

# The Ebonics Controversy

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*Writer's comment:* Professor Will Benware's Linguistics 1 was the first course in linguistics that I had taken, and I begrudgingly enrolled myself in it to fulfill a major requirement, convinced that it would be boring. But on the very first day of the class, when Professor Benware explained the goals of linguistics and described the critical approach that our class would take concerning its study, I realized how wrong I had been. Linguistics, I found, concerns itself with the study of one of the most critical and powerful facets of human existence, language. Our first writing assignment, an examination of the Oakland school board's much debated 1996 resolution, brilliantly exemplifies both the power of language and the value of linguistic knowledge.

—Michelle Kleisath

*Instructor's comment:* Linguistics is often perceived by the novice as daunting and abstruse, as Michelle's comments indicate. This is why I try to give writing assignments which emphasize the practical uses of linguistics. The critical question Michelle addressed was an issue which, it turned out, was familiar to most of the students. Now the task was to apply a scientific understanding of human language to this pressing social issue. Michelle not only critiqued the unfortunate misuse of linguistic terms, but also underscored how it exacerbated stereotypes about African American Vernacular. She showed how the admirable goals of a social policy can be shipwrecked by an ignorance of basic linguistics.

—Will Benware, Linguistics Department

“Language and schooling draw impassioned perspective and powerful convictions from all quarters-with and without study or expertise” (Croghan 74)

**I**N THE WINTER OF 1996, the Oakland school board put out a resolution whose ultimate intention was to better the experience of African American students in their school district. This resolution asserted that “African American students as a part of their culture and history [as] an African people possess and utilize a language described in various scholarly approaches as ‘Ebonics’ or [...] ‘African language systems’” (Fields 24). The school board also claimed that several validated scholarly studies had “demonstrated that African Language Systems are genetically based and not a dialect of English” (Fields 24). Considering all of the time and effort that the Oakland school board put into realizing this resolution, which included several months of research done by a specially designated task force, it is clear that they possessed the very same passion concerning the plight of many African American students that Michael Croghan highlights. However, they lacked expertise in their articulation of a solution to this problem. The resulting poorly expressed resolution was met with the equally passionate opinions and judgments of dominant society, which ultimately caused the resolution to be rejected and ridiculed. Although the intentions of the Oakland School Board were justified in their attempt to remedy a very real problem faced by many African American students and their instructors, the board’s improper use of many linguistic terms ultimately rendered their resolution not only ineffective as a combatant against this problem but also harmful to the African American communities that utilize the dialect concerned, subsequently making them a frequent source of ridicule and parody.

Before a critical analysis can be made of the school board’s linguistic felicity, an understanding of the problematic situation that it addresses is paramount. As Robins Burling describes in her article “Non-standard English,” most Americans, although they may not readily admit to it, perceive a noticeable difference in the speech of African Americans and Caucasian Americans. As linguists such as Burling have discovered, this difference is actually a dialectical one which has resulted from years of social segregation of African American communities (290). This dialect is known by several different names, but for the purposes of this essay it shall be referred to using the term “Ebonics,”

literally meaning “black sounds,” which was coined in 1973 by Robert L Williams (Fields 23). The coining of this positive term was a decisive step in the fight for recognition of African American’s speech differences as something other than just “bad English.” As we learn in Michael Croghan’s exploration of the topic, it is actually the persistent refusal to recognize these speech differences as valid, and not learning disabilities or laziness, that has caused unbelievably low grades and test scores within the African American student community (75). Not only do these negative attitudes affect student’s test scores, but also their feelings of belongingness and importance in the school community, which can eventually lead to a rejection of the entire institution and its values (Balester 158). This second effect can be extremely harmful to the student’s success in a world whose standards are based on these same values. Ultimately, a student who graduates without the ability to speak and write in Standard English is being set up for failure in the business world (Fields 28). Thus it becomes clear that in order to effectively validate the students’ community of origin while concurrently giving them the skills necessary to succeed in dominant society, educators need to recognize and understand Ebonics as a viable language system. The solution to this dilemma, however, is a particularly complicated matter, one which the Oakland school Board intended to resolve with their 1996 resolution.

Awareness of the history of Ebonics reveals the validity of the Oakland School Board’s demand for new procedures in the education of African American Students. So why was their resolution met with such a stifling backlash in the dominant society? Michael Croghan claims that the wave of misunderstandings that followed the resolution could have been avoided if the media had been more aware the history behind the resolution (74), but this is inaccurate. In truth, the school board was not betrayed by the media but by their own misuse and misunderstanding of certain terms, which subsequently fueled the media’s negative portrayal. In this essay, the terms “language,” “genetically based,” and “dialect” will be analyzed in order to explain the ineffectiveness of the school board’s resolution in achieving its purpose.

