Ebonics, the Oakland Resolution, and Using Non-Standard Dialects in the Classroom

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The Oakland Resolution

ON DECEMBER 18 1996, the Oakland, California school board passed a resolution regarding its policy of language instruction that sparked a heated controversy which would flood the media in the weeks that followed. Aiming to improve literacy among the school board’s African American students, which was below state and national averages, the board resolved that its English-language instructors would apply what was already a strategy for the development of literacy in English among Asian, Hispanic and Native American students: teaching English, a second language, through the medium of the students’ first language, in what is referred to as the Standard English Proficiency (SEP) program. The resolution concluded that the first language of African American students was indeed not English, but ‘Ebonics’, and it determined that academic programs should be developed that recognized the existence of Ebonics as the primary language in the domestic and social lives of the students, as well as its cultural and historical legitimacy for the African American population. The board’s proposed methods to improve the literacy of African American students were immediately controversial and the debate was polarizing. A month later, in January 1997, the initial proposition was rescinded and the board released an amended version that significantly altered its linguistic claims and proposed methodology; in many ways, the Oakland Proposition was considered a failure. However, the revised version continued to advocate for the use and valorization of Ebonics in the classroom, albeit under different conditions, and in this way the proposition must be deemed an unequivocal pedagogical success; in addition, the issue continues to be relevant today as speakers of other non-standard dialects face the same challenges as African American students, and pedagogical experts are looking to Oakland and similar programs as models, since recent studies have confirmed the unmistakeable effectiveness of using non-standard dialects in the classroom.

Ebonics: A brief Introduction

There is some debate among linguists about exactly how to characterize and define the language (or language variety) referred to as Ebonics. Linguists agree that when the ancestors of most African Americans were brought to the US as slaves, they spoke a variety of languages
that belonged to the Niger-Congo family of languages and, arriving in an environment where English was dominant, they would soon learn and adopt English as well. Contention arises, however, about how much influence the slaves’ African languages would have on this new variety of English, and John Rickford (1999, 324-327) explains that linguists are divided into three main camps. First, Afrocentrist linguists contend that the most salient features of Ebonics are imports from African languages, and that as slaves learned English, it was restructured to accommodate the patterns of these primary languages; John Baugh (2000, 73) explains that it is from this Afrocentrist tradition that the concept of Ebonics as a modern language was first developed. Alternatively, Eurocentrist linguists maintain that the slaves learned English rapidly and with very little influence from their primary languages, and that the distinctive features of Ebonics are in fact fossilized features of the colonial English spoken by Irish or Scotch-Irish settlers (Rickford 1999, 325). Finally, the Creolist view is that as slaves began to learn English, they developed a pidgin of English and their primary African language and that the African American variety of English would develop from this simplified blend of the two languages (Rickford 1999, 326). Despite these disparate accounts of its origins, Ebonics is indelibly linked to a particularly traumatic history shared by many African Americans, and is thus culturally and socially significant, though of course this view is not universal. By adopting an Afrocentrist position in its resolution, however, the Oakland School Board was arguing from a position that valorizes African American history, as well as its linguistic consequences. While the term Ebonics has evolved quite a bit since its coinage in the 1970s, for our purposes it will refer to the ‘informal speech of African Americans’ (Rickford 1999, 320) which would first attract public attention during the Oakland controversy.

What’s in a name?

Ebonics is just one of many labels used to refer to the vernacular speech of African Americans; however, it would be misleading to equate the different labels as synonyms because, to some degree, the name by which one designates the language/dialect reflects an ideological position. Baugh (2000, 19) explains that the word ‘Ebonics’, for instance, was first coined in 1973 at a conference for academic and pedagogical experts concerned with the cognitive and language development of black children; until then, the most commonly used expression was ‘Black English’ but conference members felt that this term implied a corrupt or somehow deficient variety of English, and that a new term had to be developed instead. ‘Ebonics’ was arrived at by the combination of ‘Ebony’ and ‘phonics’, and it thus literally referred to ‘Black sounds’. ‘Ebonics’, then, was adopted in opposition to ‘Black English’, and it was intended to refute the implication, which conference member felt was reflected in this latter term, that the speech of African Americans is a corrupt or somehow less valid variety of Standard English. Baugh’s account of its origins illustrates that ‘Ebonics’ was not originally meant to apply only to the US and designated more widely the linguistic consequences of the African slave trade; however, it eventually narrowed and is now used almost exclusively to refer to the speech of African Americans. Ernie Smith writes that ‘the term Ebonics is not a mere synonym for the more commonly used term ‘Black English.’ If anything the term is, in fact, an antonym for Black English’ (quoted in Baugh 2000, 21) by which he means that Ebonics is meant to connote a sense of linguistic independence which is decidedly absent from ‘Black
When the Oakland school board chose Ebonics as its label of choice, then, it did so deliberately to legitimize its position by legitimizing the language/dialect it was referring to as an independent one. Smitherman (2000, 28), however, explains that because Ebonics was never adopted as the designation used in the American mainstream, it can be problematic because it tends to require additional definition. Like her, many linguists have chosen to use ‘Black Talk’ or ‘Black Language’, which—like ‘Ebonics’—are meant to connote a linguistic variety independent from English. However, these two alternatives are problematic in that they can be used to refer inclusively to the language of all black people, regardless of linguistic background, which is a much more varied and diverse definition than is usually intended; these terms thus resemble the original definition of ‘Ebonics’ discussed above. This confusion can be mitigated by using instead the term ‘African American Language’, which connotes the desired independence from English but still refers to a single specific variety. It is used in opposition to the term now most often used in linguistics, ‘African American (Vernacular) English’. Like ‘Black English’, the latter label implies a variety of English as it is specifically spoken by the African American demographic, though it tends to be understood as a more neutral term than Black English.

