Present Imperfect:

A Discussion of Ebonics, Bowling Balls, and the Dangers of Common Sense

by

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Shortly before Christmas 1996, I was dismayed at the bombardment of articles, columns, so-called reports and discussions on Ebonics. As an educated Black male, there seemed to be no way of escaping a discussion of it. *Everyone* was talking about it or, at least, making reference to what they *thought* it was. As a linguist (or, as I prefer, *linguistician*), I was disappointed at how many outright lies were being circulated as "fact" in this debate and at how little the truth actually mattered to most participants.

My pulse raced when *National Public Radio's* Ray Suarez billed one of his ***Talk of the Nation*** programs as "the last Ebonics show you will ever need."[1] But my heart sank again upon the introduction Jack E. White who wrote a Time column featuring a "debate" on Ebonics between The Kingfish and Buckwheat.[2] (To Mr. White's credit, he did have Buckwheat speaking so-called "Standard" English and pointed out that these "Black" characters were created and scripted by white writers.) By the time local morning radio talk shows jumped into the fray by inviting white callers to give "Ebonics lessons" and front page articles in the ***Plain Dealer*** continued to perpetuate inaccuracies, I had had enough!

When was someone who knew something about linguistics, or at the very least language, going to explain what "Ebonics" really was? When were the commentators, reporters, and pundits going to stop referring to it as a "new" idea or invention? Why was the Oakland School Board hardly ever mentioned during these arguments except as a parenthetical reference which served as a spring board for wild diversions?

After all, I kept hearing from Blacks and Whites alike, this was a fundamentally silly argument to begin with, wasn't it? Common sense tells you that *I don't know nothing, You be tired,* and *He going* are incorrect, lazy and outright sloppy forms of communication, right?

Wrong. Inherently, unequivocally, and invariably wrong. Alas, if only common sense truly were so common!

Historically, "common" sense has told us that the world is flat, the earth is the center of the universe, that five pennies are better than one quarter, that a pound of feathers is lighter than a pound of lead, and that a bowling ball dropped from the top of a building falls faster than a baseball released at the same time. It also tells us that there are "good" languages and "bad" languages, that two negatives make a positive, and that "illogical" speech is at best the sign of a poor upbringing or at worst the sign of an illogical or inferior mind.

What has been lacking in most "Ebonics" debates to date has been a truly empirical examination of the facts, not of what we would like them to be. No matter how much you may *want* the bowling ball to hit the sidewalk before the baseball, it is not going to happen! Why? Because

after seeing the same result time and time again, we were forced to conclude that both objects are being pulled at a constant rate by some unseen force we call *gravity*.

All languages and their varieties or "dialects" are controlled by a similar unseen force called *grammar*. This grammar is not necessarily the "grammars" we are taught in school which tend to be *prescriptive.* They tell us what we ought to do or, most often, what we should *not* do. You may be taught *not* to split an infinitive, but no one teaches you *not* to put determiners and prepositions after the noun. Why haven't you ever heard a teacher correct you with "You must say *on the corner*, not *corner the on*!" Obviously, because no one ever says *corner the on*. That's just common sense, right? Scientifically, we have to ask ourselves, why not? If someone can make a "sloppy" "illogical" or random error like *he been gone*, the (mis)production of the phrase *corner the on* should be of no surprise. Why would that latter be any "sloppier" or more "illogical" than the former? Because there has to be some force, some rule, some grammar that will allow the former but not the latter. These unconscious rules, which restrict what a native speaker might and cannot under any circumstances say, make up a linguistic *grammar*. The rules that govern different dialects may vary (that's why they are *different*!), but all of them have rules. Hence, they are all logical and systematic.

Many articles, such as Patrice M. Jones' front page story in the Sunday, March 9 ***Plain Dealer***, typify Ebonics as lacking the verb *to be* only to say that this same verb is misused a few lines later![3] Word endings are said to be chopped off and we are left with the impression that these forms are the haphazard, illogical butchering of the "standard" vernacular. There could not possibly be any rules to this type of doubly-negated mumbo jumbo! But there are. In fact, these rules are very similar to the ones that govern the Queen's English.

