outcry, nonstandard language and illiteracy often seemed conflated. “Old” ideas about language differences and literacy (like Piéstrup’s) are found in thick monographs on library shelves and in linguistic courses for those privileged to attend universities. (President Clinton, who seems in the mood lately for giving the nation literacy homework, might assign us all to watch again PBS’s series on *The Story of English.*)

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Moreover, teacher education programs (even local ones) do not necessarily help students become knowledgeable about these issues. New teachers, anxious to learn how to keep order and structure a reading lesson, need guidance in learning that a too-secret ingredient for teaching success is an awareness of how they themselves figure into our complex world of dynamic but different cultures, voices, and access to power.

In this publication of the National Writing Project, it seems reasonable to call attention to the urgent need for public schools themselves to become sites for faculty and community discussion. Information can and should be sought from language specialists, but, in the end, teachers have to be familiar with the particular languages of children in their own schools. Moreover, only parents and community members can explain their concerns and hopes for their own children, and only teachers can reflect with each other on their particular frustrations and successes in fulfilling those hopes and addressing those concerns. As Linda Rogers, another fine Bay Area first grade teacher, points out to me again and again, school dialogues about difficult, emotion-filled issues are not easy — but they are indispensable (Dyson and the East Bay Teacher Study Group, 1997).

Second, the public commentary has also revealed the limits of framing talk about language differences as if it were an issue only for “some” of our children. No where in the commentary has there been any concern voiced for children growing up speaking a version of standard English — children who are surely making their own interpretations of the adults’ dialogue. Popular radio “call-in” shows display the many accents and dialects of our nation (MacNeil, 1995). What sort of democracy can we have if children learn to dismiss some voices out of hand (and out of mind)? How can children understand our history, our current social struggles, our literature without an appreciation of our changing languages? How prepared will our children be for participation in an emerging world order in which there are increasing varieties of English around the globe?

In her first poem in the book *Honey, I Love,* Eloise Greenfield’s narrator, a young girl, talks about her pleasure in listening to her cousin talk:

Cause every word he says just kind of slides out of his mouth
I like the way he whistles and I like the way he walks
But honey, let me tell you that I LOVE the way he talks
I love the way my cousin talks

Now, in this month of Black History, of Brotherhood and Sisterhood, it would be a fine teaching goal to promote, in all our children, this sort of pleasure in words, this sort of appreciation for the rhythms of our own, and our cousins’, ways with words.

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