EBONICS, LANGUAGE, AND POWER

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Modern education not only corrupts the heart of our youth by the rigid slavery to which it condemns them, it also undermines their reason by the unintelligible jargon with which they are overwhelmed in the first instance, and the little attention that is given to accommodating their pursuits to their capacities in the second.


The current furor and confusion in the U.S.A. over the role of “Ebonics” in education is but a recent skirmish in a long-running struggle. It is not new, not confined to “Black English,” or to English in general, not confined to education, and certainly not confined to the U.S.A. It is a controversy that surfaces in North America and around the world time and time again. On all five continents, coercive power relationships between socio-economic elites wielding state power and oppressed groups wielding little or none find linguistic reflexes. The elites speak the “official” state language or the “standard” variety of a language—in the present case, “Standard English” (SE)—which they made official or standard; the oppressed groups (not necessarily minorities, as in the present case) are decreed by the same elites to speak a less acceptable or unacceptable language or a socially stigmatized variety of the same language, like “Black English.” Very real objective linguistic differences thus provide yet another excuse for discrimination in many areas of public life, including education, (so-called) criminal justice systems, employment, media access, and even labor unions. The public policy decisions in different countries that result from these periodic convulsions, often enshrined in statute and case law, concern linguistic human rights, and they have wide-ranging social consequences for hundreds of millions of people. The rhetorical barrage surrounding the present struggle serves to confuse the real issues, or to ensure that they are not discussed at all, which benefits only one side in the status quo.

For these reasons and because the role of language in education is but one of several examples of the critical nexus of language and state power, the “Ebonics” issue is a vital one for working people everywhere. The radical right in the U.S.A. recognize its importance and are all over the mass media using it to push their own domestic agenda, i.e., a relentless attack on the burgeoning U.S. underclass, spiced with obvious racism,

one manifestation of which is the defunding of public education. Symptomatic of the level of confusion, misinformation and dis-information, at least one supposedly radical left group, the (Trotskyite) International Socialist Organization (ISO, the U.S. equivalent of the British SWP), has unwittingly aligned itself, albeit for different reasons, with radical conservative demagogues like Rush Limbaugh, Mike Royko, William Raspberry, and George Will; the ISO opposes attention to Ebonics because it sees such attention as an irrelevant distraction from the “real issues” in U.S. education—racism and lack of funding (see, e.g., the editorial and letters section of the January 3rd and 17th issues, respectively, of the ISO’s paper, Socialist Worker). And perhaps in reaction to the 300-year denial to African-Americans of access to literacy, education, and socio-economic status typically associated with command of SE, usually well-meaning liberals like Kweisi Mfume, Maya Angelou (“incensed”), Jesse Jackson (“ungrammatical English”), and Ellen Goodman (“legitimizing slang”) have come out with reactionary, ill-informed public pronouncements. Some familiarity with the basic linguistic concepts involved and with research findings on (in this case, educational) solutions is required for an informed and appropriately targeted response, and also in order to initiate a long overdue discussion of libertarian approaches to language education and language in education.

Ebonics

“Ebonics” is a term coined by Robert Williams at a 1973 conference, the proceedings of which, edited by Williams, were published two years later as Ebonics: The true language of black folks. He defined it as “the linguistic and paralinguistic features which on a concentric continuum represent the communicative competence of the West African, Caribbean, and United States idioms, patois, argots, idiolects, and social forces of black people. . . . Ebonics derives its form from ebony (black) and phonics (sound, the study of sound) and refers to the study of the language of black people in all its cultural uniqueness.” (1975, p. vi)

The Journal of Black Studies devoted a special issue (June, 1979) to Ebonics, but other terms more often employed by linguists are “Black English,” “Black English Vernacular” (BEV), and “African-American Vernacular English” (AAVE). AAVE is the term which will be used here, except when citing those who refer to “Ebonics.”

The other terms more accurately reflect the fact that we are concerned not just with the sounds, or pronunciation, of “Black English”, such as final-consonant deletion (they see him for “they seed him”), final consonant cluster reduction (mos for “most”) or “th”/“f” substitution (wif for “with”), but with its grammar (morphology and syntax),
meaning (lexicon and semantics), and use (discourse and pragmatics), as well. With considerable variation both within and across speakers, common morpho-syntactic differences between AAVE and SE, for example, involve subject-verb agreement (She like, They like), copula deletion (They feels as though they even), past time reference (He done seen him), negative inversion (Don’t nobody see), and double (sometimes even triple) negatives (I ain’t never doin that no more) (see, e.g. Fasold, 1972; Labov, 1972; Wolfram, 1969). There is nothing inferior (or superior) about any of these constructions. If some varieties of AAVE can give expression to an idea about time much earlier than the time of speaking by use of a nifty auxiliary: “I bin read that book,” whereas most “white” varieties have to use a clumsier adverbial construction, “I read that book a long time ago,” to say the same thing (example courtesy of Ralph Fasold), it is not that AAVE is better or the white varieties worse, just that they are different.

The fact that most AAVE speakers are intelligible to speakers of other varieties most of the time, and vice versa, does not alter the fact that some differences do nevertheless cause communication breakdowns and that those can occur without speaker or hearer, e.g., teacher and student, understanding either that or why they have occurred. The late Charlene (“Charlie”) Sato (1989) showed, moreover, that the degree of difference and its import for instruction often go unrecognized, affecting both comprehension and classroom participation in hidden ways. For example, many a SE-speaking immigrant in Hawai‘i has interpreted Hawai‘i Creole English (HCE) neva, in I neva see him, as SE “never,” instead of what it really means, i.e., “didn’t,” in “I didn’t see him,” neva functioning as a past time marker in HCE. Similarly, the African-American child who writes “I be fighting,” which is true, only to have a white SE-speaking teacher correct it to “I am fighting,” which is false, for example (courtesy of Ralph Fasold), is frustrated and confused, and his teacher blissfully unaware of the fact (or the facts).