In Ebonics, there is indeed a verb *to be* (although its absence should not in itself be surprising; many languages such as Arabic and Russian eliminate or limit its use deeming it unnecessary). In Black English, the forms of *to be* in the sentences *he is sleeping* and *he is a doctor* can be dropped through ellipsis to become *he sleeping* and *he a doctor.* This is the same process that allows *he is at home* to become *he is home* or *I think that it is raining* to become *I think it is raining* in standard English. But not every occurrence of *to be* can be dropped. Only contracted forms can be ellipsed. *He is sleeping* can become *he's sleeping* and *he is a doctor* can become *he's a doctor*. Since *how beautiful you are* cannot become **how beautiful you're* and *It's cold outside, isn't it?* cannot become **It's cold outside, 'snot it?* predictably, **how beautiful you* and **it's cold outside, not it?* are both impossible structures in Ebonics. Have you ever heard anyone sing *"***How great thou"* during a Sunday service?

In "Standard" English, the verb *to be* usually marks the tense of a verb. However, in Ebonics, it often marks its *mode* or *aspect*. Ms. Jones' article erroneously stated that *he is going* would become *he be going* in Ebonics. Instead, it would become, as we have seen, *he going*.[4] *He be going* is a different sentence meaning *he goes all the time* showing the habitual aspect of the action. Romance languages mark this distinction in the past with the use of the imperfect versus the preterit or *passé composé*. Ebonics extends this usage to create a *present imperfect*, if you will. Similarly, the durative aspect can be marked with *he been going* meaning *he has been going for quite some time* (not a misuse of past progressive as is sometimes stated meaning *he was going* or *he went*.)

The famous argument against double negatives that "two negatives make a positive" has no basis in logic (after all, do two wrongs make a right?) This assertion, attributed to an eighteenth century grammar written by Robert Lowth, was not supported by logic or grammar or science, but by math.[5] Lowth used as evidence against this structure that the product of two negatives makes a positive (-2 x -2 = +4). Oddly enough, he could have used mathematics to prove the opposite because the *sum* of two negatives is a negative (-2 + -2 = -4). He just liked multiplication better than addition! Besides, I have yet to meet anyone who *truly* believes upon hearing *I don't know nothing about Physics* that the speaker is or intended to claim to be an expert in that field or that *I ain't got no money* is synonymous with *My wealth rivals Bill Gates'.*

The substitution of the "th" sound with "d" is often shown as a proof of the illogic of Ebonics. In truth, there are two "th" sounds in Standard English: [θ] as in *bath* or *thin* and as in [ð] *bathe* or *these*. *They* is often converted to *dey*, but *bathe* does not become *bade*; it would become *bave*. *Bath* does not become *bad* but rather becomes *baf* and *thin* does not become *din* but *tin*. If these changes were truly illogical, why couldn't *thin* become *din, vin, fin* or for that matter even *gin, min*, or *pin*? Because there are rules that determine *where* the substitutions occur and *which sounds* will replace the original. [ð] becomes [d] only at the beginning of a word; between to vowels or at the end of a word it becomes [v]. The choice of [d] and [v] is not accidental-- they share many qualities with [ð]. All of the sounds are voiced (your vocal folds vibrate) and are pronounced on the teeth or lips, while [v] and [ð] are also fricative (the flow of air is continuous unlike [d] where there is a complete blockage.) Likewise, [θ], [t], and [f] are the voiceless counterparts of [ð], [d], and [v]. The former group are exactly the same sounds as the latter except that the vocal folds do not vibrate.

Even "mistakes" or slips of the tongue in a language are rule-bound thus highly predictable. A possible Spoonerism for *key chain* [ki čen] in English is *chey kain* [či ken]. But the initial "ch" consonant in *chey* [č] is actually an *affricate*-- the combination of two separate sounds, [t] and [š] (the "sh" as in "shoe"), perceived as a single sound. Hence, *phonetically* (or physically) *key chain* can be represented as [ki tšen] or "k" + "long e" and "t" + "sh" + "long a" + "n". *Phonologically* (or perceptually) it is heard as [ki č en] "k" + "long e" and "ch" + "long a" + "n". In slips of the tongue, English speakers automatically move these two sounds together to "mispronounce" *chey kain* [tši ken]. However, a French speaker, who does not recognize the [tš] as a single sound (although they can pronounce it in words like *ciao* or *match*) could theoretically mispronounce the words as *tey kshain* [ti kšen]. *No* native English speaker, no matter how uneducated, deficient, lazy, or inferior one might presume him or her to be, could *ever* make this mistake. Our rules of phonology will not allow it.

