EBONICS AND PREJUDICE

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“It is difficult to talk about Black Language/Ebonics in a meaningful way without simultaneously talking about racism” (p. 120). Such was the sentiment of Terry Meier (1998), an associate professor at the Wheelock College Graduate School in Boston. There is scarcely a more apropos statement for the debate over the Oakland Unified School District's (OUSD) Board of Education's resolution to officially recognize Ebonics as the native language of a number of its students back in 1996. What the OUSD was actually addressing with the resolution was the poor performance of their Black students as compared to their non-Black students. Black students in the district had an average grade point average (GPA) of only 1.8 while their non-Black counterparts had average GPAs between 2.4 and 2.7 (Perry & Delpit, 1998, p. xi). It didn't take long before their efforts were misrepresented as an attempt to teach Ebonics in place of Standard English (Perry, 1998, p. 4). In actuality, the program was meant to be similar to California's Standard English Proficiency (SEP) program, where the home dialect of students was taken into account as a bridge between it and Standard English was built (Secret, 1998, pp. 80-81; Dalji, 1998, pp. 106-107).

Criticism of the perceived goals of Oakland's Ebonics resolution almost immediately sprouted from all corners, including the United States Congress. Senator Lauch Faircloth (R-N.C.), who spoke at Arlen Specter's (R-Pa.) hearing on the issue, characterized the resolution as an “'absurd' [example] of extreme 'political correctness'” (Baugh, 2000, p. 53). Even supporters of the resolution played a part in adding race into the issue. Theresa Perry (1998), an associate professor of education and editor of a *The Real Ebonics Debate*, blamed the misunderstandings on White people controlling the conversation. She also went into a lengthy generalization of

what “Whiteness” was and referred to Standard English as “White” Standard English (pp. 8-15). As John Baugh (2000), a noted linguist, pointed out: Oakland's use of “Black Language” as a definition for Ebonics created enough ambiguity to force “matters of race and language together” (p. 65).

In fact, much of the controversy surrounding the Oakland resolution was based on the lack of a concrete definition for Ebonics. The term was coined in 1973 by psychologist Robert L. Williams, in a paper with L. Wendell Rivers (1975), who perceived the term Black English as derogatory because it relegated the language spoken by African Americans to a “non-standard English form” (p. 101). Williams made the mistake of assuming the linguistic term “non-standard” was synonymous with “substandard.” In reality, “nonstandard” is used by linguists to distinguish between the politically dominant dialect of a society and related, non-dominant dialects (Baugh, 2000, p. 29). That being said, Williams' (& Rivers, 1975) extremely confusing definition for Ebonics was “the linguistic and paralinguistic features which on a concentric continuum represent the communicative competence of West African, Caribbean, and United States slave descendants of African origin” (p. 100). Not only does this definition create a problem by attaching a dialect to a race which is not exclusively spoken by that race, it also lumps together languages which are not even mutually intelligible. For instance, slave descendants in Haiti cannot possibly be speaking the same language as those in the United States, yet this definition seems to make that claim. Even other members of the committee involved in coining the term were confused about its meaning. Ernie Smith, a linguist who was part of Williams' committee–who also was responsible for convincing the OUSD to use the term Ebonics (Baugh, 2000, p. 41)—wrote in 1975 that Ebonics was synonymous with Black English (p. 77). William Labov, a reputable linguist, at Senator Specter's hearing, agreed that this was the

way in which people were treating the term during the debate over the resolution but made it clear that this was not correct nor was it even a term that linguists used (Baugh, 2000, p. 58).

Regardless, confusion persisted. The OUSD (1996) went to one extreme by defining Ebonics as a language completely unrelated to English and, as such, stated that it should have the same status as any other second language, including qualifying for federal educational funding (p. 143; Baugh, 2000, p. 40). Supporters made the argument that a language, as opposed to a dialect, was “a dialect with an army and a navy – or a school system.” The idea here being that Ebonics, having a school system, was a language in its own right (O'Neil, 1998, p. 41). This argument seemed to ignore the fact that there was only one school supporting Ebonics as a separate language and that the federal government was vehemently opposed to labeling Ebonics as a language instead of a dialect (Baugh, 2000, p. 49). The other extreme view, voiced by people like California State Senator Ray Haynes, was to label Ebonics as nothing more than “slang,” sitting at one end of a spectrum while “correct” English sat at the other end (Baugh, 2000, p. 69). This view even found unlikely support among people like a Black minister at Senator Specter's hearing who equated Ebonics with “bad English” (Baugh, 2000, p. 55).