Dialect differences can also often lead to differential participation in classroom interaction, Sato (1989) showed, that in turn being interpreted by some teachers as a sign of low academic ability or an “attitude” problem. To cite but one example, in a study of a first-grade classroom in Berkeley, Michaels (1981) described how a Caucasian teacher’s own tightly organized “topic-centered” style, in which thematic development is accomplished through lexical cohesion, the linear ordering of events, and so on, matched that of the white students in her class, but failed to accommodate during the same lesson to her African-American students’ “topic-associating” presentational style, with its series
of segments or episodes that are implicitly linked in highlighting some person or theme. Familiar prosodic (intonational) features of the white children’s speech, for instance, made it easy for the teacher to time her comments and questions appropriately for them, allowing her to provide successful linguistic scaffolding. Conversely, she appeared to misread stress-placement and vowel-lengthening cues in the black children’s speech, resulting in her disrupting rather than supporting and elaborating on their presentations. (For additional examples of often unrecognized comprehension problems and clashes in interactional style arising from dialect differences in education, see Sato, 1989.)

Numerous linguistic studies of AAVE over the years have documented its richness, expressiveness, and communicative adequacy (see, e.g., Labov, 1969, 1995). Like any other natural human language or language variety, AAVE is systematic and rule-governed, its rules sometimes less complex than those of SE, sometimes more so. To illustrate the greater complexity (example courtesy of Ralph Fasold), AAVE offers three tenses (He thinking about it, He be thinking about it, and He think about it) for two in SE in the same domain (He is thinking about it and He thinks about it), allowing more precision. Those rules and the varieties are, again, not better or worse, just different. AAVE is not a separate language, however (as the original Oakland, California, School Board resolution unfortunately implied, allowing opponents another opening for their attacks), just a variety of English. While there are no hard and fast rules, the usual criterion for distinguishing separate languages from separate varieties of the same language (including geographically, ethnically or social class-based dialects) is mutual intelligibility. If 80% or more of what speaker A says is comprehensible to speaker B, they are usually held to speak different varieties of the same language, not different languages (although there are exceptions, Danish, Norwegian and Swedish, for example, being much closer than this, yet referred to as separate languages). Which of two or more varieties of a language is considered the prestige variety is not a linguistic issue, but a sociolinguistic one, i.e., a function of the prestige of its speakers. In the often quoted words of the linguist Max Weinreich, “A language is a dialect with an army and a navy.”

The stigmatization of AAVE reflects not its linguistic qualities, but negative attitudes towards AAVE speakers. For example, it so happens that a number of features of AAVE are also common in several varieties of American English spoken by some whites in southern states, e.g., Arkansas, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and the Carolinas, yet they are not considered problematic when produced by the likes of such fine moral guardians as Bill Clinton, Jimmy Carter, Howell Hefflin, Strom Thurman, or Jesse Helms. Similarly, some varieties of so-called “standard British English” are just as different from “standard
American English" in pronunciation and vocabulary (although not in major systems like verb structure) as "standard American English" is from AAVE, sometimes more so, yet they rarely elicit the same hostility. For example, most British speakers say lift, boot, and holiday for American elevator, trunk, and vacation, Have you got the time? for Do you have the time?, Have you seen today's paper? for Did you see today's paper?, and so on. Yet many Americans still hold what they wrongly think of as (homogenous) "British English" in high esteem, higher even than their own variety in some cases. These and numerous other examples that could be cited from around the world show clearly that positive or negative evaluations are not linguistically based; the "problem" with "non-standard" varieties lies in the ears and prejudices of the hearers, not the mouths and minds of their speakers. It would be a mistake, however, to dismiss negative attitudes towards AAVE as simply one more manifestation of racism. While much of the criticism and many of the critics may well be racially motivated, the same stigmatization is often performed by speakers of a "standard" language or dialect at the expense of speakers of a "non-standard" one who are members of the same ethnic group. Obvious examples include speakers of "standard" British English and "Cockney" English or of "restricted" and "elaborated" codes in the U.K. (see below), "standard" American English and Appalachian English, "high" and "low" German, and "standard" French and Quebecois or Cajun French. Power is at least roughly distributed along racial lines in many societies, including the U.S.A., and in turn with linguistic differences, but it is the power to discriminate along racial, linguistic, or any other lines that is the real issue.

Even so-called "standard" English varies considerably with geography, ethnicity, social class, and other factors, as well as over time. Compare, for instance, what is considered SE by elites in New York, California, and Alabama, or in India, Australia, Singapore, and Nigeria, or in London, Liverpool, and Edinburgh. It quickly becomes apparent that the ruling classes (of different ethnic backgrounds) in English-speaking countries around the world all have their own peculiar local notions of SE, which always happen to coincide with the way they and their friends speak, and which they proceed to exploit as one more means of discriminating against those who speak differently. In fact, if anything approaching a universal "standard" variety exists at all, it is found only in the written form of English or any other language. Discriminating against people for the way they speak is even more unwarranted than might be obvious to any rational person, for nobody speaks either "English" or "Standard English"; everyone speaks a variety of English, and SE
speakers speak but one variety of SE.

The same relationship between language and the power to discriminate determines which variety gets to be called standard and which non-standard. The fact that the answer can change over time as the locus of power changes, even within the ruling elites, again belies the notion that there is anything inherently superior or inferior about any one variety. This is true at both the national and international level. It used to be a virtual requirement in the UK, for example, for BBC radio and television news readers and reporters to speak “standard” British English—something close to the “plumb in the mouth” accent of Edward Heath and Margaret Thatcher that is pervasive on the Tory Party benches to this day. With the election of the Labour Party’s Harold Wilson, the first British Prime Minister to speak with a (northern) regional accent, however, a much wider range of regional (and to a lesser extent, social class-based) accents soon became “acceptable” and perfectly adequate to do the same jobs just as proficiently. British TV and radio today boast accents from most parts of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Internationally, with the shift in the locus of English-speaking world power from the UK to the U.S.A., the model of English favored for the teaching of English as a foreign language in most countries in Asia and Latin America has shifted from British to American, too. If and when a non-English-speaking country or regional alliance comes to replace the U.S.A. as the dominant world power, English itself will eventually give way. By the end of the next century, it may be Mandarin Chinese that everyone is learning. If so, it will not be because Chinese is superior to English, any more than English is superior now. It is simply, again, a question of power.