The Controversy: Language or Dialect?

Oakland is one of the only school boards in the US where African Americans constitute a majority of the student population (Baugh 2000, 38), and the now-infamous resolution arose from the observation of board administrators that these students tended to exhibit standardized test and grade scores in reading and language arts that were well below state and national norms. In fact, the educational underachievement of African American children in the US was and still is a widely recognized phenomenon, and Jeff Siegel (2010, 162) explains that this so-called ‘achievement gap’ has been attributed to a number of complex factors, including poverty and social obstacles like racism. When the resolution was passed, African Americans accounted for 71% of students in special education programs (Baugh 2000, 10), though they made up just 53% of the student body as a whole (Rickford 1999, 331). African American students were also significantly over-represented in the number of suspended students, where they accounted for 80% (Rickford 1999, 331). This suggests the possibility that their generally poorer academic performance was due as much to the stigmatization of their speech as it was to comprehension difficulties in the classroom, as the school board proposed. Because nonstandard varieties are often associated with low social status and/or a lack of intelligence, speakers who are not fluent in Standard English—whether their first language is a non-standard dialect of English or a different language altogether—are often socially disadvantaged. Baugh (2000, 50) writes that: ‘Those who speak English in America with a distinctive accent should pray that it’s one that most Americans find appealing—otherwise some will inevitably ridicule their speech.’ Siegel (2010, 163) makes a similar statement when he writes that speakers of Ebonics—for which he uses the term African American English—are often treated as careless or lazy speakers of Standard English, and are frequently relegated to inappropriate special education classes instead of receiving suitable education; in a cycle that he describes as a self-fulfilling prophecy,
the children often become frustrated and withdraw from classroom participation and begin to perform at exactly the level that was expected of them in the first place.

This negative conception of Ebonics—and, arguably, of its speakers—was evident in the backlash that followed the school board’s decision; in one of countless examples, Brent Staples, an editor at the New York Times, published an article on January 14 1997 after Oakland announced its decision that exemplifies the attitude that prevailed among many of those opposed to the resolution. Staples refers to Ebonics as ‘broken, inner-city English’, as ‘street talk’ and as ‘urban slang’. He contends that the resolution ‘patronizes inner-city children, holding them to abysmally low standards’ and objects to ‘declaring all students to be ‘equal’ regardless of whether they have difficulty speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language’. Staples also suggests that the resolution will take up valuable classroom time as ‘time that should be spent on reading and algebra gets spent giving high fives and chattering away in street language’. Finally, he closes his article by condemning the Oakland policy for ‘further isolating children who are already cut off from mainstream values and ideas’ (quoted in Baugh 2000, xi). Staples’ editorial, despite its profound misunderstanding of the policy’s intent, which was indeed not to ‘lower the bar’ for African American students but to help them attain national standards, does helpfully illustrate the kind of vehement objections raised against the Oakland resolution.

It’s important to note that the Oakland Policy is not unique, and Oakland was not the first school board to adopt ESL teaching strategies for African American students; similar programs had begun to flourish in various California school boards in the 15 years or so preceding. However, as Baugh (2000, xi) specifies, Oakland was the first to attract such a flurry of media attention, and this was largely due to the board’s outright characterization of Ebonics as a language separate from English, and as the primary language of most African American students. Staples clearly conceives of Ebonics as not only a non-standard variety of English, but a substandard one; along with questions of linguistic quality and diversity, his classification raises the issue that was truly at the heart of the Oakland controversy: is Ebonics a distinct language, or a dialect of English?

