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# Liberating American Ebonics from Euro-English

**Arthur L. Palacas**

## The Search for Ebonics

The term Ebonics, a blend of "ebony" (black) and "phonics/phonetics" (speech), was originally coined to refer broadly to the "linguistic and paralinguistic features . . . which represent the communicative competence of the West African, Caribbean, and the United States slave descendant" (Williams vi). The compass of Ebonics in the United States includes the Gullah language and what we academics, at least, know as Black English, Black English Vernacular, African-American English, and African American Vernacular English, its most up-to-date scholarly name. The Oakland School Board used the term Ebonics to refer narrowly to African American English as the "mother tongue" of most of its African American student population, with the intention of giving terminological credence to its historical origins. Following the Oakland tradition, we shall use the term Ebonics to refer to that variety of Ebonics also known as Black English and its synonyms, unless otherwise noted. However, even then, Smitherman has made the point that American "Black English" itself may be thought of as comprising an entire range of distinctives from unique grammatical patterns to simply characteristic tones, rhythms, and communicative styles that can overlay the most proper standard English ("It Bees Dat Way" 16). The terminology pertaining to Ebonics raises certain questions that we shall address: Is American Ebonics (in the narrow sense of Ebonics in the United States) a different language from English? Is it a dialect of English? How does American Ebonics relate to the larger Ebonics picture? In pursuit of answers, and while acknowledging

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the range of linguistic and paralinguistic features that characterize Ebonics, our focus will be specifically on the grammatical patterns of Ebonics that diverge the most from standard English.

Uncertainty continues to surround these issues and seems to stymie pedagogical initiative, despite the efforts of linguists. Beginning in the 1960s with the groundbreaking work of William Labov and followed by other important researchers, to whom we owe an incalculable debt, such as John Baugh, Guy Bailey, J. L. Dillard, Ralph Fasold, Salikoko Mufwene, John Rickford, Arthur Spears, William Stewart, Donald Winford, Walt Wolfram, and the ever-popular Geneva Smitherman, linguists have unswervingly proclaimed that Black English, as Ebonics continues to be popularly known among academics, is a rational, rule-governed linguistic system just like any other language or language variety and, therefore, deserving of the respect due any language or language variety; it is not just bad, broken, careless, or lazy English, nor is it a degrading reflection of an untrained or even inferior intelligence (as if the structures or grammars of languages were mirrors of such factors, which they are not). This scholarly assessment, most recently reaffirmed in the 1997 Linguistic Society of America and American Association of Applied Linguistics resolutions on Ebonics, has surely helped improve attitudes toward Black English, although mainly among academics, particularly among those of us in fields most closely associated with linguistics, such as English, composition studies, reading theory, communicative disorders, and anthropology.

The fundamental insight about the systematicity of Ebonics, until quite recently, has been conjoined with two supplementary views, namely that (1) Ebonics and standard English have similar deep structures and (2) Ebonics is highly variable, displaying alternations along a continuum of standard, standard-like, and non-standard forms. While these supplementary views have played their respective roles in the history of Ebonics studies, they may also at times have clouded the fundamental insight and dampened its social and pedagogical impact.

The first supplementary view is that, although the two varieties are different on the surface—to the ear—underneath it all, in their underlying structures, Ebonics and standard English are very similar, although no linguist would argue for complete identity of underlying structures. While the popular view of the relationship between Ebonics and standard English is quite negative, presuming, as it does, that Ebonics is simply a faulty derivative of English, dialectal research predating the sociolinguistic surge of the 1960s gives a positive scholarly explanation of the relationship in its tendency to identify Ebonics with local varieties of English. Indeed, while acknowledging Africanisms in the pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar of the isolated Gullah language, and while acknowledging that differences in "American Negro speech" may reflect "the persistence of something from African speech" (10), McDavid and McDavid state that "the overwhelming bulk of material of American Negro speech—

in vocabulary, as well as in grammar and phonology—is, as one would expect, borrowed from the speech of the white groups with which Negroes came into contact" (3). A related view can be seen in Labov's early sociolinguistic work (to be contrasted with his more recent work and the entire creolist view of Ebonics origins), in which a certain "view of the relations between BEV [Black English Vernacular] and SE [standard English] in the competence of black speakers shows that [BEV and SE] do indeed form a single system" (*Language in the Inner City* 63) and BEV represents "extensions and restrictions of certain formal rules [of standard English] and different choices of redundant elements" (38), giving "abundant confirmation of Chomsky's general position that dialects of English are likely to differ from each other more in their surface representation than in their underlying structures" (127). (Of course, while we can agree with Chomsky's general point, this appeal to Chomsky assumes that Black English Vernacular relates to standard English as a dialect among dialects, but this is the very question at the heart of this essay.) The idea of an underlying unity is captured, for example, in the belief that the non-existence of the copula in sentences like "You crazy!" is due to the deletion of the verb "to be," a belief that has persisted, as in Wolfram's 1991 *Dialects and American English* (289), Fromkin and Rodman's 1998 *An Introduction to Language* (415), and Labov's 1998 "Coexistent Systems in African-American Vernacular English" (114). The emphasis on "deletion" in the very name of the grammatical rule—"Copula Deletion"—proposed to account for the non-existence of "be" verbs indicates that Ebonics was, and for some continues to be, conceived of as a synchronic variation of standard English. The names of other rules, such as "Consonant Cluster Simplification," carry the same implications. As rational about and as positive towards Ebonics as the dialectologist and sociolinguistic views of BE are, they give no sense of a language variety with its own vitality and definition.

An obvious conflict arises and confusion results from the juxtaposition of the idea that Ebonics and (standard) English are somehow actually very similar and the idea that they are also quite distinct. If the two varieties are so similar in their underlying structures and origins, then why do so many Ebonics-speaking students have difficulty consistently producing fully acceptable standard English? Students from more standard speaking backgrounds seem to have much less trouble shifting back and forth between less formal and more formal ways of talking or writing English. Are the "number of structures unique to BEV" actually so "small," as Labov says, that "it seems unlikely that they could be responsible for the disastrous record of reading failure in the inner city schools"? (*Language in the Inner City* 114).

The second supplemental view is the idea that Ebonics is an inherently variable language, to the point where that variability should be incorporated into grammatical theory (Wolfram, *Sociolinguistic Description* 220), so that a speaker will, to different degrees, depending on factors of the social context, the familiarity of the speakers

with each other, the mode of discourse (spoken or written), and other factors, sometimes use the past tense -ed, the 's possessive marker, or the plural -s ending, for example, and other times not. Here, the distinction is necessary between statistical community-wide variability and the variability in an individual's production. The latter is of the greater theoretical interest, since ultimately, the goal of linguistic theory is to uncover the mental structures responsible for the individual's linguistic abilities (the language of the social group being a cross-section of the language of linguistically similar individuals). The individual's linguistic production, however, poses the difficult problem of sorting out which elements are Ebonics, which standard English, which a mixture, which intermediary forms between Ebonics and English, and which experimental forms. Variability is a fact of language life, but in regard to Ebonics the fact can be misunderstood. Variability itself is not the issue; the source of that variability is. Is a given sentence the product of a single intrinsically variable language, or is it actually a multilingual/multi-English production, the product of a heterogeneous grammar (Mufwene, *Joy of Grammar*) or coexisting systems (Labov, *African-American English*)?

