EBONICS AND EDUCATION: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THE POST-1996 RESEARCH LITERATURE

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Introduction

The 1996 Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) resolution that affirmed the role of Ebonics in the education of black students touched off a brief but highly contentious national debate on school policy. In doing so, it also brought together a divided community of black language scholars that rallied around the spirit, if not always the exact wording, of the resolution. In fact, the resolution itself is indicative of an underlying linguistics tug-of-war. For instance, neither the resolution nor its supporting policy statement refers to "Black English" in their texts (Oakland Unified School District, 1996). In addition, the research studies around which the decision was based exclude the work of most of the scholars who comprised the slate of expert witnesses for the plaintiffs in the 1970s Martin Luther King, Jr. v. Ann Arbor School Board case. The King case gave judicial recognition to the term "Black English" which, in part, contributes to its present-day currency. Similarly, the King expert panel did not include some of the more prominent scholars who coined the term Ebonics only two years before the trial began.

It is highly improbable that these exclusions were coincidental or simply the consequence of the orthodox procedures of science. For instance, in coining the term Ebonics during a caucus at a national conference in St. Louis in 1973, the black scholars who did so were strident in their criticism of the work of their influential white peers, many of whom were present, and in their repudiation of the racist implications of the term "Black English" (Williams, 1975; see also, Smith & Crozier, 1998). It is not surprising then that, for the most part, the more vocal members of the caucus and the African-centered thesis on black language they posited have been marginalized in the academy. Consequently, scores of students of black language and communication over the past thirty years have been professionally prepared without the benefit of interaction with scholars who are part of an interdisciplinary research tradition that spans seven decades (e.g., Alleyne, 1971, 1980, 1993; Bailey, 1965; Blackshire-Belay, 1996; De Frantz, 1995; Du Bois, 1933; Herskovits, 1958; Ladefoged, 1968; Smith, 1976, 1978; Turner, 1948; Vass, 1979; Welmers, 1973; Williams, 1975; Woodson, 1933). The 1996 resolution may be understood, in part, as a deliberate move on the part of the OUSD task force and school board to formally reestablish black language policy and pedagogy upon a tradition that is explicit and unapologetic in its affirmation of not only black language but of black humanity itself.

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This gesture was obscured not so much by the firestorm of media criticism and public outcry that came in the aftermath of the OUSD resolution as it was by scholarly attempts to clarify the board's approval of it. Scholars typically used Black English, African-American English, and African-American Vernacular English interchangeably with Ebonics and synonymous terms such as African American language and black language. Prominent among those that conflated the terms was the Linguistic Society of America (1997) in a January 1997 motion that generally affirmed the OUSD decision. Now it appears that Ebonics, as a concept, has been largely removed from its African-centered roots, as researchers and educators typically conflate the term with those that it was coined to supplant. At the same time, though, the OUSD resolution has arguably provided the main impetus for the proliferation of scholarly publications on the topic of Ebonics and education over the past seven years.

The aim of this article is to critically review a selection of the research published on black language and education since the 1996 OUSD resolution. The review does not include post-1996 compilations of work originally published prior to the resolution (e.g., Baugh, 1999; Smitherman, 2000) or studies that focus on language research conducted largely in out-of-school contexts (e.g., Makoni, Smitherman, Ball, & Spears, 2003; Morgan, 2002; Mufwene, Rickford, Bailey, & Baugh, 1998). This is not to suggest that these works are not important; they are only omitted from this review due to space constraints. The objective of this review is to identify the salient themes in the contemporary black language and education research literature and to determine the extent to which post-1996 studies have been influenced by the tradition reintroduced into the public domain by the OUSD policy decision. In my view, the latter objective is significant insofar as the members of the Oakland school board, like the conferees that participated in the St. Louis caucus in 1973, created a context for scholars to re-examine the relationship between language and power and to embark upon new programs of research to further unravel the complexities of Ebonics. The interest here is not only in conceptual issues related to black language but also in the pedagogical policies implied by different formulations and the economic and social consequences that result from them (Duncan, 2000a, 2000b, 2003; Gaulding, 1998).

Conceptualizing Black Language

Contemporary researchers of black language and education typically use the term Ebonics interchangeably with the terms Black English, Black English Vernacular, and African-American Vernacular English (e.g., Fordham, 1999; Gaulding, 1998; Ogbu, 1999; Richardson, 2003; Seymour, Abdulkarim, & Johnson, 1999). In some instances, researchers use either black/African-American English (e.g., Foster & Peele, 1999; Lanehart, 2002) or Ebonics/African American language (Hilliard, 2002; Smith, 1998; Smith & Crozier, 1998) exclusively in their work. In rare instances

scholars acknowledge differences between the historical origins and theoretical foundations of the two sets of signifiers (e.g., Baugh, 2000; Hilliard, 2002; Smith, 1998; Smith & Crozier, 1998). However, in these cases there is disagreement over the legitimacy of Ebonics as a term to describe the language spoken at least part of the time by the majority of people of African descent in the United States.