There are also no such things as "simple" or "primitive" languages. All "dialects" can convey any and all possible (even impossible) messages. There is no idea that can be expressed in "Standard" English that cannot be conveyed in "Ebonics" and vice versa just as there is no idea in Arabic that cannot be expressed in French. Granted, some renderings may be wordier or more circuitous in Variety A than in Variety B, but there are just as many cases where the reverse is true. The bottom line is, one way or another, the idea is expressed. All "dialects" are also equal in complexity. If you asked a child in any language to give you an example of a subordinate clause or a coordinating conjunction, they would probably give you a blank stare. But even a child of "Ebonics" can hear a sentence like *This is the cat that ate the rat that stole the*

cheese...(etc. etc. etc.)...in the house that Jack built and perfectly understand who is doing what to whom and add as many new elements as they please or you have the patience to endure.

Why then, in the face of this well documented scientific evidence, does there persist the notion that this form of speech is inferior, nonsensical, and unintelligent? Are there great hordes who still believe that the bowling ball will also crash first on the flat earth of our geocentric universe?

The unfortunate truth of the matter is that certain fallacies are preferred over reality. Geoffrey Pullum, in his essay "The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax," discusses the prevalence of the myth that Eskimos have hundreds of words for snow in spite of the research of Cleveland State University's Dr. Laura Martin to the contrary.[6] In fact, even if the "Eskimos" (a truly precise term right up there with "Africans" and "Indians") *did* have a wide variety of terms for snow, it should not be a very interesting or shocking bit of information. Try substituting "Eskimos" and "snow" with "botanists" and "flowers," or "printers" and "fonts," or "mechanics" and "wrenches," or "dancers" and "moves" and I predict that the ensuing lecture would elicit from the audience little more than spitballs and snores. It is the exotic nature of this (perceived) blubber-eating, nose-rubbing, ice-dwelling, wife-swapping people that makes this so-called information "notable." Finding this image to be false is like learning that there is no Santa Claus-- we would rather live in a world where he does exist!

By this time, physics scholars have undoubtedly pointed out that the bowling ball example only works within a perfect vacuum. Wind, air pressure, and a myriad of other variables can influence the actual descent of my two metaphorical orbs. Certainly, we do not live in a vacuum (which is fortunate for us since, I am told, it would be pretty damn hard to breathe!)

Nor do our languages. When we use language, we do so in specific *contexts*. Language is influenced by our perceptions, our preferences, and unfortunately our prejudices. If we approve of a group, we approve of their language. If we dislike a group, we dislike their language. In the United States, wealthy, northern, metropolitan, white, suburban and male are preferred over poor, southern, rural, black, inner-city or female. So it is not surprising that wealthy, northern, metropolitan, white, suburban, and male speech patterns are favored over poor, southern, rural, black, inner-city or female speech patterns.[7]

Language, like any other symbolic system, has a shape (morphology, phonology, and syntax), a meaning (semantics), and a usage (pragmatics). These elements should not be studied in isolation. For example, a stop sign has a shape (a red octagon), a meaning (pedestrians and motorized vehicles are to come to a complete stop and look both ways before continuing through an intersection), and a usage. Is a stop sign valid if, as was common during my college days, someone hangs the sign on the dorm room wall or ceiling?

The power of pragmatics is evident to all students who have asked "Can I go to the bathroom?" has received an icy "I don't know, *can you*?" as a reply. They know deep down that they have indeed made a request. (In technical terms, they invoked the *felicity condition* of an *illocutionary act*; if you ask something of someone, they have to be able to do it or be in a position to allow you to do it.) I have not dared to use this response with a student since hearing several years ago that a student unzipped his pants and urinated in the classroom trash can to prove that indeed he *could* go to the bathroom! (But, I must keep in mind that perhaps this never happened at all. It

could be one of those urban myths that defy eradication like the Eskimos' hundreds of words for snow.)