This debate continues to be waged today; it yields no easy answers since its implications are so obviously ideologically loaded. As Smitherman (2000, 13) writes, ‘The question of whether Ebonics […] is a language or a dialect is not one that can be definitively answered by linguistics. Ultimately, this is a political, not a linguistic, question’. The Linguistic Society of America (LSA), whose annual meeting came at the height of the Oakland controversy, was forced to consider the Ebonics issue, and its members voted unanimously in support of drafting a resolution ‘primarily intended to affirm the linguistic integrity and legitimacy of American slave descendants’ (quoted in Baugh 2000, 42). The LSA insisted that Ebonics is ‘systematic and rule-governed like all natural speech varieties’ and that the Oakland proposal was ‘linguistically and pedagogically sound’ (Rickford 1999, 320). The LSA also released a statement highlighting the arbitrariness of the language/dialect distinction:

The distinction between ‘languages’ and ‘dialects’ is usually made more on social and political grounds than on purely linguistic ones. For example, different varieties of Chinese are popularly regarded as ‘dialects,’ though their speakers cannot understand
each other, but speakers of Swedish and Norwegian, which are regarded as separate ‘languages,’ generally understand each other (quoted in Smitherman 2000, 13).

Despite this ultimately murky distinction, linguists generally agree that Ebonics is a variety of English, and Rickford (1999, 322) writes that

most linguists agree that Ebonics is more of a dialect of English than a separate language, because it shares many words and other features with other informal varieties of American English. [...] Yet Ebonics is one of the most distinctive varieties of American English, different from Standard English – the educated standard – in several ways.

His position allows for an understanding of Ebonics that is historically valid and linguistically correct, but which does not deny the particular social and cultural significance of this dialect that supporters of ‘Ebonics’ are ultimately trying to emphasize. In the end, the Oakland School Board might have garnered more unreserved support from linguists if it had refrained from distinguishing Ebonics as a distinct language, since this was a leap so many were reluctant to make. Pedagogically, however, many agreed that Ebonics could be a useful classroom tool to bridge the gap between the students’ home language and Standard English, and many were much more willing to support the board’s second, revised version which amended the proposition to use Ebonics as a tool for English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction. Instead, the amended resolution called for its use in a Standard English as a Second Dialect (SESD) context, which was much less controversial, at least among linguists, and which future studies would continue to endorse.

The Amended Resolution

Reacting to mollify the public outrage that erupted after its resolution, the school board released an extensively amended version just over a month later in January 1997, and one of the most significant changes was the board’s definition of Ebonics. The original text read that ‘African Language Systems are genetically based and not a dialect of English’ (quoted in Baugh 2000, 44). First, the word ‘genetically’ suggested the possibility that the board was propagating out-dated racist ideology about biological racial differences, and the public was understandably outraged. The board later defended its statement, explaining that the intention had been to construct the language Ebonics as a descendant of West African languages, not to imply that African American students have a genetic predisposition towards one language or another. The revised version eliminates this implication altogether, and also reflects a substantial shift in the board’s position towards the status of Ebonics; it reads that ‘African Language Systems have origins in West and Niger-Congo languages and are not merely dialects of English’ (quoted in Baugh 2000, 44). The wording here suggests that Ebonics is a variety of, or at least related to English, but continues to insist upon its particular historical and cultural significance for the African American community.

Interestingly, the amended version continues to promote the ‘application of bilingual or second language learner principles’ (quoted in Baugh 2000, 45) to improve the language skills of African American students, which continues to characterize Ebonics as a distinct language.
Similarly, the amended text expresses the aim of ‘facilitating the acquisition and mastery of English language skills’ (quoted in Baugh 2000, 46) which is decidedly not the same as facilitating the acquisition of Standard English skills. Despite retracting its statement that Ebonics is a separate language, the Oakland school board continued to align African American students with other students whose primary language is not English, and some have suggested that this contradicts the board’s claim that it had no bilingual education funding aspirations (Baugh 2000, 48).