Most of us are familiar with the sorts of Ebonicisms that crop up, not only in speech, but even in formal essays—not all the time, of course, and not in the writing of all students with Ebonics background, but especially in the writing of students with the strongest Ebonics background. We have all run into grammatical forms like those in the highlighted forms illustrated here, all from papers written by Ebonics-strong composition students, where Ebonics-derived forms sometimes alternate with their standard counterparts within the very same sentence or in a nearby sentence:

*Non-existence of Past Tense*

1. The next time I **hear** this word it was from my old girlfriends mom.
2. In my junior high school days, my peers **use to** always make jokes bout how different my name **sound.**

*Non-existence of Possessive*

1. My **cousin name** is Cowillimae and she hates her name. She would rather be called and known as her nickname, Cora.
2. Some people make up names by taking part of both parents name. For instance, if the **father name** is Maurice and the **mother name** is Tony, they will tend to come up with the name Tyrice.

*Non-existence of Plural*

1. As for me, I'm committed to complete one of my highest **goal,** which is finishing college.
2. In conclusion, there are many different avenues that can be taken when naming a child. One way put both parents **name** together to create one fascinating name.

*Non-existence of Subject-Verb Agreement*

1. Basically, a player hater is someone who is jealous of what **another person have** that they don't have.
2. At the same time you need English in the professional business atmosphere when communicating with **people that has** some type of control with your job.

*Distributive be + ing (where the "be" verb plus progressive aspect -ing combination is unnatural in standard English)*

1. Enthusiastic—a person who **is showing** enthusiasm: I'm always enthused with the work I do.
2. At that time I **was hating** my name because of everyone's criticism.

*Past for Perfect (where the perfect with "have, has, or had," not the simple past, is called for in standard English)*

1. Ever since that day, I **heard** the word "chillin" just about everywhere from someone.
2. Since my friend Shawn was just a passenger they let him go, but me I was the driver—and I **just turned** eighteen. [Bemoaning the fact that simply driving through a white neighborhood as a black male and a teenager made the writer an easy target of the law].

*Perfect for Past (where the simple past is the natural choice in standard English, not the perfect)*

1. The first time I **had heard** this word was at school. I was in the eleventh grade at John R. Buchtel.
2. But the most important thing that he **had did** for me was when he used to write me letters and poems.

*Non-existence of Complementizer with Noun Clauses*

1. When I asked Bill what did he think of the test? His reply **was, he thought** the test was racist first of all.
2. I think that they **feel by being** easy they will get what they want out of life.
3. I am so glad I decide to take Black English, for **the reason being, I have learned** the meaning of Black English, I have change my views about people who speak Black English, and I have come to know that Black English is a language all to itself.

*Direct Style Indirect Questions*

1. When I asked Bill **what did he think** of the test? His reply was, he thought the test was racist first of all.
2. You might ask **how did the whites do better** they don't even live in black communities to learn the deeper level of Ebonics.

*Topic-Comment Construction (so called "double-subjects," with a pronoun—"them" and "we" in the following examples—referring to part or all of the topic announced in the first phrase of the sentence or clause)*

1. And last but not least the opinions of friends, peers, scholars, and prejudice individuals. **As for my associates, to them it really doesn't matter to them** because they don't care what society says to them at all.
2. Some people say that Black English is Unstandardized English, meaning that the way some Black people talk is a incorrect form of speech, but **to us Black English speakers, we** believe Black English is as correct to us as Standard English is to others.

*Negation Concord (the so-called "double negative")*

1. If there was a disagreement they would tell me to leave the dinner table and go to my room. I used to get mad because I **wasn't never** finish eating my food.
2. "That's straight" I would say as she pointed out the clothes to me. I **didn't think none of the clothes** were really cute.

Ebonicisms such as those illustrated here are ubiquitous in the writing of students with strong Ebonics background and are easily observed when they occur, but what do they signify? Through the filter of the two tendencies of thought, that Ebonics and standard English have quite similar underlying structures and that Ebonics is essentially a variable language (falling along a continuum of non-standard and standard values), two obvious, but unacceptable, conclusions readily follow: (1) that such variations from standard English are not linguistically very significant, and (2) that Ebonics speakers should just be more careful to avoid variability. The influence of these tendencies of thought is evident, for example, in Goodman and Buck's 1973 classic reading theory article, "Dialect Barriers to Reading Comprehension Revisited," where they state: "These dialect studies show that dialect contrasts are not sharp and discrete among urban speakers, but show up more as a matter of preferences for certain alternatives" (8). The authors conclude that "what [divergent speakers] find in print is not as hard to deal with as we had once thought" (8) and that the "core of the problem" is not the rather inconsequential linguistic differences but the "rejection of linguistic difference," requiring mainly changes in teacher attitudes (6). Although the Goodman and Buck article is quite old, like the linguistics articles that influence it, its view of Ebonics is apparently still in vogue, for the article was recently reprinted, in 1997 and 1998.

Teacher attitudes toward Ebonics are truly a serious matter, and efforts by linguists and the others in related fields to affect attitudes positively are all to be applauded. To make a finer point, however, attitudes follow beliefs, and so we need to go back to the prior question: What rational source of respect for this form of English would motivate and support a positive change in attitudes? For years, linguists have

been testifying that teachers and others need to know that Ebonics is a separate, rule-governed language system and that this knowledge is essential as a foundation for a positive attitude toward Ebonics. However, linguists have apparently been overemphasizing correlations and similarities between Ebonics and standard English and not highlighting the root differences. This emphasis on similarity and relationship, as in the Goodman and Buck view of Ebonics, apparently devaluates the differences and sends a message that eases the burden of teacher training when the actual need is for teachers to be trained much more in grammatical applications so that they have the tools for effectively dealing with linguistic difference in the classroom as practitioners of applied linguistics.

The clouding of the distinction between Ebonics and English tends to leave the negative stereotypes about Ebonics and its speakers intact—and (as the Oakland Unified School Board recognized in 1996) leaves a large gap in any explanation for those persistent academic difficulties that African American youth continue to face nationwide in the English classroom. Gains from the understanding that Ebonics is its own rule-governed system are seriously undermined, and the pedagogical impetus of this understanding almost fatally weakened. The only defense is the interesting but undeveloped position that "The difficulty of acquiring a second dialect cannot be underestimated" (Baugh, *Beyond Ebonics* 9). Whatever truth this position contains, in this unqualified form, it has captured neither academia's nor society's imagination.