The social aspect of language is what makes this such an impassioned debate. Language defines who we are, who we perceive ourselves to be, and how others perceive us, often unconsciously. If language is not used to communicate messages with other people, then what is its value? The social contexts in which conversations take place are the "air" in which language breathes, flourishes, and evolves.

Another common linguistic myth is that by putting children into a room full of foreign language tapes, CD's or videotapes, they will automatically learn every language they hear. Not quite. Children will naturally *acquire* (or in other words teach themselves) these languages if they have *active participation* with real live speakers. Mere exposure is not enough. The social interaction between the child and the speakers is critical. The notion that this acquisition is effortless is also under question considering that a child would have had over 9,000 hours of active language interaction by the age of five.[8] In the typical high school or college classroom setting, that would be the equivalent of sixty-seven years of study.

"Ebonics" is by no means new nor is it a fad. It has been well studied and named "Black English (BE)," "African American English (AAE)," "African American Vernacular English (AAVE)," "Black English Vernacular (BEV)," or "Urban English." The choice of the name "Ebonics" by the Oakland Unified School District's Board had as much to do with the public reaction to this question as anything else. The image of "ebony" and its connotations of Black pride and Afrocentrism have become for many the spark that ignited the argument.

Trinidadian writer Earl Lovelace has said "our experience has had as its central theme *not* slavery and colonialism, as is often thought, but *the struggle against* enslavement and colonialism."[9] I would submit that the Black or African-American experience is similarly *not* rooted in slavery and racism, but in *the struggle against* enslavement and racism. The passion that has fueled the national debate over Ebonics for the past three months is rooted in this same struggle.

Bill Cosby, in a speech at Atlanta's Morehouse College, claimed that there were two groups of students at that institution: those who called it "Morehouse" and those who referred to it as "Mo'house." The "Mo'house" group, he added, were the students who had already found jobs.[10] Chris Rock asserted that there are two ways to speak: the way to talk if you want to get a job and "that other way" if you don't want to get a job.[11] These two comedians underscore how tightly our language is tied to our personal outlooks on our place in the world and our opportunities for advancement and success within it. Our choice of linguistic style can identify us either as one who has gotten over, crossed over, or never given up the fight and defied the powers that be. The use of the standard can mark one as being *proper*, *stuck up,* or a *wanna be* while use of the dialect can show that one is *real people* or *down to earth*. Our language is not a function of our *ethnicity*, but of our *identity*, given or chosen. This choice can (and does) change not only over time, but from situation to situation. Wanting to belong can be one of the strongest obstacles against the acquisition of a new dialect. The power over their own words may be the sole power many of the disenfranchised feel they have left.

Whatever variety of English we speak or espouse, "proper" or "real," "standard" or "non-standard," merely wishing the problem away will not work. As with infants, extended exposure to the "preferred" dialect is not enough. Consider the logic of this approach-- if we make sure that our students only hear "standard English" and erase or forbid any other usage, they will all speak "perfect" English. I don't care if you locked yourself in a room and watched Jethro Bodine or Archie Bunker 24/7, you would not magically, mystically, automatically start talking like them! Some "mavens" have even gone as far as to speculate that, due to the influence of mass media, American regional dialects are steadily blending into the Midwestern dialect and that someday everyone will speak the same dialect. Texans, Atlantans, Brooklynites, and Appalachians have listened to George Will, Edwin Newman, Al Michaels, and Bob Costas on the TV for years and their speech has not been altered. My father has watched Peter Jennings religiously for nearly twenty years and he sounds no more Canadian today than he did in 1981.

The intent of the Oakland school board was never to do away with the instruction of "standard" English. On the contrary, they were looking for better ways to lead their students towards its acquisition in face of declining verbal scores.[12] They planned to teach Ebonics *to the teachers* so that they could better understand the complexities of their students and the impediments to their furthered education. This move is not without precedent. The Conference on College Composition and Communication of the National Council of Teachers of English has officially endorsed a policy of "Students' Right to Their Own Language" (and dialects) since 1972 while simultaneously supporting the acquisition of the standard variety by all students.[13] The Linguistics Society of America has recognized Ebonics and supported the Oakland resolution.[14]