Language and Identity

AAVE is the variety of American English, itself taking several distinct forms, that is spoken by many, but by no means all, African-Americans, particularly, but not only, in the inner cities, as well as by a few other groups in the U.S.A., such as some southeast Asian refugees who grew up in African-American neighborhoods. AAVE is usually identified with the race and ethnicity of its speakers, but many African-Americans, especially members of the black middle-classes, seldom experience it as children, and others do so but choose not to speak it, or do so only rarely and only in certain settings in which they consider its use appropriate. AAVE is better seen as not simply a matter of race, therefore, but of social class, and to some degree also of age, for it tends to be especially strong and salient among the young urban poor. Among black youth, linguists have found evidence of AAVE’s increasing divergence from “standard” (i.e., currently mostly white, middle-class)
spoken American English, especially in its pronunciation and intonation, apparently as a marker of group solidarity and resistance (see, e.g., Bailey, 1987, 1993; Bailey and Maynor, 1989; Labov and Harris, 1986).

The same trend was reported by Sato (1991) among adolescents in Hawai‘i. Most Hawaiian children, like (this time) the majority of people who grow up in the Hawaiian Islands, especially those from working-class backgrounds and educated in public schools, are speakers of another “non-standard” (albeit, this time, again, majority) variety, Hawai‘i Creole English (HCE), often referred to locally as “Pidgin.” Paralleling disputes over AAVE, the status of HCE in Hawai‘i’s classrooms has also been the subject of a long, continuing struggle (see Sato, 1985). HCE is currently experiencing something of an upswing through the increasing productivity of fine local poets, novelists, dramatists, and lyricists, like Joe Balaz, Eric Chock, Rodney Morales, Wai-Tek Lim, and Lois-Ann Yamanaka, many published through Bamboo Ridge Press, who write at least partly in HCE, often about the everyday lives of local working-class families. HCE’s persistence and vibrancy, along with increasingly positive attitudes to it among its speakers, especially Hawaiian youth, seems to reflect its perceived desirability as a marker of “local” identity and resistance to economic and social oppression, including in recent years, resistance to comical attempts by Hawai‘i’s educational bureaucrats and politicians to eradicate HCE from the schools. Most “locals,” i.e., those born and raised in the Islands, experience discrimination every day at the hands of (this time) the minority of “standard” English-speakers, most of whom are haole (outsiders, typically Caucasians). It is the haole, together with Japanese corporations, who dominate the grossly exploitative tourist industry, which accounts for about 35% of all jobs and wealth in the fiftieth state. With Sato our most articulate and expert spokesperson, a coalition of applied linguists, linguists and graduate students from the University of Hawai‘i, public school teachers and children, local artists, and several Wobblies, among others, helped organize strong, at least partly successful community-based resistance to the State Legislature’s and Hawai‘i Board of Education’s assault on HCE in 1987, as well as (ultimately unsuccessfully) for a major court case the same year (Kahakua et al. v. Hallgren), which involved accent discrimination against HCE speakers in the workplace (see Sato, 1991, for an account of both struggles).

To sum up so far, AAVE, like HCE and like language everywhere, is a conscious part of people’s identity. To attack a language or language variety by discriminating against it
in education, e.g., by forcing students to be educated through someone else's language or language variety, is to attack its speakers. It is an effective way of breaking down resistance and of rendering communities and cultures more vulnerable to state control. As the current rapid spread of English as a vehicle for international capitalism worldwide illustrates, the spread of an "official" language or "standard" language variety increases the influence of its existing speakers, and facilitates absorption of new ones into an English-speaking (especially, now, U.S. capitalist) world view. Linguistic dependency quickly translates into political, economic, and cultural dependency, or as Pennycook (1995) puts it, "English in the world" quickly becomes "the world in English."

Governments know all this. It is no accident that, as part of the fascist dictatorship's brutal suppression of the Basques after 1939, Franco made it illegal to speak Basque and an imprisonable offense to teach it, or that the indigenous Hawaiian language (now being revived through school immersion programs) was suppressed by the plantation owners and missionaries to the point of extinction, or that the same politicians, e.g., Dole and Gingrich, and forces behind current movements to make English the (only) official language of the U.S.A. are those on the wrong side of every other struggle for social justice, or that Israel obliges Arabic-speaking university students to take their classes and exams in Hebrew (despite Arabic being an official language in Israel), or that the U.S.A., Britain, France, Germany, and now Japan, consider it so important to spend so much (of other people's) time and money on teaching their national languages overseas. When then U.S. Vice-President Dan Quayle, not renowned for his own language abilities, made a speech urging thousands of young Americans to join the Peace Corps to go and teach English to the newly "liberated" citizens of Hungary, Rumania, and elsewhere in eastern Europe, was it because of a sudden interest in foreign language learning on his part?

What is true of languages is true of language varieties. Governments and elites understand the gatekeeping opportunities afforded them by support of a "standard" variety as a requirement for access to power, too. The fact that discrimination against speakers of other languages and of non-standard dialects is often carried out by people of the same race, upper-class against working-class, and/or regional dialect-speaking white children in Germany and the UK, for example, shows that the issue is fundamentally one of power, not race. While power imbalances are often strongly correlated with racial differences, as in the present U.S. case, it would be a mistake to dismiss the attack on "Ebonics" as simply another manifestation of racism, as some have done, and to lose sight of the important linguistic issues in the process. Racism and underfunding may be more important overall than language issues in public education in the U.S.A., but as explained
earlier, there is ample independent evidence of the importance of linguistic discrimination in education for African-American and many white children, too. Hence, the addition of linguistic discrimination—or what has been termed “linguicism” (Phillipson, 1992; Skutnabb-Kangas, Phillipson, & Rannut, 1995; Tollefson, 1995)—to racism, sexism, and the long list of other forms of oppression experienced by working people may be acceptable to politicians, corporations, right-wing ideologues, media barons, some prominent liberals, and other representatives of state power, but it is surely unacceptable to those who value individual freedom and diversity of all kinds, including linguistic diversity, and who oppose any manifestation of state coercion. Gratifyingly, as shown by the case of Hawai‘i (where HCE is still very much under siege, nonetheless), and several African-American communities in the U.S.A., among others, it is increasingly unacceptable to a growing number of working people themselves.