## A Grammatical Theory Approach

However, a Chomskyan approach to language universals and language typology can provide a rather different and more hopeful picture. To review, the Chomskyan approach to language structure requires abstraction away from the variabilities of experience in order to gain explanatory insight. Abstraction, in this approach, means offering bold, imaginative, yet testable, mentalistic hypotheses about linguistic observations, hypotheses that sit beyond observation but have the purpose and possibility of providing insight into observation. It is the attempt to uncover the invisible cognitive contents of the mental black box containing the speaker's linguistic knowledge, including, especially in more recent work, the universally available choices among typological features ("parameters") that define the shape of the black box itself for different language types (Haegeman 11 ff.). While differences in vocabulary and pronunciation are obvious factors in the separation of languages from one another, structural separation of languages is determined by their differential adherence to typological universals; languages will be separated from one another by the choices they make from among the universally available typological options (for example, a choice of tone language or non-tone language, and subject-verb agreement language or non subject-verb agreement language). Speech behavior is seen as the product of many

confluent mental and behavioral factors, including especially the black-boxed linguistic systems and other cognitive systems, as well as social and psychological factors, processing and production factors, even slips of the tongue, false starts, and linguistic experiments.

While variability in speech is undeniable, the Chomskyan approach nevertheless requires the researcher to distinguish between observations of speech behavior and the language or languages the speaker knows—between the externalized events of speech and the mentally internalized linguistic system or systems a speaker possesses. The data of speech and the speaker's intuitive knowledge about the data of speech (for example, whether a form such as "I been did that" is acceptable in context—which it is) become evidence for the unpacking of the inner, black box linguistic systems. Thus, to observe that the speech of Ebonics speakers sometimes, even most of the time, displays standard or standard-like forms need not be taken as a statement about Ebonics and need in no way compromise the distinctness of Ebonics, which in some speakers' speech may emerge only sporadically and partially and only under certain social conditions. Also, although a linguistic form produced by an Ebonics speaker may look standard, the form is not necessarily the product of the standard English rule system; the same form, for example, "Daryl is messed up!", may ambiguously be the product of either rule system. Thus, although both produce "He is messed up," English also produces "I am messed up" and "You are messed up" while Ebonics gives "I is messed up" and "You is messed up." The fact that both produce "He is messed up" is due to a convergence of the forms that the two systems produce, not to a partial identity of the systems. Such convergence makes Ebonics and English look more alike than they are.

The remainder of this paper discusses the grammatical typology of Ebonics, not just for linguistic edification, but more importantly, and speaking personally, because the way I have come to think about African American English has dramatically impacted how and what I teach in the composition setting and how I respond to students themselves; I want to share certain insights that have occasioned this impact on me. As I have been able legitimately to drive the theoretical wedge between Ebonics and standard English, I have become increasingly effective in aiding Ebonics speakers who have questionable competence in standard English to strive more successfully for complete competence in the standard and in encouraging students and non-students alike to respect Ebonics and, therefore, its speakers.

Before an elaboration of pedagogical implications, the next section of this paper unveils the drama of the grammatical typology of Ebonics, by which a legitimate theoretical wedge is driven between Ebonics and standard English. Driving Ebonics and English apart means seeing Ebonics and English not simply as an amalgam of rule choices within the same system but as separate systems, so that Ebonics and, particularly, standard English are, at the level of grammatical typology, different language

types—leading to the marvelous paradox that English and Ebonics are, in respects, two highly disparate languages, both of which are "English."

## English and Ebonics Typology

The apparent anomaly that English and Ebonics are highly disparate and yet both English is a central theme to be developed and clarified in this essay. The differences are startling, really, when stacked up against each other. A typological comparison of English and Ebonics shows that at the level of the linguistic features that define language types, English and Ebonics are structured oppositely in many respects at their core—in the grammar of noun phrases and verb phrases and in the grammar of subject-verb agreement. Table 1 is an informal effort at a grammatical typology of the two languages:

**Table 1. Ebonics and English Typology: Features Differentiating Ebonics and Standard English**

| Features | Ebonics | English |
|---|---|---|
| *Inflection* | | |
| 1. Present tense suffix | No | Yes |
| 2. Past tense suffix | No | Yes |
| 3. Tense marking system | No | Yes |
| 4. Possessive suffix | No | Yes |
| 5. Plural suffix | Limited | Yes |
| 6. Subject-verb agreement | No | Yes |
| 7. Inflectional language | Limited | Yes |
| *Verb Aspect* | | |
| 8. Pre-verb system (zero verb, be, done, been, been, been done, gone, finna, steady) | Yes | No |
| 9. Distributive (invariant) be | Yes | No |
| 10. Temporally two-tiered perfective aspect | Yes | No |
| 11. Recent emphatic (done) | Yes | No |
| 12. Remote emphatic (been) | Yes | No |
| 13. Single perfective aspect (have) | No | Yes |
| *Miscellaneous Structures* | | |
| 14. Complementizer (that, if, whether) with noun clauses | No | Yes |
| 15. Direct-style indirect question | Yes | No |
| 16. Topic-comment structure | Yes | No |
| 17. Negative concord | Yes | No |

The features in this typological chart, except features 8–12, are illustrated in the earlier examples of Ebonics-influenced student writing errors on pages 329–31. Examples of 8–12 would not normally be expected to crop up in college writing since items such as invariant **be,** perfective **done** (not the alternate past tense use of **do,** as in: **He done it.**) and **been,** in their Ebonics usage, are obvious red flags of linguistic usage and are easily monitored out. Even so, I do occasionally run across instances of invariant **be** (with distributive, habitual, or durative function, meaning all the time, habitually, or regularly), as in this student example: "That answered my question, it wasn't my imagination it was reality that it doesn't matter where you grow up at it's the kind of people you be around."

All the listed features of Ebonics are foreign to standard American and British English, although, among the miscellaneous structures, items 16 and 17 are regular features of other nonstandard varieties (as well as numerous standard languages around the world). The complementizer **that** (feature 14) is often absent in colloquial varieties, presumably from stylistic omission rather than, as I assume, systematic nonexistence in Ebonics, and the direct-style indirect question (feature 15) can be found in Belfastian Irish (Ken Packenham, University of Akron, personal communication). The idea that Irish English **be** is the source of Ebonics usage, while needing to be considered, has its historical weaknesses (Rickford "Social Contact" 278). With just a few exceptions, then, the set of typological disparities argues strongly for our first conclusion, in concert with the creolist position on Ebonics origins, namely, that the most deeply distinctive system-features of Ebonics grammar do not originate in English.

Further profound implications also follow. Apart from the last two features, the sizable (although not exhaustive) list of grammatical differences in Table 1 shows Ebonics and English to be structural opposites in essential, typologically relevant respects. This typological way of thinking rises above the traditional catalogue of differences among dialects to the level of features that differentiate and define types of linguistic systems and establish the magnitude of the differences. At the heart of the differences is the fact that Ebonics is, in important ways, a non-inflectional language and has a remarkably different verb phrase. In modern Chomskian "minimalist" linguistic theory, the inflectional character of a language is a major defining characteristic; the presence of an inflectional system, particularly the agreement relationship between the subject and the verb, implies a superstructure governing the grammar of the sentence as a whole, a superstructure that would be non-existent in a non-agreeing language. The existence of the **-ing** progressive suffix on Ebonics verbs does not change the picture significantly since this suffix does not appear to participate in the broad-spectrum superstructure of the sentence. And even though the plural **-s** suffix occurs in the speech of Ebonics speakers, its role, even its existence, in the structure of Ebonics can be seriously questioned. Some scholars analyze plural nonexistence as an absence of redundant plural marking in contexts containing other

indications of plurality (Dillard 61–62). For others, plurals are absent when the phonological context favors omission (see Mufwene "Structure" 77–80 for a review of the topic). While both views have merit, my analysis of African American student compositions indicates that the omission of the plural suffix does not always conform to grammatical rule and that those students having the greatest difficulties with standard plural usage have no clear intuitions on standard plural suffix usage. This lack of clear intuition parallels the lack of clear intuition on subject-verb agreement in those Ebonics speakers who evidence the greatest degree of Ebonics influence in their writing. Such lack of intuition for judging plural usage is a distinct sign that, like subject-verb agreement, a feature absent from Ebonics core grammar, plural inflection may be less a part of the basic Ebonics system than has been thought. Thus, Ebonics is not only a non-agreement language but, with minor exceptions, at least largely non-inflectional.