For example, Baugh (2000) acknowledges the "worthy social intentions" of the black scholars who introduced the term Ebonics, but charges them with ethnic boosterism. He further argues that these scholars introduced the term by "violating one of the most essential principles known to linguistic science," that is, by defining a language or speech community based solely on the racial classification of its speakers (p. 85). In contrast, Hilliard (2002), for example, views English and Ebonics as separate amalgams. According to this perspective, Ebonics refers to the canonical African linguistic features in black speech that distinguish it from English and other language varieties in the United States (Smith, 1998). These differences in the way contemporary scholars conceptualize black language reflect historically-contested perspectives over its origin and over the nature of black humanity in the Western Diaspora.

Although scholars on both sides of the issue agree that black language in the U.S. owes its origin to a lingua franca shared by captive Africans from disparate ethnic groups, they differ as to the nature of this "common language of communication." On the one hand, underlying the view that has most purchase on contemporary research is the assumption that black language is a dialect or nonstandard variety of English that owes its origin to a pidginization process (e.g., Baugh, 2000; Gaulding, 1998; Fordham, 1999; Lanehart, 2002; Ogbu, 1999; Seymour et al., 1999). The implication here is that, as a result of the Middle Passage and slavery, captive Africans broke all cultural ties with their native land and constructed a new culture from that of their captors. Accordingly, captive Africans altered and transformed bits and pieces of English in what would form the foundation of "black English."

Although this view has currency in contemporary research, it is a theory that lacks empirical support. As Dilliard (1973) noted some thirty years ago, the "ultimate explanation of the origin of a pidgin is almost as vexed a problem as the origin of language – about which there is no respectable theory" (p. 136). Along these lines, on the other hand, those that either implicitly or explicitly assert an African linguistic continuity of black language in the Western Hemisphere (e.g., Hilliard, 2002; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Perry, 2003; Perry & Delpit, 1998; Smith, 1998; Smith & Crozier, 1998) do so on the empirical basis of the status of Wolof as a lingua franca among West Africans in the thirteen colonies (Dalby, cited in Dilliard, 1973), of a Niger-Congo-based language shared by West Africans of the southeast U.S. (Turner, [1948] 1973), and of a Bantu linguistic basis and influence of the language spoken by the

later-arriving captive Central Africans who populated the plantations of the American south (Vass, 1979; see also, Holloway, 1991).

Divergent Views of Black Language in the Classroom

Different conceptualizations of black language inform different ways that researchers assess its role in the classroom. Researchers who conceptualize black language as a non-standard form of English often see it as either adversative or obstructive to school success (Baugh, 2000; Fordham, 1999; Lanehart, 2002; Ogbu, 1999; Seymour et al., 1999). For example, Fordham (1999) views black language use by the black students in her study as evidence of a form of guerilla warfare that contributes to the "successful" academic failure of youth who opt not to "lease" the ideally standard English discursive practices during the school day to avoid "acting white." Similarly, Ogbu (1999) argues that the black community in his study is caught in a dilemma characterized by the belief in not only the necessity of mastering ideally standard English for education and job success but also by the belief that "mastering proper English threatens their slang English identity, their bona fide membership in their community and racial solidarity" (p. 168). Studies in this vein also implicitly or explicitly affirm the non-standard language as a legitimate mode of communication (Baugh, 2000; Foster & Peele, 1999; Seymour et al., 1999). When this occurs, researchers generally emphasize acceptance and accommodation of the speech patterns in the classroom and focus on the development of teaching and diagnostic strategies to foster academic achievement (Baugh, 2000; Foster & Peele, 1999; Seymour et al. 1999).

In contrast, scholars and researchers who view black language as deriving from a Niger-Congo or Bantu linguistic heritage often treat it as an unremarkable dimension of the classroom environment (Delpit, 2002; Hilliard, 2002; Perry, 1998; 2003; Miner, 1998). In other words, it is viewed as a natural and welcome feature of classrooms with students of African descent. Delpit (1998) perhaps captures this sentiment best in her response to the question, "What do you think about Ebonics? Are you for it or against it?" "My answer must be neither," she writes, "I can be neither for Ebonics or against Ebonics any more than I can be for or against the air" (Delpit. 1998, p. 17). Researchers that adopt this view of black language are explicit in their advocacy of classrooms that affirm the importance of fluency in Ebonics and ideally standard English. Such a view of language in the classroom realizes "that fluency in the standard code can never be the singular goal if, and this is a big if, our schools are to participate in the creation of the next generation of African American scholars, preachers, dramatists, writers, blues men and women – African American leaders" (Perry, 1998, p. 15). Along these lines, these researchers do not necessarily conceive of English and Ebonics as discrete sets of linguistic and discursive practices that are in conflict with each other. Rather, for them, black people have access to (or should have access to) a linguistic repertoire that is

comprised of both, along with additional languages. Further, black student underperformance within this conceptualization has less to do with linguistic barriers or pupil attitudes toward education than it does with the social identities of black children and youth and how they are treated by those charged with educating them (Baldwin, 1979; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Hopson, 2003; Perry & Delpit, 1998; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Smith, 1998, Smith & Crozier, 1998).

