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Language Ideology and Dialect

Understanding the Oakland Ebonics Controversy

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Several years ago, a couple of colleagues and I submitted a manuscript on language variation and education to a major national organization devoted to the teaching of English. One of the manuscript reviewers wondered how relevant our discussion would be since "today's hot issue is really language, not dialect, bilingualism, not bidialectalism . . . the dialect issue has quieted" (anonymous manuscript reviewer). I found this response disturbing for a couple of reasons. For one, it suggested that concerns for language education issues are somehow driven by socio-educational faddishness rather than authentic educational need. The response further indicated a troubling detachment by members of the professional academy from the everyday struggles and concerns of practitioners. Certainly, the reviewer could not have witnessed the same classrooms I was observing or even listened to some of the casual conversations about language variation among my colleagues in the English department.

In the mid-1990s, shortly before the controversial resolution of the Oakland Unified School District regarding Ebonics, I offered the following observation:

My sociolinguistic experience over three decades, which includes the heyday of interest in dialects in the sixties and seventies, suggests that, at the grassroots level, we have not made nearly as much progress as we imagine with respect to dialect and education. The confrontational rhetoric may have subsided, but the issues encountered a couple of decades ago remain as relevant in today's schools as they were then. Furthermore, many of the socioeducational inequities that derive from the failure of the educational system to take into account dialect diversity continue to be perpetuated. Can we afford to dismiss or treat with benign neglect fundamental matters relating to dialects and education because they are no longer trendy? I hope not. (Wolfram 1995, 1)

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As it turned out, the observation was somewhat prophetic. The controversy surrounding the Oakland resolution justified my concern that conditions and issues pertaining to dialect diversity and education had not really changed that much since the original dialect controversies three decades earlier. Language professionals, including linguists, sociolinguists, and dialectologists, have not made nearly as much progress as they might have assumed or wished for with respect to the public understanding of language diversity.

If nothing else, the controversy and media blitz surrounding the Oakland resolution has certainly emphasized

- (1) the intensity of people's beliefs and opinions about language and language diversity,
- (2) the persistent and widespread level of public misinformation about issues of language variation and education, and
- (3) the need for informed knowledge about language diversity and its role in education and in public life.

The social and educational outcomes of sociolinguistic involvement in the difference versus deficit debates of the 1960s obviously were not enough to overcome prevailing attitudes and practices. Furthermore, the adoption of strong position statements on dialect diversity by professional organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English (namely, the statement on Students' Right to Their Own Language) (Butler 1974, 2) and the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (1983, 22) barely made a dent on entrenched attitudes and practices with respect to language differences. Public discussion of issues of dialect diversity following the Oakland resolution poignantly highlighted the pervasiveness of public (mis)understanding of socioeducational issues related to language diversity. And the topic remains shrouded in controversy.

Framing the Oakland Controversy

What was really behind the Oakland controversy? Why was there such a public outcry when the fundamental issues attending language diversity and education in Oakland seemed to differ little from those that language professionals have dealt with for several decades now? Perhaps more important, what can we learn from this situation that might mitigate the kinds of misunderstandings that pervaded the Oakland situation?

To understand the full significance of the Oakland controversy, we have to understand that it is framed by a fundamental ideology about language and language diversity. By *language ideology*, I mean an underlying, consensual belief system about the way language is and is supposed to be. In its most pervasive form,

language ideology is unquestioned and appears to make "common sense" so that no specialized knowledge or information is required to understand fundamental "facts" about language and its role in society. To a large extent, the beliefs about language need not be made explicit; in fact, as Fairclough (1989, 85) notes, language ideology is most effective when its workings are least visible.

From time to time, however, particular events in society may bring to the surface underlying beliefs about language, and language itself may become an object in the ideological struggle. In an important sense, the Oakland resolution was controversial because it surfaced foundational beliefs about language and language diversity and exposed an alternative, nonmainstream set of beliefs about language and language variation. The questions and comments about Ebonics provided a forum for exposing alternative ways of viewing language and language diversity. Such views, which are derived from the same core of beliefs that govern religion, morality, and ethics, were assumed to be inflexible and unassailable.