The Oakland School Board Resolution

According to a January 15, 1997, article in Education Week, approximately 53% of the 52,300 K-12 student population in the Oakland, California, School District is black, and 47% Asian or Latino. There are very few white students. A plurality of the teaching staff is white, the next largest group black. Oakland teachers had not had a raise in five years, and in February, 1996, went on a two-month strike over pay and conditions, especially class size, black and white teachers standing shoulder to shoulder on the picket lines. They won a partial victory over wages, but little else. The schools themselves, like public schools almost everywhere in the U.S.A., are underfunded and run down. Student test scores are low and getting worse; of the 28,000 black students, 71% are in special education classes, 64% held back a grade, and on a four-point scale, their collective grade point average is a meager 1.8.

Against this background, on December 18th, 1996, the seven-member Oakland School Board unanimously adopted a resolution recognizing Ebonics as a legitimate “genetically based” “language” spoken by many of its African-American students, and proposing to seek state and federal funds in order to mount additional training programs. (Some programs, costing $200,000 a year in state and federal funding, were already in effect for 3,000 students in the District). Their purpose was not, as has often been asserted, to “teach Ebonics” (which the students already know, after all), but initially to accept student participation in Ebonics, while pointing out differences between Ebonics
and SE to the children, as the resolution clearly stated “for the combined purposes of maintaining the legitimacy and richness of such language . . . and to facilitate [African-American students’] acquisition and mastery of English-language skills.” Like the successful five-year Ebonics program in the Dallas public schools recently shut down due to funding cuts, the Oakland resolution’s first objective was to help sensitize teachers to linguistic differences between AAVE and Standard English (SE). On a par with programs designed to help immigrants who speak a different language to learn English, the second aim was to help AAVE speakers learn SE, and to do so without denigrating or (as if this were possible by fiat) eradicating the home (AAVE) variety. The third goal was to begin instruction in reading, mathematics, etc. in AAVE, on the usually unchallenged pedagogic principle of starting where the students are, and then gradually making the transition to SE. Subsequent public comments by School Board members suggested that the resolution was an honest, well intentioned (not to mention, for the most part scientifically supportable) attempt to do something tangible to help a large group of under-achieving students in their care.

A few voices were raised publicly in support of the general thrust, at least, of the Board’s proposal during the weeks that followed, including that of the country’s preeminent professional association for linguists, the Linguistics Society of America (LSA), which at the end of its annual conference, fortuitously meeting in Chicago early in January, 1997, issued a formal resolution broadly supportive of the Oakland initiative. The LSA resolution stressed AAVE’s well documented rule-governed systematicity, appending a list of nearly 30 scientific books on the subject, noted that the distinction between “language” and “dialect” is usually made more on social and political than linguistic grounds, and termed recent public characterizations of Ebonics as “slang,” “mutant,” “lazy,” “defective,” “ungrammatical,” and “broken English” as “incorrect and demeaning.” The resolution further noted evidence from Sweden, the U.S.A., and other countries to the effect that pedagogical approaches which recognize the legitimacy of non-standard varieties of a language help their speakers learn the standard variety, and concluded that “the Oakland School Board’s decision to recognize the vernacular of African-American students in teaching them Standard English is linguistically and pedagogically sound.” A resolution to expand language programs for African-American students was introduced in January by a member of the Los Angeles School Board, the second largest in the U.S.A.

Supporters, however, were simply overwhelmed by an immediate and intense barrage of angry, often blatantly racist, sometimes close to hysterical, criticism from all sides.
Different interest groups singled out different aspects of the resolution, parts of which really were open to criticism because they were linguistically uninformed or poorly communicated. With hardly a pause for breath, let alone unwanted debate or hearings on the real issue, and obviously relieved at the easy “out” the resolution allowed his agency, U.S. Department of Education Secretary Richard W. Riley quickly issued a statement saying USDOE would certainly not be funding any education programs for AAVE speakers or their teachers, since, contrary to what the Oakland resolution had stated, Ebonics was not a “separate language”—about which, since it is simply one variety of English, the USDOE was right. Others reacted negatively to the idea that Ebonics, or any other “language,” was “genetically based,” and in this, too (see below), they were right, while managing to avoid the real issue.

For numerous right-wing commentators with their usual surfeit of air-time in the mainstream media—often their own regular newspaper columns and whole TV shows—a common approach was simply to assert that support for Ebonics was an unfounded, minority, “liberal” position, just one more dangerous example of divisive “Afrocentrism,” and then quickly to lose the original language-in-education issue amidst a melange of baseless, sweeping charges about “European” civilization and “white” history and culture being under threat in the curriculum. Aristotle was Greek and white, for instance, but how many students learned that at school, an irrate George Will demanded to know within minutes of the start of an early ABC current affairs “debate” supposedly on Ebonics. To make matters worse, the ideologues’ task was facilitated by the shield provided them in the form of the strong condemnations of the Oakland resolution issued by prominent Black liberals, notably Maya Angelou, who has credibility as the current U.S. poet laureate. Such pronouncements on the issue were given exceptionally good media coverage. For instance, perhaps because of his increasingly more reactionary political stances on a number of issues in recent years, the Reverend Jesse Jackson is often sought out and presented by mainstream journalists as if he were an official spokesperson for all African-Americans; meanwhile, more radical (although often equally reactionary) African-American leaders with large followings, such as the Reverend Louis Farakhan, are marginalized.