In addition to its definition of Ebonics, the school board also significantly changed its proposed teaching methodology in the amended resolution. The original text reads that teachers would follow ‘a program featuring African Language Systems principles in instructing African-American children both in their primary language and in English’ (quoted in Baugh 2000, 45). It was thus stated very explicitly that Ebonics is the primary language of African American students, and that they would be taught in this language to learn English. The revised text, however, is interestingly vague; it reads that teachers would apply ‘a program featuring African Language System principles to move students from the language patterns they bring to school to English proficiency’ (quoted in Baugh 2000, 45). This part of the resolution moves away from explicitly citing Ebonics as the students’ primary language, though the paragraph above this one includes the sentence, ‘Primary languages are the language patterns children bring to school’ (quoted in Baugh 2000, 45), so the two are somewhat conflated. The amended resolution does not state explicitly that teachers will use Ebonics in the classroom, but it is tacitly understood that Ebonics will be used as a bridge to move students from one set of language patterns to another; this approach is closer to Standard English as a Second Dialect (SESD) methodology than it is to ESL.

SESD classes are usually carried out in Standard English, but the students’ native dialect is consciously valorized in the classroom. Lessons generally compare the students’ native dialect and Standard English, drawing the students’ attention to differences and helping them to recognize the appropriate settings in which to use either dialect (Ball, Bernhardt and Deby 2005, 12). While many linguists welcomed the second version of the resolution as a more linguistically accurate analysis of Ebonics (Baugh 2000, 47), public outrage was not entirely quelled by the revised text. The school board had abandoned its stance that Ebonics is a language, and had officially rescinded its intent to use Ebonics as a language of classroom instruction; for many, this signalled the board’s defeat. However, the board had continued to insist that, even as a dialect of English, Ebonics ought to be recognized and valorized in the classroom as a legitimate and culturally significant variety of English, and this claim is still debated today as many continue to conceive of Ebonics as a ‘broken’ or ‘corrupt’ version of English.

**Ebonics and SESD education**

In the years since the Oakland controversy, many studies have investigated and confirmed the merits of using Ebonics in the classroom; to cite just one of many examples, Rickford (1999, 328) describes an undated study conducted at Aurora University, just outside of Chicago, where African American inner-city students were taught Standard English by contrasting its features
explicitly with those of Ebonics, which is precisely the method proposed by the amended Oakland resolution. After just eleven weeks, the students’ use of Ebonics features in their Standard English writing dropped by 59 per cent, while a control group who had been taught using traditional methodology saw a rise of 8.5 per cent of such features. This study is promising not just because it illustrates the effectiveness of SESD education in general, but because it suggests that even older, university-aged students can benefit from such instruction.

Despite such studies that endorse SESD education, arguments against the use of Ebonics—and, by extension, other non-standard dialects—in the classroom continue to be put forth, and Siegel (2010, 183-191) writes that these are generally based on one of four different precepts. First, such arguments are often based on the notion of similarity; for example, some linguists argue that Ebonics is more similar to Standard English than other dialect varieties like Scottish English, but that these students don’t need special Second Dialect Acquisition (SDA) programs, so that African American students shouldn’t either. Siegel (2010, 184) refutes this argument by stating that ‘many scholars would disagree about how typologically close AAE and standard English really are’, and quotes a study conducted in 2000 where pre-college and first-year college students whose native dialect was Ebonics were given the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Their initial results were similar to those of low-level ESL students, confirming that Ebonics and Standard English are different enough that knowledge of one does not count towards knowledge of the other. On this point, Siegel quotes Palacas (2001) who writes, ‘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 from the fact that they are so very different yet seem so very similar’ (quoted in Siegel 2010, 184).

The second argument often put forth against SESD education is based on notions of language immersion. Some linguists that the best language-acquisition learning environment is an immersion program, so that speakers of Ebonics shouldn’t need special instruction if they are surrounded by a Standard English context. Siegel refutes this claim with two points: first, that most immersion programs, like French Immersion programs in Canada, do in fact feature some formal instruction in the first language; and secondly, that in such contexts the first language is usually valorized and supported, which has immensely favourable consequences for second language acquisition, and which is decidedly not the case for Ebonics-speaking African American students.

The third argument is based on a variety of different concerns for students, which include fears of ghettoization—that is, the belief that SESD education would further disadvantage already disadvantaged students. Traces of this fear appear towards the end of Staples’ editorial, cited above. Siegel explains that this concern is usually based on the misconception that the students’ native dialect (D1) will be used as the language of instruction in the classroom, so that students are not obliged to become proficient in Standard English; of course, this is simply not the goal of SESD methodology. A second concern is that SESD wastes valuable classroom time, because time spent paying attention to the students’ native dialect is time taken away from learning Standard English; Staples makes this argument in his editorial as well. Siegel (2000, 189) writes that this claim is disproved by the ‘results of rigorous research conducted on the long-term effects of bilingual education’. Finally, a last concern is interference, whereby paying attention to the D1 in the classroom at all would interfere with students’
acquisition of the D2, but again, Sieger explains that there are no studies that confirm this concern.