On numerous occasions during the recent Ebonics controversy, I was asked if I "believed in Ebonics," as if there were some article of religious belief attendant to the recognition of African American Vernacular English. In fact, one host on a radio talk show confronted my stance on the legitimacy of African American Vernacular English as a linguistic system with the comment, "You have to understand, professor, that I believe in a right and a wrong, a moral and an immoral, a correct and an incorrect, and Ebonics is simply incorrect English." Others have had similar experiences. After I gave a recent lecture on Ebonics at a university, the following day a person in the audience reported that she was greeted that morning by a colleague who observed, "I heard you went to the Ebonics lecture last night; so do you believe in Ebonics now?" The response to attendance at the lecture on Ebonics conjures up images of attendance at a religious revival meeting. But this semblance is not far-fetched, as I have found that it is as difficult to dispute the linguistic validity of a vernacular variety such as African American Vernacular English as it is to dispute religion. Everyone seems to have an opinion about Ebonics, and these opinions are typically quite dogmatic. In fact, I have found that the question, "So what do you think of Ebonics?" typically functions as an indirect speech act declaring that a person is about to offer you his or her opinion on this topic rather than a literal question. Furthermore, most people assume that any "reasonable person" would believe the same way as they do about language. Such is the manifestation of language ideology—at its best or worst.

There is another characteristic of language ideology that sets language apart from some other domains of knowledge. Language is considered to be at once collective and personal, a symbolic token of group identity as well as personal character. In its collective capacity, it is a shared, ordinary commodity, and no specialized

knowledge or expertise is required for public commentary. This status means that authoritative critique on the topic is not limited to those with specialized expertise. In fact, the Ebonics controversy has taught us that social and political prominence are considered to be quite adequate for the assumption of authoritative stance. Fuel was added to the fire of the Oakland Ebonics controversy when prominent public figures ranging from the president of the United States to educators and leaders in the African American community offered immediate and pronounced opinions that chastised the Oakland school board for its resolution recognizing Ebonics.

One of the ironies of the public commentary on Ebonics was the seemingly ironic alliances of public figures who commented on the topic. Public commentary brought together leaders from the African American community known for their social activism and progressive sociopolitical views and those known for their conservative, reactionary political stances. On what other topic have a conservative icon such as the media commentator, Rush Limbaugh, and the social activist, Jessie Jackson, agreed on in their public condemnation? Such alliances are, however, simply a testament to the depth of the entrenched language ideology. Of course, none of these prominent personalities had any expertise in language issues *per se*. By the same token, Americans in general have been socialized in the same language ideology, which appears to be no respecter of ethnic background, social class, and position.

It is interesting to note that the Senate subcommittee hearings led by Senator Arlen Specter on Ebonics included two well-versed, widely recognized sociolinguists, William Labov and Orlando Taylor, who argued in support of the Oakland resolution. They, in turn, were countered by two antagonistic countertestimonies offered by a columnist and a preacher, neither of who had any formal training in linguistics or sociolinguistics. This scenario would be akin to two nonexperts arguing with two well-credentialed research physicists about the ramifications of a particular law of physics in industrial manufacturing. Interestingly, two weeks before the Senate subcommittee hearings, the office of Arlen Specter called me and asked if I knew of any African American linguists who might "testify against Ebonics." It is revealing that linguistics, a field of study hardly known for its internal congeniality among professionals, could offer no linguist Black or white who would speak against the legitimacy of Ebonics at the hearings of the Senate subcommittee.

Without any safeguards that limit public discussion to those with specialized expertise in language structure, popular beliefs that include common myths about language can run rampant. And that is exactly what took place in the public furor over the Oakland resolution. In this instance, however, the issues involved broad-based societal beliefs about the nature of language and a specific set of misunderstandings over what was claimed and maintained with respect to language diversity in Oakland.