Also, the evidence of college writing suggests, as assumed earlier and proposed here, that Ebonics does not incorporate usage of noun clause complementizers—the subordinators **that, if,** and **whether.** This absence would account for the existence of direct-style indirect questions in Ebonics, illustrated in the examples already given, where standard English would use **if** or **whether** to introduce the subordinate clause. It would account, as well, for the frequency with which composition teachers sense the absence of the complementizer **that** introducing noun clauses in the writing of Ebonics-speaking students and the preference for other structures (for example, the preference for "the fact of Daryl leaving" to "the fact that Daryl left"). The existence or non-existence of the complementizer construction in the inner structure of the language is, again, an important typological defining feature of subordination structures, another feature central to the division of languages.

The Ebonics verb phrase, too, is remarkably different from the English verb phrase, as indicated in the work of Spears ("Black English"), Green ("Aspect"), and Labov ("Coexistent Systems"). The Ebonics pre-verb system, including the pre-verbs listed in the typology table, is not part of English structure and does not behave like English auxiliary/helping verbs—Ebonics pre-verbs do not invert with the subject to form yes-no questions, for example, and are not inflected for tense, of course; also, the class of pre-verbs appears to be somewhat open to new members. Spears discusses the use of the pre-verb **come** (to be distinguished from the similar appearing main verb **come**), whose existence as a semi-auxiliary "indicates that there is a greater difference between [black speech and white speech] than previously thought" (871). One can point to a perfective **done** in Appalachian English and other southern varieties (Wolfram and Christian 85 ff., Brandes and Brewer 286) which is similar to Ebonics **done,** but the structural place of **done** in the Ebonics pre-verb system keeps it separate. The striking difference in the expression of the perfective aspect is amplified in the next section.

On the basis of these linguistically major differences—particularly non-agreement, lack of inflection, non-complementizer heading of noun clauses, and differently constructed verb phrase—it becomes reasonable to take the view that Ebonics and standard English are actually different language types, a view that has powerful pedagogical implications. The traditional gross typological division into synthetic, agglutinative, and isolating languages would divide English and Ebonics between synthetic and isolating and in this respect would align Ebonics in a camp with Chinese, Indonesian, some West African languages, and the many pidgin and creole languages (that is, trade languages and their established varieties born of contact between peoples of contrasting language and culture) rather than with English. Indeed, the major inflectional and verb phrase features distinguishing Ebonics from English (where inflection is the linguistic term for word endings) are uncharacteristic of the Indo-European language family to which English belongs, from which we might also want to conclude that while English is an Indo-European language, Ebonics is not.

From this startling conclusion, a paradoxical question arises: if English is an Indo-European language and Ebonics is not an Indo-European language, is Ebonics English? Traditionally, it would be ridiculous to suggest that a non-Indo-European language (say, Chinese, Swahili, Navajo, Tagalog, Malay, or Wolof) could simultaneously be identified as an Indo-European language (such as English, French, Russian, Hindi, Greek, or Albanian). However, a marvelously old and insightful answer to this question is to be found in the writing of a linguist, an Africanist named Carl Meinhoff, as early as 1910, in his discussion of the linguistic needs of European traders in different parts of Africa. He claimed that no truly widespread native African lingua franca existed as a linguistic link between the numerous coastal tribes of west Africa, so traders there had to resort to what he termed "negro English." In his characterization of "negro English," Meinhoff is translated (from German) as stating unambiguously that "[Negro English], it must be remembered, is not in any real sense English; it is rather a number of English words arranged according to the syntax of the Sudan languages. The material of the language is in the main English, the form negro. However objectionable this mixed language may be, it is indispensable for trade purposes" (109).

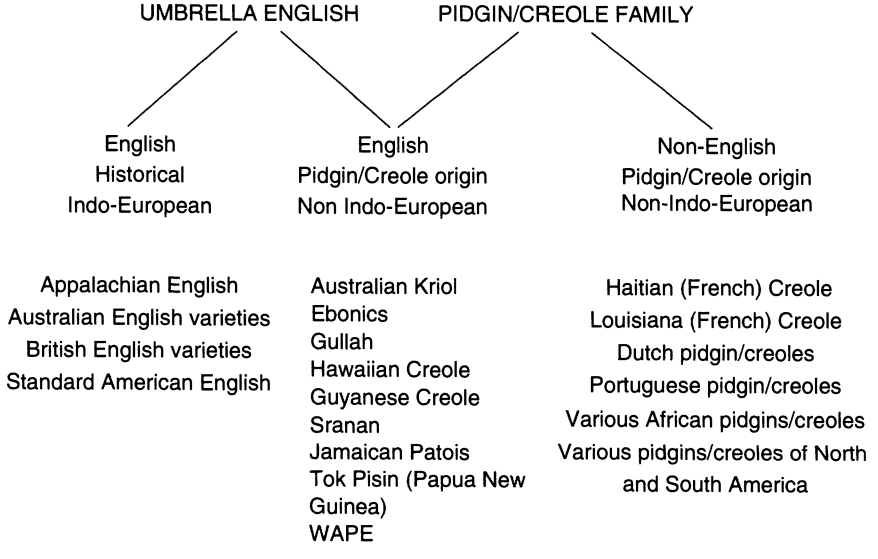
Although Meinhoff has not explained what may be "objectionable" about "negro English" or to whom it may be objectionable, Meinhoff's statement more importantly captures the conceptual problem perhaps at the heart of modern day misunderstanding toward Ebonics. In his definition of West African Englishes as a mix of English vocabulary and African syntax (see Schneider for a grammatical description of West African Pidgin English), Meinhoff acknowledges that languages of pidgin/creole origins disturb the usual categories of language and dialect. In a more modern discussion of African language classification, Welmers, another Africanist, picked up

on this problem in his discussion of Krio, the English-based creole and lingua franca of Sierra Leone, asking, "How, then, would one . . . categorize such a linguistic entity as Krio of Sierra Leone?" His answer is that "[i]t is a new language, without any genetic history in the usual sense" (11, 12). While Ebonics does not possess the complete character of a pidgin or creole language, it seems safe to say that the major grammatical differences posed by Ebonics are of or are consistent with pidgin/creole origins (that is, non-European-English origins) and that, as in the more thoroughgoing pidgin or creole languages, also disturb the usual categories of language and dialect. Given the grammatical separation between Ebonics and English, we cannot confidently proclaim that Ebonics is a dialect in the sense of a historically derived variety transformed by the usual processes of historical linguistic change; the evidence is that this is not how Ebonics came about. In the more general sense in which dialects are defined by a mutual intelligibility criterion, however, we in fact can simultaneously say that Ebonics and English are dialectally related—meaning simply that they are mutually intelligible to a significant degree. This mutual intelligibility is the consequence of the fact that, as with West African "negro English," Ebonics is made of "material that is in the main English," including a number of overlapping features of grammar (most word order qualities of English, for example). However, by the measure of grammatical typology and the depth of the typological differences, we can conclude the opposite, that English and Ebonics, being members of entirely different language families, are, in serious respects, different languages.

