Ebonics, or Language as a Class and Status Marker

by

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The controversy over the Oakland School Board's attempt to improve instruction for the many African American children who enter the public schools speaking nonstandard English has been most revealing of conflicting attitudes toward race, class, language, and the public schools.

The first fact to note is that no child is responsible for the color of his skin, the language he speaks, his economic status, or the culture he inherits. These are givens. The second is that the public schools and the teacher's first duty is to accept and respect him as he is, from the first moment he steps onto the school grounds.

If he speaks a nonstandard form of English, he is not to be made to feel ashamed or inferior or inadequate on that account. Simply put, it's profoundly immoral for the school or the teacher to suggest that how a youngster speaks is "wrong," or to suggest he's been improperly taught by his parents. To make a youngster feel ashamed of his parents or of himself for the English he uses is unforgivable. The only important question about his language is this: can he say what he needs to say and be understood by the person he's speaking with? The issue is communication — it's adequacy or inadequacy — and nothing else matters at that point of contact with persons outside the home. In time, he will acquire the skills he perceives to be of benefit to himself, but only if and when they can be shown to advantage, more than disadvantage, him.

Further fact: there is no such thing as "correct" or "incorrect" English. Such absurd notions were killed off years ago by those who developed the discipline known as linguistics. There is really no such thing as one "standard" English; there are many forms of it, depending upon the degree to which they vary from some fairly arbitrary practices and conventions of English as used and understood by other groups of users of the same language. And every user of a language — any language — modifies the conventions to a greater or lesser degree because no two users can employ language in precisely the same way.

Ebonics (for Black English) is simply a coined word referring to a number of dialectal forms of English both spoken and understood by African Americans without their having to make a special study of them. The several dialects covered by the term evolved over a period of years from native African languages in association with several dialects of English spoken by the earlier English settlers and slave owners. Black English began as a spoken language and has largely remained so to this day.

Further fact: all those who would read and write English well, standard or not, must invest a certain
amount of time learning those conventions of the spoken and written language used by most speakers and writers at any given time — in both formal and informal settings. Understandably, those who have invested large amounts of energy and diligence learning the conventions prescribed by language purists are most inclined to support and defend their expenditures.

Hence, the rush of the likes of Maya Angelou, Ishmael Reed, Jesse Jackson and others to condemn the Oakland Board for its attempts to find untied ways to teach the conventions to those who have been slow, or reluctant, to learn them.

Adepts at a learned language tend to frown upon those who are content to get by speaking the mother tongue, burrs and all. Linguistic snobbery is forever with us.

If the Oakland Board is attempting to get teachers to teach African American youngsters the hows and the whys of their first language, then teachers must make a study of Black English themselves, if they don’t already know it. Such a requirement should be considered no different from that of a math teacher to learn math before attempting to teach it, because one can’t readily teach anything of which one is ignorant, including the history and development of the conventions of the English language. These are in constant change and evolution — old conventions yielding to new: Middle English briddes for birds, and thrid for third; the current pronunciation of off-un for off-ten, even as we retain the unpronounced t in the spelling of the word. And, who knows, eventually aks for ask?

What is remarkable in the negative responses to the Oakland Board’s intentions is the underlying racism that always surfaces when African Americans demand their place in the sun. Those who believe that Blacks are inferior to Whites — and their legions are many — abhor the inventiveness of the “underclasses,” particularly their forms of dress, speech, hairstyles, musics and the like. Slang, or “street talk,” as some would term it, is the name given to newly-coined words, or new usages for old words, before they make their way into respectable use — by those who consider themselves superior to the inventors of it. Who doesn’t write and say okay by now or use the slang word jazz in thoroughly ordinary speech and writing?

Unfortunately, the Oakland Board has been slow to clarify its intentions. If the path to higher education and better-paying jobs lies through a mastery of the confusing and conflicting conventions of what some term “standard English,” then African Americans, a numerical minority in the country, have little choice but to learn the language manners of the dominant social, economic, and political classes — these gatekeepers to the avenues of success in the dominant culture.

Nothing very positive can be forthcoming from those who would destroy the public schools by underfunding, then fleeing them, then condemning them for trying to educate all the children of all the people, or from those who assert their own class and racial superiority to African Americans by denigrating their language and achievements — among which have been the development of some truly remarkable survival strategies, from those who take a sinful pride in their learning, considering themselves virtuous for having acquired special knowledges and skills, however, subsequently, they choose to use them. Virtue lies in deeds, not words.

No man or woman is superior to another based upon his or her pronunciation of the word tomato or his spelling of the word potato, but try selling that proposition to the language police. The School Board is on the right track, however awkwardly it’s tried to explain its adoption of a new, and necessary, policy. If the old ways didn’t work, it’s time to try something different, beginning with respect for a people who’ve had to fight every inch of the way for whatever advancements the dominant white cultures have grudgingly granted them. The least the rest of us can do is cut the Oakland schools some slack to try new approaches to old and, thus far, insoluble problems. Lighten up, Dudes!

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