The last argument used against SESD education is familiar to us already, and rests on precepts of *legitimacy and appropriateness*. Standard language ideology, which contends that only a standard variety of a language belongs in official, institutional and educational contexts, remains pervasive today, and Siegel quotes William Mackey who observes that ‘Only before God and linguists are all languages equal’ (quoted in Siegel 2010, 185). On this point, very little has changed since the Ebonics proposal; in 2005, for example, the San Bernardino City Unified School District of California proposed to include African American English in the curriculum, and one opinion piece appearing in response claimed that ‘rambling incoherently and showing adverse reactions to proper grammar, spelling, and pronunciation isn’t a language, it’s an abomination’ (quoted in Siegel 2010, 185). The same piece writes that ‘legitimization (of AAE) by Oakland was and is a shameful attempt to convert illiteracy into a cultural and social asset. Trust me—there is nothing cultural about being a dumbass’ (quoted in Siegel 2010, 186). Such a response illustrates the very negative conception of Ebonics in particular, and of non-standard dialect varieties of English in general, that still prevails today outside of specifically linguistic or pedagogical circles. Standard language ideology constitutes the largest hurdle for the institutionalization of non-standard dialects in the classroom, because it cannot be refuted by empirical research; it is deeply rooted in socio-historical processes of upper-middle class hegemony and cultural domination.

**SESD Education and First Nations dialects of English in Canada**

In the fourteen years since the Oakland controversy flooded media platforms, this issue has receded somewhat from public attention, but continues to be relevant for educators and pedagogical experts who debate the relative merits of using Ebonics – and other nonstandard varieties of English—as a classroom tool. In the Canadian context, for instance, First Nations dialects of English have recently made their way into educational discourse because students who are native speakers of these dialects face a challenge similar to that of African American students.

First Nations students whose first language is an Aboriginal language are recognized in the Canadian school system as having ESL needs, and these students are provided with ESL resources in the classroom. However, some students have a First Nations dialect of English as their primary language and are also learning a new language: Standard English; this need has until very recently remained unacknowledged, and students have gone unsupported. Like African American native speakers of Ebonics, students who are native speakers of a First Nations dialect of English are often mislabelled as developmentally delayed or behaviourally difficult, and inappropriate pedagogical measures are often implemented as a result (Peltier 2009, 4). While there has been no debate about whether these students have a dialect or independent language as their primary language, the controversy arises with the suggestion that these dialects should be valorized and legitimized in the classroom and used as a pedagogical tool to improve the students’ Standard English proficiency.
Linguists and First Nations activists who recognize the importance of implementing pedagogical programs that valorize First Nations dialects of English, have been working to overcome the stigmatization of these dialects that continues to be a problematic social issue today; the intent has been to train educators to recognize the cultural significance and linguistic and historical legitimacy of these varieties (Ball, Bernhardt and Deby 2005, 5). Experts cite successful Standard English as a Second Dialect programs (SESD) that promote approaches of additive bilingualism, like the Ebonics programs employed in the US, as the best approach for First Nations students in Canada, specifying that SESD programs are more suited and more effective for such students than ESL because they aim to promote Standard English proficiency without assimilating the student into mainstream culture (Ball, Bernhardt and Deby 2005, 12; Peltier 2009, 4); not only do such pedagogical approaches validate the student culturally, but they are effective at improving the students’ Standard English literacy skills, as American and Australian studies have confirmed (Ball, Bernhardt and Deby 2005, 12; Rickford 1999, 327). However, the ultimate issue of the stigmatization of nonstandard dialects that continues to be problematic today reflects wider social issues and cannot be resolved by linguists and pedagogues alone.

Conclusion

The Ebonics controversy is a particularly strong example of the kind of vehement objections that are raised against the institutionalization of non-standard dialects in the classroom. The debate that arose highlighted the resistance that exists in the general public—in 1996 as well as today—to the educational valorization of non-standard, non-prestige dialects, despite extensive research that finds SESD programs effective. While labelling Ebonics as a distinct language may have been something of a miscalculation on the part of the school board, the fact remains that even once it acknowledged Ebonics as a dialect of English instead of as an independent language, the public continued to resist its efforts—and similar efforts in other school districts; this demonstrates the pervasiveness of standard language ideology which continues to influence negative perceptions of non-standard dialects. This is a complex social issue, but it is one that must be tackled head on if we are to provide appropriate and effective education to children whose first language is a non-standard dialect.
References

**Ebonics & the Oakland Controversy**


**Standard English as a Second Dialect (SESD)**


**SESD and First Nations Dialects of English in Canada**