Some Specific Misunderstandings

Those who followed the Oakland Ebonics controversy are familiar with a recurring set of issues embroiled in the debate. These issues related to particular beliefs about the nature of language and/or activities involving language that surfaced in the resolution approved by the school board. The media presentations and public discussions of the resolution are instructive because they reflect how underlying ideology may shape the interpretation and representation of language issues. They also demonstrate the chasm that can sometimes develop between popular language beliefs and professional, specialized expertise in the description and analysis of language. In the following paragraphs, I examine some of the discrepancies between popular interpretations of language issues and the professional linguistic and sociolinguistic understanding of these issues as set forth in the resolution. In the discussion, I first offer a specific quote from the resolution that served as the basis for the controversy. Each quote is followed by the public interpretation of the statement as presented in the media, which in turn is countered by the sociolinguistic understanding of the resolution statement. The pertinent resolution statements are quoted as they appeared in the original resolution approved on December 18, 1996, or the revised resolution approved on January 15, 1997.

The Separate Language Issue

Resolution statement: "African Language Systems have origins in West and Niger-Congo [African] languages and are not merely dialects of English."

Popular interpretation: Ebonics is a separate language.

Linguistic understanding: Language and dialect exist on a continuum, and it is often difficult to determine where a dialect ends and a language begins.

As the resolution approved unanimously by the Linguistic Society of America at its January 4, 1997, meeting noted,

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. What is important from a linguistic and educational point of view is not whether AAVE [African American Vernacular English] is called a "language" or a "dialect" but rather that its systematicity be recognized. (Linguistic Society of America 1997)

The important point of the Oakland resolution from the linguistic point of view is that African American Vernacular English is a legitimate language system, not whether this system is a separate language or dialect.

There is a further issue involving the label *dialect* as the term it is used by those in popular culture and by professional linguists. In popular culture, the term dialect is often used pejoratively, to refer to an aberration of language that is somehow different from authentic language (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1998, 2-8). Linguists, however, use this term in a neutral way to refer to any variety of language. To avoid misunderstanding over its technical and popular definitions, the use of the term dialect is sometimes avoided in gatherings that bring together professional linguists and laypeople. This is why some professions, including the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, prefer using terms such as *language difference* or *language variety* when referring to what linguists would technically term dialect. In fact, I sometimes find myself avoiding the use of the term dialect altogether when speaking to certain types of nonprofessional audiences to avoid any misunderstandings about the reference of this term. On other occasions, I have used the term dialect in its technical linguistic sense only to find out later that a lay discussant and I really were using the term with quite different points of reference. By contrast, the term *language* does not have the connotative baggage of the term dialect and therefore would be preferable in a resolution that underscores the unique, systematic nature of a language variety.

The African Base Issue

Resolution statement: "recognizes the existence and the cultural and historic bases of West and Niger-Congo African Language Systems, and these are the language patterns that many African American students bring to school."

Popular interpretation: Ebonics is an African language.

Linguistic understanding: Language varieties typically incorporate items from other language sources in the formation of a distinct variety.

This borrowing is a natural and widespread process, and American English is full of structures and words that indicate influence from non-English donor languages. Among these are words and structures that find their roots in African languages, just as there are influences from European languages. Furthermore, one viable hypothesis for the origin of African American Vernacular English posits a link with creole languages found in the African Diaspora, including Sierra Leone Krio, Jamaican Creole, Gullah, and other creole languages. This genesis would correspondingly heighten the influence of languages of the African Diaspora in the development of African American Vernacular English. Although there is considerable debate about the origin of African American Vernacular English among

well-respected researchers at the present time (Mufwene 1996; Montgomery and Fuller 1996; Rickford 1997; Schneider 1989; Wolfram 1990), a creole-based genesis for African American Vernacular English in the African Diaspora remains a credible, legitimate hypothesis. If this is, in fact, the origin of African American Vernacular English, then it stands to reason that there would be remnants of this historical linguistic influence in the present-day variety. In this vein, reference in the Oakland resolution to "origins in West and Niger-Congo [African] languages and not merely dialects of English" is not out of line, although, in my opinion, it may represent a bit of a metaphorical stretch.

The Genetic Issue

Resolution statement: "African Language Systems are genetically based and not a dialect of English." (in December 18 resolution only)

Popular interpretation: African Americans are biologically predisposed toward a particular language through heredity units transmitted in the chromosomes.