The first term, “language,” appeared in the resolution in the following context: “African American students [...] possess and utilize a *language* [my emphasis] described in various scholarly approaches as ‘Ebonics’” (Fields 24). According to linguistic theory, a “language” is a

group of linguistic variants which are mutually comprehensible (Bradley 10/02). Although many Standard English speakers may have difficulties understanding the speakers of Ebonics, to say that it is a separate language, meaning that it is entirely incomprehensible to Standard English speakers, is a far stretch. Most Standard American English speakers are likely to be just as baffled by certain terms used in Ebonics as they would be by those used in Standard British English, but British English is still considered a dialect of English, not a language in and of itself. Even if the line between language and dialect is sometimes unclear, the Oakland School Board's statement went against the beliefs of many well recognized linguists and they didn't provide their audience with substantial proof that Ebonics is indeed a language. Thus their bold declaration was received with criticism, doubt, and ridicule in popular culture.

The second instance which resulted in mass confusion and ridicule was the use of the phrase "genetically based" in the following sentence: "African Language Systems [Ebonics] are *genetically based* [my emphasis] and not a dialect of English" (Fields 24). At first glance, this term appears to imply that African American have some kind of genetic predisposition toward Ebonics. Indeed, the expression was so widely understood to refer to biology that the school board later retracted it from their resolution. They later explained on their website that the term "genetically based" refers to "origins" and not "genetics" (Fields 20), but given that this is not the widely accepted understanding of the word, and given the passion that people invest in language, the board would have been wise to exercise caution in their inclusion of this statement.

The third and final misused term which explains the ineffectiveness of the school board's resolution is the word "dialect." The school board claimed in their resolution that Ebonics is "not a *dialect* [my emphasis] of English" (Fields 24). Given the dual understanding of this term, it is clear why the Oakland School Board chose to use it in the way that they did. According to a technical linguistic definition, "dialects" are the variants of a language, which itself is a more ample linguistic entity (Bradley 10/02). But another understanding of this term exists in its current everyday use, one which is demeaning and negative. For example, when Spanish dictator Francisco Franco wanted to suppress the regional languages of Spain, which include Basque and Catalan, he deemed them nothing more than regional dialects of Castilian Spanish

(Bradley 10/02). Thus the Oakland School board's adamant assertion that Ebonics is *not* a dialect can be interpreted as a tactic intended to fight against the oppression of the African American people. However, just as with the term "genetically based," if the board would have acknowledged and accounted for this term's official understanding, perhaps they could have selected a more accurate or communicative expression to argue their point, and in doing so avoided the backlash that ensued.

In the end, the school board's use of these and other controversial terms resulted in confusion and misunderstanding within the larger American community, which eventually led to the ridicule and parody of the African American community itself. The misconceptions that sprung from the resolution's inaccuracy include the following: the Oakland school district is going to teach its students Ebonics instead of English, they want Ebonics speakers to be recognized as bilingual, they only want more state and federal funding, they are devising a system of lower standards in which students are rewarded for failure, and they are condoning the use of slang (Fields 20). Obviously, these and other misconceptions caused the negative associations that had been synonymous with Ebonics before the resolution to spread and deepen within the country. And in the end, the Oakland School Board failed to acquire the validation of Ebonics that they had set out to create in the first place.

Ultimately most of the harm done was at the hands of the media, who twisted and warped the resolution in order to form ridiculous myths and stereotypes. It is unfortunate that we live in a society where attempts to improve the experience of African Americans are met with such criticism, but this *is* the society that we live in. In their attempts to change our society, the Oakland School Board should have been more aware of the extreme criticism that they were bound to encounter and more careful while they were writing their resolution. After learning about the history of the steps that have been taken toward improving the lives of African American students, it is unmistakable that the school board's actions were not only justified, but extremely progressive and even noble. With their resolution they were directly confronting a hegemonic depreciation of African American culture that has persisted since the inception of slavery. Considering the predictable adamant refusal to acknowledge privilege that dominant social groups characteristically display, it is most likely that even a resolution void of the aforementioned errors would have been met with extreme criticism.

But if the original resolution had been crafted in more grounded terms, its creators would not have had to meet the inevitable criticisms with poor excuses and retractions, but would have been able to stand firm in their position and meet any questions head on with well-researched explanations. After all, the passion created by language and schooling is much more powerful when it is combined with study and expertise.

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