Issues of Theory and Evidence in the Research

A review of the research literature indicates that post-1996 studies that treat black language as a nonstandard form of English dominate the empirical literature. Research largely views Ebonics, at best, as a cultural resource or asset to facilitate academic achievement (Foster & Peele, 1999) and, more generally, as an impediment to school success (Fordham, 1999; Lanehart, 2002; Ogbu, 1999). Despite the disparate views of black language within this body of research, these studies share conceptual and theoretical orientations that reinforce racist imagery that has historically plagued social scientific representations of black language. For instance, post-1996 empirical studies are typically replete with references to "dropped," "reduced," and "deleted" post-vocalic consonant configurations and to "zero" and "absent" copulas, to name some of the more obvious deficit terms. As Smitherman (2000) observes, "a deficit is a deficit by any other name" (p. 78). It is in this way that contemporary empirical studies on black language and education inadvertently reinforce racist assumptions in the constructs that are brought to bear on framing, analyzing, and representing Ebonics.

Scholarship on black language and education that asserts the African linguistic and cultural continuity of Ebonics is largely conceptual and theoretical. For instance, it relies on autobiographical, anecdotal, and/or dated empirical evidence for support. The reasons for this may be two-fold. On the one hand, scholars who produce literature in this vein rely on the belief that the humanity of black children and youth is self-evident and that no proof is necessary to assert the legitimacy of their language. Moreover, it follows that to single out language as a predictor of the school success or failure of black students is little more than a decoy issue that takes attention away from more pressing issues of racism and oppression that inform the public education of these children and youth (Baldwin, 1979; Hilliard, 2003; Hopson, 2003). On the other hand, researchers whose post-1996 work is sympathetic to a view that affirms the African linguistic heritage of Ebonics encounter numerous obstacles in securing support for and disseminating their research. For example, in 1997, then Secretary of Education Richard Riley's preemptory rejection of any petition by school districts to access Title VII funds on behalf of black students and the rush by politicians to draft legislation to prevent federal support for programs and research based on the premise that Ebonics is a legitimate language had a chilling effect on post-1996 black language research efforts. In addition, African-centered researchers have also

had to contend with gatekeepers and protectors of the status quo when submitting their work for publication. Consequently, as was the case in the mid-1970s, researchers who today challenge popular conventions on black language and education encounter resistance at every level of the research enterprise not faced by their peers who uphold the status quo.

Summary and Implications for Future Research

The work reviewed in this article indicates that the post-1996 research on black language and education generally affirms the importance of Ebonics in promoting achievement among black students. However, empirical studies typically conceptualize Ebonics as a non-standard variety of English that black students should at least bracket and use in non-academic situations in class, if not altogether eliminate in the developmental process of mastering ideally standard English. In contrast, the contemporary literature that affirms the African cultural heritage of Ebonics is largely conceptual and theoretical in nature and offers little, beyond anecdotal accounts, by way of practical inclusion in the classroom. In many ways, the problem described here reflects one of the predicaments that characterize the post-Civil Rights education of black children and youth in the U.S. In other words, the current research climate favors research on black language that tends to affirm studies that reinforce the normalcy of a white linguistic standard and tends to marginalize scholarship that asserts the normalcy of black culture. However, there is reason for optimism. The bold stance taken by the members of the OUSD board of education as well as by a small but significant number of scholars over the years has created the opportunity for researchers to forge new programs of research. Further, these scholars have found sympathetic venues to disseminate their work among progressive or otherwise open-minded editors and publishers.

In conclusion, much of the contemporary research on Ebonics privileges West Africa in explaining the roots of black culture in the United States. Although West Africa has indeed exerted considerable influence on black culture in the Western Hemisphere, the empirical record indicates that the majority of captive Africans in the latter period of the Atlantic slave trade were taken from Central Africa (Hilliard, 2003; Holloway, 1991; Vass, 1979). These Africans were assigned to toil in the fields of Southern plantations; those taken earlier from West Africa, in contrast, worked mainly as artisans and domestic servants in much closer proximity to white Americans (Holloway, 1991). These points raise important questions as researchers continue to forge new pathways in contemporary black language research. For instance, the issues of class and regional diversity within black culture and the role of power in the research enterprise, even when "native speakers" are conducting studies within their own communities, become salient and may help to explain why the idea of Ebonics is so hotly contested, even among black researchers. Certainly, these issues have social and economic relevance in contemporary U.S. society, as

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demonstrated by Angola, the Louisiana prison. Angola is named after the enslaved Central Africans who once worked the fields of the plantation where it is presently located and whose Bantu-speaking descendents now comprise the vast majority of its inmate population. I raise these points as I conclude this article as a reminder to researchers that the policies implied by the different formulations of black language we entertain in the academy have material consequences in the world outside of it.

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