Linguistic understanding: In the study of historical linguistics, the term *genetics* is used as a common and well-known metaphor to refer to ancestral linguistic lineage.

For example, one might say that Spanish and Italian are genetically related because they are derived from the same historical source or "parent" language, Latin. A widely referenced text in historical linguistics thus observes the following:

The goal of comparative linguistics is establishing *genetic relationship* by showing that the putatively related languages share similarities which cannot be attributed to chance or to linguistic contact and which find their explanation only through the assumption that the languages are descended from a common ancestor. (Hock 1991, 557, emphasis added)

From a technical linguistic perspective, the use of the term genetic to refer to a relationship between languages through common language ancestry is completely justified. Unfortunately, this is a highly restricted, technical definition that is limited to students of historical linguistics. This technical definition is countered by the popular, widespread use of genetics to refer to biologically based heredity. Furthermore, the biological definition of genetics has been highly involved in the nurture versus nature debate that has dominated racial politics, including the discussion of language differences found in the speech of African Americans (Baugh 1988). Linguists have taken a united stand against the view that language differences are the result of genetic predisposition in the biological sense. From the standpoint of racial politics, then, the inclusion of the term in the original statement was probably ill-advised and inflammatory.

In my opinion, it was sociopolitically indiscreet for the Oakland resolution to use the term genetics as it did, given the ideology that frames language debate and the politics of race in this country. Racist interpretations of language differences often rest on assumptions about genetics as this term is used in biology, and it stands to reason that the term would be interpreted by the public in its biological sense. A couple hundred million Americans are familiar with the popular, biological meaning of the term genetics, while a few thousand linguists know the linguistic metaphor, so it stands to reason that the biological sense of genetics would be the primary one conveyed by the use of this term in the resolution. Of course, at the time the resolution was drafted, there was no way of anticipating that this controversy would be played out on a national and international level rather than a local level within the Oakland Unified School System. Happily, in my opinion, the clause referring to genetics was judiciously deleted in the revised resolution approved on January 15, 1997, to avoid any confusion between the technical and popular interpretations of this term.

The Bilingual Issue

Resolution statement: "The English language acquisition and improvement skills of African American students are as fundamental as is application of bilingual or second language learner principles for others whose primary languages are other than English."

Popular interpretation: Speakers of Ebonics should qualify for federally funded programs restricted traditionally to bilingual populations, for example, Spanish-English bilingual programs.

Linguistic understanding: As indicated in the resolution adopted unanimously by the Linguistic Society of America, linguists agree with educators that speakers of varieties other than Standard English should have access to programs where they can achieve their highest academic potential, including the use of Standard English for these purposes.

In developing materials for teaching Standard English, it is often useful to take into account the systematic differences between the native dialect and standard variety, just as it may be important for a program designed to teach English as a second language to take into account the knowledge of the language and culture of the student's first language. The analogy between teaching English as a second language in bilingual situations and teaching Standard English as a second dialect, along with the definition of Ebonics as a "language system," has been the basis for interpreting the resolution as an attempt to position Oakland to qualify for federal funds earmarked for bilingual situations. In her testimony to the Senate Subcommittee Hearing on Ebonics chaired by Senator Arlen Specter on January 23, 1997, Carolyn M. Gettridge, Superintendent of Schools, Oakland Unified School District, stated that no federal funding under bilingual entitlement programs had ever been applied for

on behalf of those children who speak African American Vernacular English in Oakland, nor was there any intention of doing so (Gettridge 1997).

At the risk of aggravating the misunderstanding about Oakland's underlying motivation in designating Ebonics as a language, I offer a possible scenario. Suppose that the use of funds dedicated for educating bilingual students provided support for developing effective programs that achieved proficiency in Standard English (without penalizing the funding of bilingual programs). Would that be so bad? Would it really be a flagrant misuse of funds given the fact that bilingualism and bidialectalism exist on a continuum to begin with? The goal of bilingual funding, after all, is to ensure equal access to quality education. I personally do not see a sinister, deceptive plot to procure undeserved funding even if Oakland were, in fact, allocated some funding to provide their students access to mainstream English through funding earmarked for bilingual education.