The scent of blood in their nostrils, politicians in Massachusetts and Virginia introduced bills to prohibit the teaching of Ebonics in public schools (something the Oakland resolution had not suggested), and to make “Standard English” Virginia’s official
language, and a Republican congressman from New York, Peter King, introduced a bill to prohibit the use of federal funds to support “any program that is based on the premise that ‘ebonics’ is a legitimate language.” It is no coincidence that King is an activist in another currently hot area of state encroachment on linguistic human rights in the U.S.A., the heavily corporate-funded “English-only” movement, in which he is one of many federal politicians backing legislation to make English the official language of government and to abolish bilingual education programs. This is an initiative which, were it successful, would severely damage the educational life chances of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of already disadvantaged immigrant children who are speakers or would-be speakers of English as a second language, just as the current lack of equivalent programs for AAVE speakers damages the educational life chances of many African-Americans, Latinos, and other speakers of SE as a second dialect. These groups of second language and second dialect speakers are heavily over-represented among low-skilled workers. Unluckily for them, they constitute a sector which, outside of some service industries, is increasingly irrelevant to business (hence, government) interests following corporate flight to alternative supplies of more easily exploited and far cheaper labor in the third world. This makes the strong legislative and corporate support for such measures as “English-only,” and their lack of support for language in education programs, understandable, but no less reprehensible.

Faced with the media onslaught, on January 15th the Oakland School Board unanimously adopted a somewhat modified version of their original resolution. While continuing to maintain (falsely) that Ebonics is not a dialect of English, and stating (arguably correctly) that some linguistic features of Ebonics (although probably only a few lexical items) have their origins in West African and Niger-Congo languages, references to Ebonics as “genetically based” were removed. The earlier call to have children educated in their “primary language,” Ebonics, was also modified to clarify the intention of the original resolution, i.e., for education to begin where children were at linguistically—an uncontroversial proposition in any other aspect of education—and to move them towards SE over time.

As should be obvious by now, however, the details and fate of the Oakland resolutions themselves are not the real issue. If the Oakland initiative is stymied and eventually goes away, as currently (February, 1997) seems likely, the critical role of language and of language varieties in education will not. It is useful, therefore, to continue the debate (and this article) a little further in the hope that our own response can be that much better informed and “ready to go” whenever and wherever the language police strike next,
they assuredly will, as well for the purpose of stimulating long overdue discussion among those more seriously interested in libertarian approaches to both language education and language in education. The remainder of this paper is intended as no more than a very brief, very preliminary contribution to that discussion. At this juncture, it addresses the issues from an admittedly reactive, defensive stance, situated in the current socio-political context, as that is what faces education workers now. A fuller, more constructive and more interesting treatment will need to presuppose highly complex future societies like those most of us live in today, but societies organized on egalitarian lines, where individual freedom will be cherished, where linguistic oppression, and even linguistic genocide, will no longer be issues to be confronted, but where the role of language in education will always be important since, as Marshall (1986, p. 40) put it, “freedom is the basis of education and education is the basis of freedom.” A useful place to start, given the critical relevance of each to the current debate, is with a sketch of (a) the relationship between genetics and the environment in language and language learning, and (b) educational options for “unofficial” or “non-standard” language or dialect school-age populations.

Nature and Nurture in Language

In sharp contrast to neo-behaviorist views of language learning, which were largely demolished by Chomsky’s devastating review of B.F. Skinner’s Verbal Behavior (Chomsky, 1959), most modern theorists—not least, Chomsky himself—posit a critical role for biology in language acquisition, and a much less important one for the linguistic environment. Such views are broadly consistent with several widely observed phenomena. (a) While a few complex grammatical constructions can remain problematic into the early teens, normal children have developed sufficient knowledge of the grammar, lexicon, and sound system of whichever language(s) they hear around them to carry on conversations with ease by age five. This is an astonishing feat, although one that often goes unremarked upon for being the norm. Children accomplish it at an age when most of them still have trouble with far simpler psychomotor and cognitive tasks, like tying their shoelaces, kicking a soccer ball, doing simple addition, or drawing a plan of their house. (b) All normal children are successful, and at roughly the same age, regardless of substantial differences in IQ which affect their achievement on other non-linguistic tasks, and despite substantial variation in home linguistic environment, child-rearing patterns, cultural setting, and (at least surface) structural differences in the languages being learned. (c)
Even some severely mentally retarded children, e.g., Turner’s Syndrome cases, manage relatively normal morphology and syntax. (d) Despite having been successful with language learning as children, which principles of transfer of training would indicate should help them with similar tasks later, people trying to learn new languages as adults often do very poorly, even when—like many, but not all immigrants—they are motivated, intelligent, and have plenty of opportunity. In fact, recent research findings suggest that mastery of foreign or second languages at the same level as native speakers of those languages appears to require that first exposure to the L2 occur before age six if a perfect accent is ever to be hoped for, and by the mid-teens for native-like morphology and syntax (for review, see Long, 1990, 1993).

Observations like these combine to suggest the existence of a powerful, innate human learning capacity—one which dissociation data like those on Turner’s children suggest is language-specific (i.e., separate from general learning abilities) and “modular”—and one which is biologically programmed to operate optimally on a maturational schedule within the bounds of one or more so-called “critical periods.” Chomsky put it this way:

Acquisition of language is something that happens to you; it’s not something that you do. Language learning is something like undergoing puberty. You don’t learn to do it; you don’t do it because you see other people doing it; you are designed to do it at a certain time. (Chomsky, 1988, pp. 173-174)