The coiners of the "Ebonics" term had a similar point of view. In the preface to *Ebonics: The True Language of Black Folks* (1975), editor Robert Williams stated that the "black conferees" at the 1973 Conference on Cognitive and Language Development "were so critical of the work on the subject done by white researchers . . . that they decided to . . . define black language from a black perspective." These conferees, as alluded to earlier, recognized a certain similarity of form, function, and cultural expression among the varieties of language resulting from the contact of Africans and Europeans. Smitherman alluded to the same idea when she referred to "Black English" as "an Africanized form of English" (2). The same intuition impassions James Baldwin's famous "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me What Is?"; the origination of Black English, he states, "was not, merely, as in the European case, the adoption of a foreign tongue, but an alchemy that transformed ancient elements into a new language" (19). Finally, the same deep feeling is captured in "The Location of Ebonics within the Framework of the Africological Paradigm," a 1996 article by Blackshire-Belay, who proposes that Ebonics is a member of a family of African-based languages born of contact between Africans and Europeans. (The idea that these Euro-African languages have family similarities would not, however, preclude the idea that contact languages, in general, may belong to a larger, more encompassing, non-historical, typological family of languages that includes languages with non-African sources.)

To conclude this portion of the discussion, we can say that Ebonics is both English and another language and deserves a name of its own. In serious respects, Ebonics is a typologically different kind of English, not simply a historically evolved dialectal variant, where "English," in this sense, is to be understood as an umbrella term under which sit a great number of mutually intelligible language varieties, whether Indo-European or not, including Ebonics, standard English, Appalachian English, Hawaiian Creole, other varieties of American English (Latino, Chinese), varieties of British English, Gullah, West African Pidgin English, Jamaican Patois, Guyanese Creole, Australian Kriol, Papua New Guinea Tok Pisin, and others. In typological terms, while Ebonics shares many features with English, it nevertheless continues to possess defining features at its heart that mark it, it seems reasonable to conclude, not as a member of the Indo-European language family but as a member of the worldwide family of creoles and pidgins, having closest historical affinity with African-based English pidgins and creoles. Remarkably, this grammatically defined family includes languages that do not come under the English umbrella, for example, creoles of French, Dutch, Portuguese, and African languages (see Hancock). Figure 1 summarizes the classification of Ebonics as both a "dialect" of "umbrella English," based on mutual intelligibility, and a different English language in a different family of languages, based on typological factors.

**Figure 1. Umbrella English and Pidgin/Creole Family**



## The Perfective Aspect in English and Ebonics

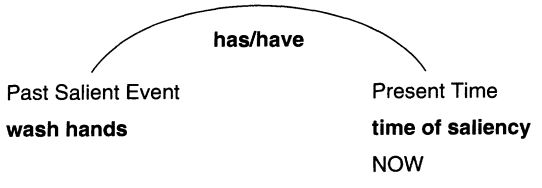
The grammatical distinctiveness of Ebonics can be dramatized further by depicting the different ways Ebonics and English express the perfect tense, or, more accurately, the perfective aspect. Ebonics is often viewed as a streamlined version of English, and there is some truth to this—the lack of grammatical inflections and the reduced complexity of consonant clusters in the phonology are obvious candidates. (The less complex consonant clusters, in pronunciations such as **lef** beside **left, wes** beside **west,** and **ban** beside **band,** are stereotypically ascribed to articulatory carelessness or laziness, whereas they are simply the inherited remnants of African pronunciation and accent.) However, this is not the entire picture. A comparative graphic display of the English and Ebonics systems for expressing the perfect tense tells a different story. To describe the function of the perfective aspect, I will use the term "salient past"; a salient past event or state is one whose reality pertains, is relevant, or persists at a later time (Quirk and Greenbaum 43).

To express the salient past, standard English has one perfective auxiliary, or helping verb, **to have,** which may be in the present tense, hence forming the present perfect, or in the past tense, forming the past perfect, as captured in this informal grammatical vignette (discussion of the future perfect is minimal):

> **English Perfective Vignette**
>
> To express the saliency of a prior event to a later time (past, present, or future), use the perfective auxiliary **have/has/had.**

For example, suppose in preparation for dinner I washed my hands. The washing of my hands is a past event, one that is not simply left in the past, however, as it would be in a narrative representation of the event, but one that is deemed currently pertinent, in the present, the time of dinner, when I inform the host of my preparation. Hence, there is the need to use the present perfect, with the auxiliary **has** or **have,** to express this situation, as shown in Figure 2.

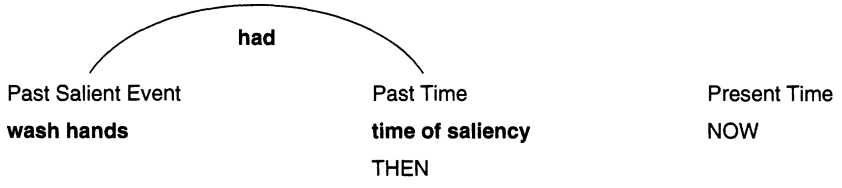
**Figure 2. English Present Perfect (has, have)**




**I have washed my hands, so I'm ready to eat (NOW).**

Suppose that the whole event is back-shifted into the past, where the dinner has already occurred. The washing of the hands, in this case, occurred prior to and was pertinent to that past dining moment. Relating this situation calls for the past perfect with the auxiliary **had,** as schematized in Figure 3.

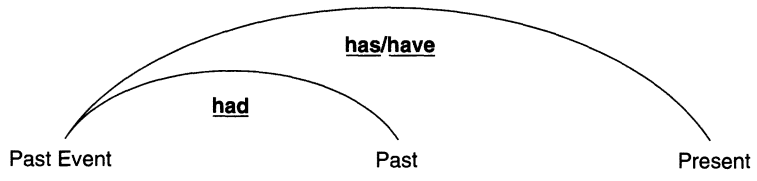
**Figure 3. English Past Perfect (had)**




**I told the host that I had washed my hands and so I was ready to eat (THEN).**

Combining the two diagrams gives a graphic feel for the English perfective aspect system with its past and present options. (See Figure 4.)