The Teaching Issue

Resolution statement: "Implement the best possible academic program for the combined purposes of facilitating the acquisition of and mastery of English language skills, while respecting and embracing the legitimacy and richness of the language patterns whether they are known as 'Ebonics,' 'African Language Systems,' 'Pan African Communication Behaviors,' or other description."

Popular interpretation: Students will be taught in Ebonics, and teachers will be taught to use Ebonics in instruction.

Linguistic understanding: In teaching standard English, students' community dialects should be respected and affirmed. Furthermore, these dialects of origin may be used as a bridge for teaching Standard English. As Orlando Taylor put it in his testimony to the Senate subcommittee hearing, "taking students where they are to where they need to go is an educational principle that is as American as apple pie" (Taylor 1997, 2).

To my knowledge, no educator or linguist associated with the Oakland situation has advocated teaching African American Vernacular English to children who do not speak it, nor has anyone recommended that teachers use African American Vernacular English as a medium of instruction. What has been advocated is simply an understanding of and appreciation for the linguistic integrity of African American Vernacular English in the process of teaching another dialect. This understanding and appreciation of Ebonics implies that educators take this knowledge into account in teaching. Pedagogically, this means that educators should have specific knowledge about the community language patterns of their students to know where they are in the process of moving them toward standard English proficiency. Attitudinally, it means that educators respect the linguistic integrity of this system and

understand that the community linguistic system is the linguistic equal of any other system.

For all its rhetoric about the linguistic status of Ebonics and the proposed pedagogy for teaching speakers of Ebonics, the underlying goal of the Oakland school actually has been quite conservative and even assimilationist with respect to its advocacy of proficiency in Standard English. The board has never wavered in its goal of teaching proficiency in the dialect of mainstream, middle-class America.

Recognition of and respect for the intricate, systematic nature of African American Vernacular English to go along with the teaching of Standard English is foundational and noncontroversial among language scientists. Thus, the resolution of the Linguistic Society of America (1997) notes,

The variety known as "Ebonics," "African American Vernacular English" (AAVE), "Vernacular Black English" and by other names is systematic and rule-governed like all natural speech varieties. In fact, all human linguistic systems—spoken, signed, and written—are fundamentally regular. The systematic and expressive nature of the grammar and pronunciation patterns of the African American vernacular has been established by numerous scientific studies over the past thirty years. Characterizations of Ebonics as "slang," "mutant," "lazy," "defective," "ungrammatical," or "broken English" are incorrect and demeaning.

Our careful examination of the resolution shows a serious discrepancy between the actual statement offered in the Oakland resolution and the widespread, public interpretation of the statement. To linguists and sociolinguists, there is very little that is controversial about the Oakland resolution with respect to the teaching issue. As I noted, I personally find the resolution rather traditional and conservative in its advocacy of Standard English. Yet, there has been a widespread popular interpretation that the Oakland resolution endorsed teaching Ebonics. To a sociolinguist, it seems far-fetched that statements such as "respecting and embracing the legitimacy and richness of language patterns" should be interpreted as an endorsement of teaching students to speak Ebonics or teachers to use it in the classroom, but this is what happens when status quo, "common-sense" ideologies are disrupted. Once the prevailing belief system is uprooted, the security of common sense can no longer be appealed to, and this gives license to fantasies about language atrocities in the classroom.

My own experience with dialect awareness programs suggests that the popular interpretation of the Ebonics resolution with respect to teaching is not unusual. For almost a decade, I proposed to pilot an experimental dialect awareness program for primary and secondary students to school systems around the country. The goal of

the program simply was to teach students to understand and appreciate the nature of language differences and the intricate and systematic patterning of all dialects and languages. No aspect of the programs ever endorsed teaching in a vernacular dialect or teaching students to use the vernacular in any productive way. Nonetheless, I was repeatedly denied permission for almost a decade to pilot these programs in the public schools—by principals, teachers, and parents who worried that the programs might teach students to speak “bad language.” Once prevailing ideologies are challenged, the security of language quality control evaporates, thus opening the door for worst-case scenarios with respect to the demise of Standard English. As exemplified in the Oakland case, such situations are a perfect environment for the development of linguistic paranoia.