It is clear that every child, whatever their ethnic or social class origins, is born with the same innate capacity to learn whichever language(s) he or she is exposed to, to do so at a very young age, and to do so remarkably fast. There is some evidence that children first exposed to a second dialect of a language after age six, like those first attempting second language acquisition after that age, are unable to master the new variety to native-like standards, with the prognosis deteriorating markedly for those first exposed as teenagers, and with morpho-syntax also problematic for starters older than the mid-teens (see, e.g., Chambers, 1992). If second dialect acquisition really is subject to the same putative maturational constraints that seem to affect second language acquisition, the linguistic flexibility routinely demanded of ethnolinguistic minority school children is even more discriminatory than previously thought. Requiring a radical change of accent by adults for certain kinds of employment could be demanding the biologically impossible and so constitute a violation of civil rights law in some countries, although, of course, one that few courts are likely to recognize, whatever the merits, for fear of the socio-economic consequences of offering legal protection for the linguistic rights of people other than those which judicial systems primarily serve to protect.
This much is due to nature. Which language(s) or language varieties are learned during this period, conversely, is determined by nurture, i.e., the linguistic environment. In other words, it is the ability and timetable for acquiring language that is genetically based, not the languages themselves. Caucasian or African-American children born to English-speaking parents in Chicago will learn whatever varieties of English they hear spoken around them, principally those of their parents, other caretakers, and age peers. A child of whatever ethnicity born to a linguistically mixed couple can learn both languages (say English and Spanish) if both are used with him or her sufficiently, although overwhelming exposure to one of them outside the home often leads to that language being “dominant” or to the child’s ability in it being stronger. Any of those children whose family suddenly moves early enough to an environment where another language is spoken will learn that second or third language (say German or Japanese) instead of, or in addition to, English and/or Spanish, given sufficient exposure. The genetic inheritance for language acquisition is equal and universal, regardless of the social class origins or ethnicity of the child, and regardless of the language or language variety in the environment.

On the basis of facts like these, as well as the discovery of a more controversial set of putative structural universals in human languages (so-called “Universal Grammar”), and the alleged impossibility of accomplishing a task as complex as language acquisition so quickly and only by listening to the input, Chomsky has been prominent in arguing, further, and very influentially, that what is innate is not just the language-learning capacity, but the capacity plus substantive knowledge of those universal grammatical principles and of the restricted ways in which languages may vary. Children are born already knowing the properties of human language, from this perspective; they are successful so uniformly and so quickly because all they have to do is to “tune in” to the particular language or languages—English, Spanish, Farsi, Arabic, etc.—being used around them, the basic properties of which they already “know” at some level, register the particular ways those principles are realized in the language they are hearing, and master its vocabulary and pragmatics, plus the discourse conventions and cultural norms of its speakers by observing the behavior of those around them—language socialization. Children do not “learn” their native language, from this perspective; rather, it “unfolds.” Language learning is even more heavily a function of nature, on this view, with nurture and the environment (linguistic input) again simply determining which particular languages are learned. There are several rival linguistic theories and accounts of child language acquisition, of course,
but successive formulations of Chomsky’s position have now constituted a highly influential theory of grammar for over 30 years.

Language acquisition is thus a product of both nature and nurture. Every child comes into the world innately equipped to learn one or more languages. Members of any particular ethnic group are not genetically programmed to speak a particular language or language variety, but, rather, whichever one(s) they are exposed to early enough. An important corollary of this for the Ebonics debate is that every language or language variety is a reflection of the same human capacity, and as such, inevitably of equal communicative potential. This is the case regardless of any differences two languages or varieties of a language may exhibit at any one point in time in such areas as their “technical” vocabulary for discussing the colors of tropical foliage, personal computers, or Sumo wrestling, and of course, regardless of their current social prestige.

**Educational Options**

If all but a few severely mentally abnormal children are genetically endowed with the same (species-specific) capacity for language learning, it follows that the particular language (e.g., English) or variety of a language (e.g., AAVE) which they end up speaking must have the same inherent communicative potential and, at some deep level, the same fundamental linguistic properties as any other, notwithstanding differences among them on the surface and at any one point in time. There is no justification for equating “non-standard” with “sub-standard,” therefore, no justification for assessing children’s intellectual ability from the way they speak, and no scientific basis to the idea that linguistic differences are genetically based or indicative of different scholastic potential.

The same fundamental linguistic qualities and communicative potential, notwithstanding, it is clear that languages and language varieties can differ in potential and prestige at any one time (Hymes, 1992). While that is due to the power and prestige of those who speak them, not to any inherent superiority of the systems themselves, the fact remains that in a hierarchically organized society, access not only to power, but to freedom and control over people’s own lives can often depend at least in part on language. Linguistic differences serve ruling elites as one more gatekeeping mechanism by which to deny access to power. Accent, speech style, or command of a prestige language variety can determine success or failure in employment (Sato, 1991), guilt or innocence in court (Eades, 1992, 1994), and—of primary concern in the Ebonics debate—self-esteem and achievement in school.

The importance of home-to-school language switch has long been documented in
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numerous countries. The vast majority of children throughout the world enter primary school with at least some degree of mismatch between what they have grown used to linguistically by listening to their caretakers and playmates in and around the home and the language of schooling. In many parts of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, children have to learn a new language if they want any formal education at all, and sometimes a third language in order to continue on to secondary or tertiary education. The fact that some of those children succeed both in mastering the language(s) required, and with their education, does not make the task less of an imposition; nor does it compensate for the vast numbers of others who fail at both or do less well because of the extra linguistic burden with which they are confronted.

Where varietal disjunctions are concerned, the British sociologist of language, Basil Bernstein (1971 and elsewhere), drew widespread attention to the educational impact of differences between what he described as the “restricted code” spoken by most working-class British children on entry to school, itself a function, he said, of the traditional “positional” structure of most British working-class families (“No more ice-cream because I said so”), on the one hand, and on the other, the “elaborated code” (“No more ice-cream because if you eat more now, you won’t want your dinner later”) spoken by most middle-class children, which was the language of teachers and of schooling. It was largely that linguistic difference, he claimed, which accounted for the staggering and tragic, persistent educational failure of working-class children, including their frequent failure even to complete secondary education. While subsequent studies showed that the codes themselves may not be linguistically more or less complex than one another, few linguists or educators have challenged Bernstein’s basic claim about the importance of the disjunction itself. Rather, applied linguists have described the impact of analogous cases in public education around the world (see, e.g., Malcolm, 1994, on Aboriginal English in Australian schools; McGroarty, 1991, on ethnolinguistic minority dialects in the U.S.A.; and Sato, 1985, 1989, on HCE in Hawai‘i). In all such settings, several alternatives exist for educators. While particular local situations often require unique solutions, some general principles and broad options can be distinguished.