**Figure 4. Combined English Past and Present Perfects**




## Expressing the Salient Past in Ebonics

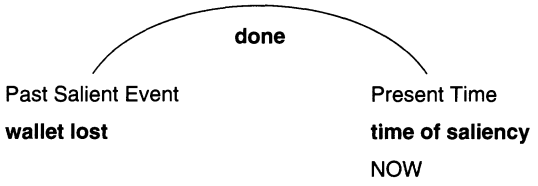
Ebonics is quite different; it has two emphatic salient pasts expressing two levels of the past, recent and remote, represented by the pre-verb **done** and the stressed version of **bín,** respectively:

**Ebonics Perfective Vignette**

To express and emphasize the saliency of a prior event, use **done** for a near-past completed event and use stressed **bín** for a remote-past completed event or a continuing state.

To emphasize that Daryl lost his wallet, and to indicate that it happened recently, one could say: Daryl done lost his wallet, as schematized in Figure 5.

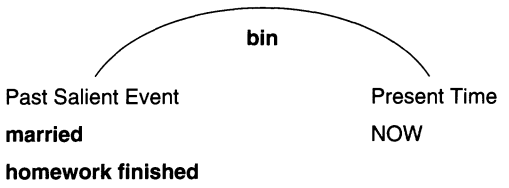
**Figure 5. Near-Past Present Perfect (done)**




**Daryl done lost his wallet.** (Daryl has just/recently lost his wallet.)

A student who wants to emphasize the point to a parent as if it happened long ago might say, "I bín finish my homework"; to clarify and emphasize the longstanding state of a particular couple's relationship, one might say, "They bín married," with stress on **bín,** as schematized in Figure 6.

**Figure 6. Remote-Past Present Perfect (bín)**



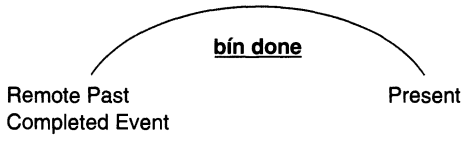

**I bín finish my homework.** (I finished my homework a long time ago!)

**They bín married!** (They've been married for a long time! How come you didn't know?)

But there is still more to the present perfect. Interestingly, Ebonics **done** and **bín** can be combined to express the saliency of a remote-past event and emphasize its completion, forming a third present perfect construction. (See Figure 7.)

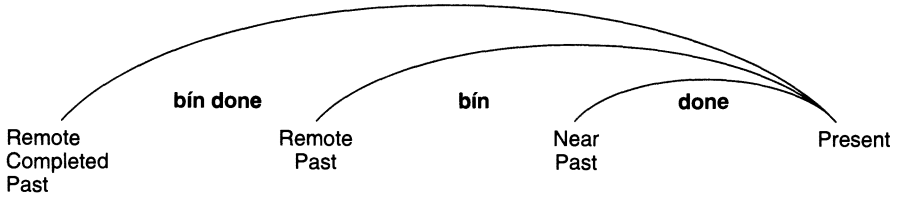
The three emphatic present perfects of Ebonics combine to give a graphic display that is quite impressive compared to the graphic display of the English present perfect. (See Figure 8.)

**Figure 7. Remote Completed-Past Present Perfect (bín)**




**He bín done ate.** (He finished eating a long time ago!)

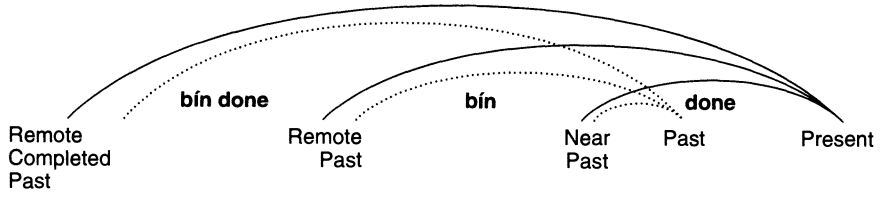
**Figure 8. Combined Representation of Ebonics Emphatic Present Perfects**




To take it one step further, Ebonics can, of course, express the past perfect idea as well, although, since Ebonics does not mark for past tense, if the time of saliency is shifted to the past, the same forms will be used as for the present, giving the following combined representation for all expressions of the emphasized salient past, as seen in Figure 9. This diagram should be compared with the much less complex representation of the combined English salient past.

A good example of a back-shifted usage occurs in Baugh's *Black Street Speech* in a discussion of the meaning of **done.** In a tape-recorded conversation, a female whose

**Figure 9. Combined Ebonics Emphatic Salient Pasts**



husband had two-timed her was telling a friend about her husband's excuse-making concerning an event that had already transpired and said, "So he went to where she was . . . and got the nerve to lie to me talking bout he done went to work" (77). A natural translation into standard English would use the past perfect **had:** "So he went to where she was . . . and had the nerve to lie to me and tell me that he **had** gone to work." Green gives more examples of **bín** and **bín done** in their past perfect usage (44–45). As if the Ebonics perfect aspect has not outshone Standard English enough already, it must finally be noted that Ebonics possesses, in addition, an unstressed, nonemphatic use of **bin** just discussed. Thus, **They bin married,** with an unstressed **bin,** implies that "they" are no longer married, as in the comparable reading of standard "They have been married." This usage raises the number of Ebonics present perfects to four and the total number of perfective uses potentially to eight.

(Although I am omitting detailed discussion of the future perfect, it is icing on the cake to note that the English future perfect, **will have,** has a radically different Ebonics counterpart in the **be done** construction: "I be done ate" = "I will have eaten" (Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin* 25–26, Baugh 77 ff., Green 45).

Counter to prevailing thought, this comparative display shows not only that the Ebonics method of expressing saliency is systematic, but that it is entirely different from the English method and more elaborate, incorporating two levels of past and a component of emphasis. (In the absence of emphasis, the perfective forms are not used and, as with much colloquial English, the perfect falls together with the expression of the simple past.) Taken together with the other typologically different features of English and Ebonics, we can safely conclude that an unbridgeable chasm separates the grammatical systems of these two languages.

## Pedagogical Implications

Liberating Ebonics from English has enormous potential—as perhaps nothing else does—to advance the academic cause of African Americans. Once acknowledged, the reality and profundity of the language difference has the power to explain the widespread academic difficulties of Ebonics-speaking African American students and to liberate those students from the pressures of stereotypes, often self-held, that induce many to believe that they are intellectually inferior. The infamous *The Bell Curve* threw a best-selling curve at the intellectual world with its statistically supported claim of the stereotype that Blacks appear by nature to be intellectually inferior. One of the strongest, and least suspected, counterarguments is linguistic. Based on the same kind of evidence as used to conclude the genetic inferiority of blacks (poor results on achievement and IQ tests), the authors are careful not to pursue the inferiority claims they could have made but did not make about Hispanics. The reason for their hesitancy is plain. In one of their text-box style commentaries (pointed out to me by Maria Palacas), Herrnstein and Murray explain: "Add [to racial mixture and socio-economic differences among Latino

groups] the problem of possible language difficulties with the tests, and generalizations about IQ become especially imprecise for Latinos" (275). This explanation is eminently reasonable, needing no further comment, because we all believe that Spanish is a different language from English; we take it without argument that, of course, the exam results would be skewed downward for Hispanic Americans taking a test in standard English. Once liberated from English, however, Ebonics poses exactly the same reason why the authors should also have retreated from their pursuit of negative claims about African American intellectuality—Ebonics is a different language, too.