These initiatives are intended to, above all, uphold the students' dignity while providing him or her with the best possible chances for future success. We need to help students make informed choices about the appropriateness of certain linguistic varieties in specific situations without automatically belittling them. The lasting influence of Lowth's grammar shows us, if nothing else, the strength of people's desire to effectively manipulate these situations to achieve their own goals. If we are constantly telling students that they are illogical, deficient and essentially stupid because of their failure to abandon *You be tired* in favor of *You are normally tired*, are we really encouraging them to switch dialects? If the detractors of this supposedly crude and unordered speech cannot even make fun of it without getting it all wrong, how seriously can the students take them? Through their apathy, the "experts" have effectively negated the students' very existence. The recognition of the validity of a language variety is essential in acknowledging the worth of its individual speakers.

Ebonics is not strictly "a Black thing." *No one* speaks the elusive "standard" English natively. (We all seem to know what it is, but as of yet no one has clearly defined it.) *All of us* speak "idiolects" that overlap in varying degrees with this standard. *All students*, of all colors and backgrounds, have to learn to bridge the difference between their own speech and the standard. Some of our bridges are just longer than others'.

Unless we as a country are ready to tackle the real issues of education, racism, and socioeconomic inequalities, the debate over "Ebonics" can only lead to more ingeniously insidious ways of hiding our collective heads in the sand. The next time "Urban English" or "BEV" returns to the national spotlight, I might as well put my money on the bowling ball. "Common sense" tells me I've got a fifty-fifty shot.

[1] Ray Suarez (host), ***Talk of the Nation: Ebonics*** featuring Jack White and Dr. Richard Wright, broadcast January 21, 1997, Washington: National Public Radio at http://search.npr.org/cf/cmn/cmnpd01fm.cfm?PrgDate=01/21/1997&PrgID=5

[2] White, Jack E., "Ebonics according to Buckwheat: a new furor over Black English provokes some stereotypical thinking," ***Time***, January 13, 1997, Vol. 149 No. 2. at http://cgi.pathfinder.com/time/magazine/1997/dom/970113/society.ebonics.html

[3] Jones, Patrice M., "A war over words: Ebonics at center if educational debate," ***The Plain Dealer***, March 9, 1997, p. 1A

[4] Ibid., p. 14A

[5] Fromkin, Victoria and Robert Rodman, ***An Introduction to Language (Fifth Edition)***. 1993. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, pgs. 14-15

[6] Pullum, Geoffrey K., "The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax" in ***The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax and other irreverent essays on the study of language***. 1991. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press

[7] from interview with in Walt Wolfram in ***American Tongues*** (video recording), The Center for New American Media, 1986

[8] Klein, Wolfgang, ***Second Language Acquisition***. 1986. Cambridge: Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics, Cambridge University Press. P. 9

[9] "The Dialectics of Form and Context in the Works of Ousmane Sembène," Round table discussion, April 14, 1990 in Gadjigo, Samba, ***Ousmane Sembène: Dialogues with Critics and Writers***. 1993. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

[10] as quoted on ***Talk of the Nation*, January 21, 1997**, *National Public Radio*, Washington, DC

[11] from ***The Chris Rock Show***, February, 1997, *Home Box Office, Inc*.

[12] Oakland Unified School District Board of Education, "Resolution of the Board of Education adopting the report and recommendations of the African-American Task Force; a policy statement and directing the Superintendent of Schools to devise a program to improve the English language acquisition and application skills of African-American students, No. 9697-0063," December 18, 1996, Amended January 15, 1997. (http://www.ousd.k12.ca.us/AmendRes9697-006.html)

[13] Butler, Melvin A., chair, and the Committee on the CCCC Language Statement. 1974. Special issue of ***College Composition and Communication***, 25 (Fall):1-320

[14] Resolution passed January, 1997 in Chicago, Illinois. (http://www.lsadc.org/ebonics.html)

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Links for Further Information:

Carol Temple Adger, Ebonics--Lang. Policy and Public Knowledge
http://www.cal.org/ebonics/eboped.htm

Charles Fillmore, Ebonics--A Linguist Looks at the Ebonics Debate
http://www.cal.org/ebonics/ebfillmo.htm

Ebonics bibliographies

Sociolinguistics bibliographies : http://www2.colgate.edu/diw/SOAN244bibs.html