With varying degrees of subtlety, the usual solution favored by states everywhere is submersion in the official language or prestige “standard” dialect as soon as children enter school. This favors the children of parents who speak the language or dialect concerned, disfavors those who do not, and increases the likelihood of linguistic, political and cultural
assimilation of groups, such as immigrants or racial blocks, which, left linguistically intact, might eventually threaten the hegemony of current elites. Submersion programs should not be confused with the widely successful immersion programs, like French immersion for English-speaking Canadians, in which children who speak the dominant national language, English, receive all or part of their curriculum delivered through the other official, but minority, language, French (their L2), and, as evaluation studies show, typically graduate with a good command of French (comparable to native speakers in listening and reading, less good in speaking and writing), with no adverse effects on their achievement in other subjects. In immersion, all students start as a linguistically and educationally homogeneous group, usually as beginners, making it possible for teachers to adapt their (L2 French) speech appropriately and keep content instruction comprehensible. In submersion, on the other hand, non-English-speaking or limited English-speaking children are thrown in with English-speaking children in English-medium classrooms. The speech they hear around them is initially incomprehensible because addressed primarily to children who already speak English, making it difficult for the non-native speakers to learn either the language or the subject matter being taught through it. Submersion programs are also known as “sink or swim.” Countless immigrant and other linguistic minority children sink (see, e.g., Schinke-Llano, 1983). These are the programs favored by the “English-only” movements.

Slightly less obviously coercive are various kinds of transition models, which allow use of the home language or dialect in the early stages, but quickly introduce the official language or standard variety, and move children from one to the other, such that the home language or dialect is replaced by the new one, a process known as subtractive bilingualism (adding the second language, but losing the first). In theory, for example, so-called “transitional,” or “early-exit,” bilingual education programs in some parts of the U.S.A. allow classroom use of Spanish for some subjects, while gradually introducing English for others, from the first one to three years of school, after which Spanish is dropped. In practice, studies show, Spanish, the most widely spoken minority language in the U.S.A., is rarely used or survives even that long in such programs. The fate of less supported languages is even worse.

Much more respectful of linguistic rights, as well as of students’ identities and cultural backgrounds, are models which seek to add the second language or dialect while validating and preserving the first, so-called maintenance bilingual programs. Examples include what are known in the U.S.A. as “late-exit” bilingual education programs, which, in theory, allow classroom use of Spanish (or some other L1) for up to the first six years of schooling, while gradually introducing English in selected subjects, before transitioning
to English. These programs aim to maintain the students’ first language and add the second, i.e., additive bilingualism, graduating bilinguals, not monolingual L2 English speakers. Continuation of Hawaiian for the first six years of the fledgling Hawaiian immersion programs was recently approved after intense pressure and not a little direct action on the part of parents, Hawaiian activists, and their supporters. In practice, unfortunately, true maintenance programs are extremely rare, as it seems there is a vast difference between rhetoric and practice when it comes to school boards digging up the money, curriculum materials, and personnel to implement true six-year maintenance bilingual education.

Evaluation research in this area has been scant and often of poor quality, but a five-year, three-way comparative study (Ramirez, 1992; Ramirez et al., 1991) of (a) early-exit and (b) late-exit Spanish bilingual programs, and (c) programs for Spanish-speakers, that were English-medium from the outset, at 27 sites around the U.S.A. found fairly consistent positive relationships between the length of time classroom Spanish use continued and children’s eventual attainment in other subjects, including reading, mathematics, and the L2, English. The Ramirez et al. study and others suggest that bilingual education can work quite well, yet it is precisely bilingual programs, and especially maintenance bilingual programs—which have hardly ever been given a chance to show what they can do—that are under attack from the “English-only” forces and the likes of Gingrich, Dole, and Buchanan, as part of the more general onslaught on immigrants, ethnolinguistic minorities, and public education in the U.S.A. and elsewhere. A parallel attack is currently well under way in Australia. The widely admired, well-informed, and socially progressive Australian Language Policy (LoBianco, 1987), which championed (indigenous) Aboriginal and (immigrant) heritage language rights, and supported multilingualism and multiculturalism, was gutted and—with the surprising exception of continued support, in theory, at least, for Aboriginal languages—replaced by something approaching an “English-only” policy when it was rewritten in 1991 by a team of federal bureaucrats. The bureaucrats, it should be noted by those still seduced by “labor parties” (an oxymoron), were working commissioned directly by the Minister of Education of the ALP (Australian Labor Party) Hawke/Keating regime, not the current (blatantly) right-wing Howard (Liberal Party) government, which is simply finishing the job.

A general methodological principle, noted earlier, that is apparent in the relatively successful immersion and bilingual programs is that a good teacher or educational
program starts where the students are. This is not questioned in the case of subject matter instruction. Few people would suggest trying to teach the tennis serve before the forehead, multiplication before addition, or cardiac surgery before anatomy. The same principle applies with language. There is a vast body of literature documenting the way caretakers (typically parents and elder siblings) adapt their speech and/or conversation to the current linguistic abilities of children acquiring their first language, and then, while conversing with them at their level and thereby making what they say comprehensible, simultaneously provide them with models of how to say it in an increasingly native-like, adult manner. The same phenomena have repeatedly been observed in child and adult second language acquisition (for review, see Long, 1996). In a very real sense, in other words, if given the opportunity, people of all ages use their innate language-acquisition capacity to learn languages by using what they know so far to try to communicate, and in the process learn a little more. As Hatch (1978, p. 404) put it, “language learning evolves out of learning how to carry on conversations.”