The discovery that they are bilingual, or, at least, "bi-English," can become a welcome source of personal pride for speakers of Ebonics. I have had several students, for example, who have commented along the lines: "I always thought I was just stupid because of the way I talked; but now I realize that I'm bilingual." The motivational impact of this discovery cannot be overestimated, nor can the potential for restoration of intellectual self-respect in those who may feel intellectually inferior or academically oppressed because they supposedly have attained only to a lesser, broken down, poverty-stricken form of English whose only system is that it is full of mistakes. The typological view of Ebonics propounded here has the potential to put an end to that myth. And it is necessary to do so. As Geneva Smitherman has noted, Carter G. Woodson was clear in 1933 that inattention to the enormous language difference plays a far-reaching role in the "miseducation of the Negro." African American students should be encouraged, not "to scoff at the Negro dialect," but to study it as a historical development and radical modification of African tongue and as a way "to understand their own linguistic history" (19; qtd. in Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin* 203).

As implied by Woodson's statement, the problem of inattention to Ebonics difference is pervasive and not relegated solely to English classes. In 1987, in her book *Twice as Less* (reprinted in 1997), Orr showed that inattention to language differences has had and continues to have a pernicious effect on the teaching of mathematical skills to Ebonics-speaking students, particularly differences in phrasal connections, prepositions, and phrasal conflations (metonymies), all still relatively unexplored areas. For example, she found her students using "expressions like *two times less than* to identify what is half" (178); being aware of such usage would obviously help a teacher understand and communicate with students who express themselves in this way. In general, we as a society, including educated African Americans, have it so ingrained in us that Ebonics is just bad, perverted standard English, or the careless and failed production of it, rather than a different language—one structurally, semantically, stylistically, and culturally at odds with English—that we have been unable to approach Ebonics-speaking African American students with the dignity, respect, thoughtfulness, and, most practically, the realism that the language difference requires. We have been so unattuned to the language issues that we have been constitutionally and institutionally incapable of directing our research and ingenuity toward pedagogical solutions to the "Ebonics problem." It is no wonder that proportionally greater numbers of African Americans have suffered ill academic fates

for such a long time. (Similar conclusions can be drawn for other groups speaking nonstandard varieties of English, such as Latinos and Appalachians.) Clearly, paying attention to the language difference is crucial in any academic area with exacting substance.

Attending to the language difference can reap immediate rewards. One student story comes immediately to mind. Dorthea, a "non-traditional" student, had taken and failed Business Writing three times with the same teacher. She took it a fourth time while simultaneously taking English Composition I: Black English, and ended up with a grade of B+. When the pleased teacher asked what changed, Dorthea told of her new understanding that Black English and standard English were different languages. She had always thought there was only one English, one she could never get straight, but her new understanding allowed her to split the two languages in her thinking and to monitor the difference more effectively. While most students do not make the shift as quickly as Dorthea, hers is exactly the kind of result that attention to language difference makes possible.

Liberating Ebonics from English not only has beneficial consequences for students but also has the potential—again, as perhaps nothing else does—to explain the complementary and enduring inability of teachers to be truly effective with many of their African American students, even at the college level. After several years of teaching a course on Ebonics and English composition to mostly African American students, I have arrived at the position that the grammatical variability and syntactic woes of Ebonics-speaking students and the corresponding woes of teachers in this context are due to a composite of four factors:

- the mixing by Ebonics-speaking students of two sometimes highly disparate languages, English and Ebonics, both of which are "English";
- the widespread lack of awareness among Ebonics speakers of the existence and systematicity of Ebonics and its separateness from standard English;
- incomplete knowledge of standard English by students with strong Ebonics background;
- the widespread lack of awareness among teachers of the existence and systematicity of Ebonics and its separateness from standard English.

It is no mystery, now, why we have all had a difficult time with the grammatical, sentence formation, and related punctuation troubles of many of our African American students—we have not had the tools of thought needed to meet the challenge. This, it seems to me, is a great relief, in one sense, because we do not have to find blame either in the student or in ourselves for our past failures. In another sense, the liberation of Ebonics exposes a deep lacuna in teacher training, or, in the case of college-level teaching, in our preparation for teaching students from strong Ebonics backgrounds, as well as students from other diverse English backgrounds. The tide

begins to shift, however, when we accept as a reality that Ebonics is structurally (and often semantically) another language. Taking the reality seriously can revolutionize our attitudes and approach toward our Ebonics-strong students—it has mine, to be sure—because the conclusion is based on objective analysis, not subjective pressures to think well of Ebonics. This approach rationalizes and invites us to the much more affirming responses to our students that Geneva Smitherman has for so long been calling us.

This good news about Ebonics as a language, a contrasting type of English—once embraced—immediately inspires us to elevate our vision of the linguistic capabilities of our students. Acknowledging the reality and profundity of the language difference will elicit from us the long-range linguistic and pedagogical research and innovative educational practices that could ignite a renaissance in the education of African American youth. Such a renaissance would also reverberate positively on the education of all linguistic minorities who bring other than standard varieties of English into the classroom. As the honorable Augustus F. Hawkins was quoted as saying in the controversial Oakland materials: "Black children are the proxy for what ails American education in general. And so, as we fashion solutions which help Black children, we fashion solutions which help all children." The news is important not just for Ebonics speakers but for everyone, since we labor under unfortunately debilitating and discriminatory national linguistic-cultural-intellectual stereotypes.

Finally, on the practical side, becoming familiar with the details of Ebonics can have otherwise unavailable pedagogical benefit. Since the disparity between English and Ebonics is great, although sometimes subtle, and since a good number of Ebonics-speaking students have incomplete knowledge of standard English, it is not surprising, for example, to find them using forms that they believe to be standard but that are nevertheless at variance with the standard, forms that can be seen, to use Spears term, as "camouflaged" Ebonics grammar (850). For example, the auxiliary verb **have** always looks standard, but its usage may arise from Ebonics grammar. The following sets of student examples, which focus on the expression of the past, illustrate this point. (These examples include some introduced earlier.) In the first set, the auxiliary verb **had** appears where the simple past is called for, and, in the second set, the simple past is used where the perfect is called for (in the location indicated by the inserted blank)—indicating the oppositional quality of the Ebonics-English difference.

*Perfect for Past*

1. But the most important thing that he **had** did for me was when he used to write me letters and poems.
2. For a long time I had had problems with this teacher's insults. I was being called stupid constantly. At first I thought nothing of them, but after a while I **had** gotten tired of them. As time went on the insults continued.

3. The first time I **had** heard this word was at school. I was in the eleventh grade at John R. Buchtel.
4. I distributed the test to the blacks first. None of them said a word; they just took the tests as if they were taking a final exam. When I **had** received the tests back each of them had every single answer right. I asked them what did they think of the test.