In between these diametrically opposed arguments, founded on ignorance, was a real problem involving students. Throughout the controversy, little attention seemed to be paid to what should be done to help Black students achieve the same academic performance as other students, especially if the Ebonics idea was to be ruled out. This was what the resolution was trying to address, after all, and there was scientific evidence suggesting that the general idea might work. Williams (& Rivers, 1975), the coiner of Ebonics, had done experiments with Black students in the 1970s that showed an increase in their performance based on the simple rewording of questions (pp. 104-105). In fact, Williams (1975) even went so far as to develop a

test, which he called BITCH, in which the cultural bias of the questions favored Black students over White students—the opposite of the bias found in previous IQ tests—and found that the scores of the former skyrocketed while those of the latter plummeted (pp. 124-125). To further demonstrate why Black students performed badly in school, and why Williams' experiments worked the way they did, Lisa Delpit (1998) taught an invented dialect to preservice teachers and asked them to extrapolate on their motives for becoming teachers using only that dialect. The result was frustration and even a refusal to continue by some (p. 18). The difficulty inherent in trying to be expressive in an unfamiliar dialect was simply too much to juggle, which is likely to be how many Black students felt when they were constantly being corrected as they attempted to voice their ideas.

Correcting students on their pronunciation when their comprehension is clearly functioning has been shown to be detrimental to the students' ability to learn to read (Delpit, 1998, pp. 23-24). The students must be understanding what they are reading because they are immediately translating the ideas into their native dialect, yet the tendency has been to correct their dialectal pronunciations instead of recognizing their cognitive abilities. This can be explained by the observations of Terry Meier (1998) who found that a disproportionately large percentage of the soon-to-be teachers that came through her graduate course viewed Ebonics/Black English as “slang” or “bad English” (p. 119). The accuracy of this observation is further corroborated by Delpit (1998) as she recounts an experiment where Black children were asked to tell a story which was followed by the recordings being played for both White and Black adults. The result was that the White adults believed the children to have cognitive impairments while the Black adults believed the children were highly intelligent. The idea here was that the method in which Black children told stories, regularly veering off into creative

tangents, was viewed as a lack of focus and comprehension by White listeners who were unfamiliar with this mode of speech (pp. 21-22).

Despite the clear evidence that a lack of cultural and linguistic understanding was hampering the progress of Black students, opinions on the debate were regularly based on a mixed bag of emotional reactions. For instance, Baugh (2000) found that Blacks who were against the resolution often took offense to the idea that Ebonics/Black English was not a dialect of English, even though this discrepancy was unimportant in the scheme of things (p. 27). Senator Haynes, who, as mentioned, misunderstood the intention of the resolution, accused Oakland of taking a step toward resegregation (Baugh, 2000, p. 69). This idea also had nothing to do with whether the initiative would be effective, focusing instead on an ideological view of educational segregation. In fact, segregation was even argued as a possible solution by some members of the NAACP in 1997. This concept was given further credence by Professor Richard Wright, a linguist, who recalled the effectiveness of his own education in the segregated south (Baugh, 2000, p. 109). Some of these commentators believed that placing Black students in a Black school would allow them to focus on learning instead of their positions as minorities in society. While this argument addressed the actual problem, it was too radical to be feasible and only served to distract the conversation from coming up with truly viable solutions as well.

In the end, despite the abundance of heated debate over the topic, little had changed. As linguist John Rickford (1997) lamented in an interview with Clarence Johnson of the San Francisco Chronicle, “All over the world, they [nonstandard dialects] tend to be disparaged” (p. 64). The dialect or language in question does not seem to matter; what does matter is that the language points out that one person is different from another. Baugh (2000), who by all accounts gives a balanced view on the debate, can himself recount mocking Hispanic children and White

teachers as a youth due to the way in which they spoke (pp. 8-10). He also points out that Shelby Steele, who specializes in race relations, openly admits to feelings of prejudice upon hearing southern accents (Baugh, 2000, p. 104). It appears that even the most ardent supporters of racial equality are capable of falling prey to judgments based solely on language. Just as the color of someone's skin has the potential to automatically conjures inaccurate associations, so does the sound of someone's voice. In the case of Ebonics/Black English, because it is commonly spoken among African Americans, this issue is even more inescapable. Unlike immigrants in the past who spoke languages other than English, and were ostracized for doing so, Black Americans cannot simply learn Standard English and blend in to the crowd (Baugh, 2000, pp. 34-35). They are stuck trying to overcome prejudice by facing it head on and, in cases such as Oakland's Ebonics resolution, one is left with the disheartening proof that there is still a long way to go.

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