Starting where the students are is essentially what the Oakland resolution proposed. Quite apart from the above rationale for doing so, there is a fair amount of evidence (although not nearly as much or as good evidence as one would like) of the effectiveness of the same principle applied to education through a second dialect. Simkins and Simkins (1980), for example, compared reading gains by 530 AAVE-speaking children, grades 7 through 12, in 21 classes in five parts of the U.S.A. using Houghton-Mifflin’s three-stage Bridge reading program (see Labov, 1995, for a useful critique of these and other reading materials) with gains by AAVE students in six classes using traditional SE materials in remedial reading classes. The treatment group first learned to read using a text written in AAVE, then a transitional reader, and finally a SE reader. The average gain in reading scores for students in the bridge program was 6.2 months for the four months of instruction. The control group students gained only 1.6 months in the same period. It should be noted, however, that there were several methodological problems with the study, which unfortunately was suspended after four months, in any case, due to the objections of some African-American community members, among other things, to the use of different curricula for black and white children.

After reviewing work by Boggs, Watson-Gegco, Speidel, and others documenting a wide variety of dialect-based problems in the classroom, Sato (1989) went on to describe several programs, such as those in the Kamehameha [Schools] Early Education Program (KEEP), that have been used with children in Hawai‘i and elsewhere to address both the comprehension and classroom participation problems arising from both dialect differences
and differences in teachers' and students' interactional styles. The latter involve such phenomena as culturally based differences in the significance of pauses and silence in talk, notions of "precision" and "relevance," an orientation towards trusted peers rather than adult authority figures, a preference for cooperation rather than competition, the function and interpretation of various kinds of questions, and the perceived appropriateness of various kinds of responses (e.g., "direct" or "indirect") to those questions. These and many other linguistic differences affect comprehension, participation patterns, and learning in classrooms, but are important far beyond classrooms, of course. Eades (1992, 1995 and elsewhere), for example, has shown how they are also differences which have cost Aboriginal defendants dearly in Australian courts on more than one occasion.

The problems, Sato argued, must first be recognized and understood. They can then be addressed successfully at a variety of levels, both inside and outside the classroom. What is called for, however, she wrote,

... is not simply consciousness-raising, that is, informing teachers about sociolinguistic diversity... The bureaucracy of the school system itself should be analyzed... Working in organizations such as teachers' unions and parent-teacher associations can also lead to a more sympathetic treatment of minority schooling issues. A recent controversy in Hawai‘i over the State Board of Education's proposed "English Only" policy [see Sato, 1991] illustrates how effective collective action by teachers, students, parents and researchers can be against reactionary views toward sociolinguistic diversity. (Sato, 1989, p. 276-77)

Overall, where educational outcomes turn partly on differences in varieties of a language, Sato advocated models where children's home variety, e.g., HCE or AAVE, is validated and preserved, while a second—usually "standard"—variety is added, to graduate students who command two, or in practice, a range of speech levels and styles, and whose attainment in content areas will not have been impeded by instruction that was delivered from the outset through a variety that was initially unfamiliar to them. If additive bilingualism, as in the case of French immersion programs in Canada, is a worthy linguistic and educational goal for the children of dominant language groups, why not this approach for the children of Oakland, Hawai‘i, and elsewhere? Sato's recommendations eight years ago are just as apt today:

It has been argued that understanding of the political context of teaching SESD [standard English as a second dialect] and greater familiarity with differences in
varieties and the classroom experiences of minority students are necessary for both policy making and pedagogy. The “nonstandard” approach to the teaching of SESD advocated here takes as fundamental (a) the social and linguistic integrity of minority varieties of English and, therefore, (b) the need to design sociolinguistically appropriate pedagogy for speakers of such varieties. Rather than remediation of students’ language and replacement of minority varieties with “proper” English, the teaching of SESD may prove more successful if systematically practiced as additive bidialectalism.” (Sato, 1989, pp. 276-77, emphasis added)

A Broader Debate

As indicated earlier, the above discussion is not only preliminary, but has been conducted within the stifling constraints entailed in the continued existence of imperialist nation states, whether monopoly capitalist or authoritarian socialist. Many current problems with language in education around the world are epiphenomena, nasty by-products of such things as the need of states everywhere for “national unity” (i.e., acceptance of the status quo, or their legitimacy), one manifestation of which is a fear of linguistic diversity among their own (or increasingly, the world’s) peoples. The useful gatekeeping function of official languages and standard dialects for those wielding state power, likewise, has already been noted. Hierarchical power structures, centralized authority and state control over (compulsory) education systems are among the mechanisms which make state-mandated violations of students’ and teachers’ identities and language rights possible in the first place. State coercion, often in the form of punishment and “failure” at school, and ultimately involving brute force and imprisonment in some countries, is what sanctions the discriminatory language policies. Likewise, some proposed solutions advocated within the same restricted terms of reference are equally clearly illusory. Struggles to force governments, or even the United Nations, to recognize linguistic human rights, for instance, as the Israeli, Australian, and many other far worse cases show, are really no more than struggles for just as easily revokable, temporary licenses, and simultaneously serve to legitimize states as the arbiters in such matters, when it is governments that are often the problem, not the solution.

What is needed among those seriously interested in language issues, in education, and in areas where the two intersect, is a far broader debate than has been initiated here. For example, what are the generally accepted principles, assuming such principles exist, which underlie libertarian educational theory and practice? There is a rich anarchist intellectual tradition in education, found among many other places, in the writings and practice of
Godwin, Tolstoy, Bakunin, Morris, Fourier, Michel, Faure, Robin, Kropotkin, Ferrer y Guardia, Puig Elias, Cohen, Goldman, Holt, Illich, Duane, and Ward. Is that tradition adequate for tomorrow's complex multilingual, multicultural societies, industrial or otherwise, or are areas of it, at least, in need of updating? What are the lessons to be learned from practical implementations of anarchist ideas about education in different countries, some of which have been described and analyzed in a number of valuable recent books and articles (see, e.g., Avrich, 1980; Shotton, 1993; Smith, 1987; Spring, 1975; Ward, 1995; Wright, 1989; and articles in The Raven Nos. 10 and 16, and in Lib Ed)? In sum, would most problems of linguistic human rights, in education and elsewhere, simply disappear with the advent of voluntary communities, l'éducation intégrale, a radically learner-centered educational symbiosis of mental and manual work, voluntary schooling, informal education, control of their workplaces by education workers (including students) and their industrial unions, and other promises of anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism, or might there still be at least a few problems in paradise?
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