What’s in a Name?
That by Which We Call the Linguistic Consequences of the African Slave Trade

by JOHN BAUGH

The term Ebonics was coined by Robert Williams, a black psychologist, in 1973 at a conference that he hosted at Washington University in St. Louis. During his January 23, 1997 testimony before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, Williams stated:

“A group of Black scholars and myself argued that we needed to define the language spoken by many Blacks rather than let others define it for us. At that conference I combined two terms: 1) EBONY, meaning black and 2) PHONICS, meaning the science of speech sounds to form the term Ebonics. In 1975, I published a book entitled: Ebonics: The True Language of Black Folks.

“Ebonics has two major dimensions as a language:
1) A lexicon or the vocabulary of the language.
2) Morphology or the study of the structure and form of the language that include its grammatical rules.

“EBONICS may be defined as the linguistic and paralinguistic features which on a concentric continuum represent the communicative competence of the West African, Caribbean, and United States slave descendants of African origin. It includes the grammar, various idioms, patois, argots, ideoleicts, and social dialects of Black people.” (Williams, 1975, p. VI, quoted from his Senate testimony.)

African American vernacular English is unquestionably a dialect of English, albeit one that is not standard; statements to the contrary are linguistically uninformed. However, I know of no professional linguist who would diminish the unique linguistic heritage of American slave descendants in comparison to all other U.S. immigrants.

Whereas the typical European immigrant may have come to the United in poverty speaking a language other than English, they were not enslaved captives who were isolated from speakers of their native language, nor were they denied access to education and literacy by law. By striking contrast, slaves were immediately segregated from other speakers of their native language by their captors to prevent uprisings. The typical European immigrant also obtained legal rights under the law, whereas slaves and many of their descendants could not seek legal relief through the courts.

These unique historical circumstances are profound, and belie the pervasive linguistic ignorance that has been displayed in response to Oakland’s efforts to teach standard English to many of their African American students. Black English is not simply “bad English,” nor can it be dismissed as mere slang. Linguistic research by many of the leading black and white scholars in the field clearly demonstrate systematic and rule governed linguistic patterns that differ considerably from the prescriptive standard English norms that are essential to full participation in any professional arena.

Thus, while I take considerable exception to any interpretation of “Ebonics” as a language other than English, I commend the efforts of educators who acknowledge the unique linguistic consequences of slavery in pedagogy that intends to foster mastery of standard American English.

John Baugh writes “in three capacities: as a professor of linguistics and education, as a former director of Stanford’s teacher education program, and as a black person who attended inner-city public schools in Philadelphia and Los Angeles as a child.”