*Past for (Present or Past) Perfect*

5. God filled me with his precious spirit and fruits of the spirit began to grow in me. I started to love everyone, even the one's who _____ hurt me. (had)
6. Since my friend Shawn was just a passenger they let him go, but me I was the driver and I _____ just turned eighteen. [Bemoaning the fact that simply driving through a white neighborhood as a black male and a teenager made the writer an easy target of the law.] (had)
7. Every since that day, I _____ heard the word "chillin" just about everywhere from someone. (have)
8. One night I was on the phone with a friend that I _____ recently met. (had)

Interestingly, the use of **had** in examples 1–4 can be interpreted as emphatic expressions of the past or of a remote past, and its absence in examples 5–8 as an absence of emphasis, a pattern that reflects the Ebonics model of pre-verb emphatic past usage (although in this case, the usage is not perfective, but a simple narrative past). Standard auxiliary **have** is not a traditional marker of the perfect in Ebonics grammar, and indeed, here, while it looks like the standard auxiliary, its use actually conforms to Ebonics grammar. Thus, this is not an ordinary random or careless mistake correctable by carefulness. It is an error born of the Ebonics system coupled with incomplete knowledge of the standard and requires a grammatical explanation, namely, that English **have** communicates the saliency of a prior event to a later time and that the Ebonics use of **have** communicates emphasis of a simple past event.

To take another example, Ebonics grammar may also overflow into the standard context in the subtly different uses of the verb **to be.** The well-known use of Ebonics "invariant **be**" expresses events or states that are durative, characteristic, or repeated, events that happen "all the time," and the absence of **be** means "right now." This distinction is not always made in standard English. Thus, the standard "The office is closed" is ambiguous and would be translated as either "The office closed" or "The office be closed," depending on whether "The office is closed right now" or whether the sentence teams up with the adverbial idea "all the time" to mean "The office is closed all the time." When expressing events, Ebonics "invariant **be**" plus the -ing ending on the main verb is similar in function to absence of forms of the verb **to be** in standard. Thus, it could be said of Alan Iverson of the Philadelphia 76ers: "He be ballin," which is translatable as "He plays great basketball"; note the absence of a

form of the verb **to be** in the standard translation corresponding to the presence of **be** in the Ebonics. While the forms of **be** in the following couple of student examples may look standard, they are camouflaged versions of Ebonics "invariant **be**" and, according to the rules of standard English, are best omitted in favor of the present or past tense ending on the main verb:

> "Look at that hoe." Many times this [use of "hoe"] **is referring** to a nice looking woman or a woman who has something revealing on.
>
> At that time I **was hating** my name because of everyone's criticism, but as I matured, I started realizing how unique it was, and started appreciating it more.

Knowing this contrast gives one a greater appreciation of the reality of Ebonics and the intellectual legitimacy of its existence. Knowing the contrast also has pedagogical value for the teacher who must deal with such Ebonicisms in contexts where standard English is expected. Here, again, is an example of an error type that is not simply a mistake corrected by carefulness but a usage reflecting Ebonics grammar and requiring a grammatical explanation for true understanding to be communicated.

When I have fully explained the details of these and other grammatical differences to students who practice such usage, they have often reacted with amazement—sometimes anger—that no one had ever before explained these grammatical differences to them. Students have every right to be surprised. As long as the two languages are held to be more or less the same, implying that Ebonics-speaking students are either careless or language impaired, these students will continue to be on their own in a pedagogical environment that is inherently handicapped to meet their academic needs.

The difficulty for student and teacher is not in a confusion that comes from the fact that the two language varieties are very similar, but a confusion that comes from the fact that they are so very different yet **seem** so very similar. A further difficulty for teachers is that they so often lack depth of training in grammar and syntactic style. The intentional move away from the teaching of grammar and sentence construction in composition graduate programs, for example, has unintentionally and ironically privileged the standard-speaking student to the detriment and exclusion of African American students and others from nonstandard language backgrounds, and it has truly hampered the effectiveness of teachers. It is my hope that the clear demonstration that Ebonics and English are, in important respects, distinct and contrary systems will help motivate graduate programs in English and education to once again take the details of language seriously for the sake of currently disenfranchised English language minorities.

Discussing Ebonics in class and especially the grammatical subtleties just illustrated requires knowledge of language, knowledge of Ebonics, knowledge of linguistics—as well as a dose of courage to pioneer the changes that all this calls for. It is a true

challenge. In the face of the difficulty of acquiring this knowledge and of raising issues in class that are easy to keep submerging, it is tempting to retreat to the popular "Just teach English well" solution to the "Ebonics crisis." However, the avoidance of the language issues is certainly a major factor keeping us in the current plight. We need to pursue avenues of renewal and to lobby for them.

Discussing and teaching about Ebonics language structures are very important, but no one has gone further than Geneva Smitherman in developing the picture of Ebonics as a cultural phenomenon. She has shown that to truly understand Ebonics one must understand it all, from its grammatical particularities, to its unique uses of otherwise English sounding words, to the rhythms of sentences, to the heights of discourse style and the unspoken rules of interpersonal interaction. And, of course, as Smitherman reminds us, the teaching of English composition must pay primary attention to the larger communicative matters. In my own teaching, acknowledging the reality and depth of African American culture and language and incorporating them into my curriculum have given me, as I have indicated, a highly effective way of bringing Ebonics to light in ways that benefit all who are willing to listen. I include regular discussion and exercises on language and Ebonics, with readings and paper topics interweaving issues of African American language and culture, using authors such as Baldwin, McCall, Hurston, Bebe Moore Campbell, Smitherman, Rickford, and others. Recent helpful publications include John Baugh's *Beyond Ebonics*, Rickford and Rickford's *Spoken Soul*, and Smitherman's *Talkin That Talk*; also, I hope to have a composition textbook ready soon focusing on African American language issues.

Personally, the more deeply motivated I have become by the realization that Black English is a language to respect in its own right, the more completely I have moved away from the inevitably (even if unintentionally) patronizing bilingualism that leaves Black English and Black culture at home (Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin* 216). Solid pedagogical commitment to the "different language hypothesis" has given me much greater freedom and confidence in the interracial classroom and tremendously increased rapport with my Ebonics-speaking Black students, a reward I desire for all my readers. I have discovered that teaching the linguistic realities that liberate Ebonics from English is most fruitful when issues of Ebonics are contextualized in the Black cultural setting through culturally, socially, and historically relevant readings and paper assignments so that the student and the student's linguistic-cultural heritage are validated by a teacher who believes in this validation and is willing to make it all a matter of open discussion in the classroom. Within this framework, I have seen sometimes remarkable progress in the consistent production of standard English by writers with strong Ebonics background. Also, students who would otherwise have dropped out have gained new courage to try again once they have grasped that their task is an intellectual one (bridging between languages), not a psychological or constitutional one, and that achieving perfection in standard

English does not require abandoning the culture and language they brought to school. The language differences need to be taught, not in a remedial sense but rather in an informative, scientific sense, and especially with the respect and joy that can come from belief in the language of the student. As Geneva Smitherman implies in the opening lines of "It Bees Dat Way Sometime," linguistic information is best taught in a linguistic-cultural framework that highlights the value of the students' backgrounds, lets the linguistic realities emerge and shine, and lets the students know that they bring value to the class by their presence.

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