Lessons from Oakland

If nothing else, the controversy that has surrounded the Oakland resolution exposes the language ideology that frames perceptions of language diversity and, correspondingly, the level of misinformation about language variation that pervades American society. Given this situation, language professionals with an authentic understanding of the nature of language diversity have a responsibility and a challenge to educate other professionals, practitioners, and the general public about these issues if we wish to avoid repeated controversies like the one that surfaced in Oakland. Thus, the resolution passed by the American Association for Applied Linguistics (1997) includes the following four points:

- (1) THAT, all students and teachers should learn scientifically-based information about linguistic diversity and the social, political, and educational consequences of differential treatment of dialects and their speakers;
- (2) THAT, teacher education should systematically incorporate information about language variation and its impact on classroom interaction and about the ways of applying that knowledge to enhance the education of all teachers;
- (3) THAT, research should be undertaken to develop and test methods and materials for teaching about varieties of language and for learning Standard English; and
- (4) THAT, members of the American Association for Applied Linguistics should seek ways and means to better communicate the theories and principles of the field to the general public on a continuing basis.

All of the points in the resolution have relevance for practitioners, ranging from general classroom teachers to specialized groups of language specialists such as speech and language pathologists, language arts instructors, reading specialists, and so forth. The controversy over the Oakland resolution certainly underscores the

need for education about dialects for all people at all levels of formal and informal education. Although there are now more courses dealing with issues of language diversity available for students at the postsecondary level, the course offerings still tend to be selective and optional, even for those who specialize in language-related disciplines such as English teachers, speech and language pathologists, and teachers of English as a second or other language. This hardly seems to be enough. Education about language and language variation should not just include those who choose to take an optional course on this topic at a postsecondary level of education. It seems to me that public education committed to a fundamental search for truth about laws of nature and matter should include language variation as a fundamental subject area. When it comes to dialects, however, there is tolerance of misinformation and folklore in students' education that is matched in few subject areas. I often maintain that the popular understanding of dialect is probably akin to a modern geophysicist maintaining that the Earth is flat. As we saw once again in the Oakland controversy, the misinformation is not all innocent folklore. It affects how we view and treat people in the most fundamental ways. At the very least, the educational system and society at large should assume responsibility for replacing the entrenched mythology about dialects with informed, accurate information.

The Oakland controversy further points to the need for educating the general American public. Our own efforts to promote dialect awareness in recent years have included community-based programs that involve informal education for broadly based audiences as well as in-school programs. These include TV and video documentaries (e.g., *American Tongues* 1986; *The Ocracoke Brogue* 1994), trade books on dialects for general audiences (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1997), museum exhibits (Gruendler et al. 1997), and presentations to a wide range of community organizations such as civic groups, churches, preservation societies, and other local institutions and agencies. The Oakland situation has clearly indicated the inherent interest and underlying concern that most people have about language issues as well as the need for public education on these issues. As the superintendent of the Oakland schools, Carolyn Gettridge (1997, 2) notes that this situation created "a teachable moment of national proportion"—an occasion to provide accurate information about dialect diversity to counter some of the misguided, popular interpretations portrayed in the early media accounts of the Oakland situation. It personally gave me, along with a number of my professional colleagues, an unprecedented opportunity to present information about the natural, legitimate base of language variation to a wide range of audiences—from civic and church groups to government agencies. We need to seize the moment to provide sociolinguistic services to the American public. And from this point, we need to move forward and implement concrete public and school-based educational programs that will eventually lead to the replacement of widespread, destructive myths about language variation with scientific, factually based evidence on the nature of dialect diversity. There is no

other insurance against the reincarnation of the kinds of controversies and misunderstandings associated with the Oakland Ebonics resolution. More important, there is probably no other road that will lead to a valid understanding of the role of dialect diversity in American society. Such variation affects us all, regardless of class or ethnicity. It is a basic fact of language life.

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