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# Introduction

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body...

W. E. B. DuBois, 1999.

Academic scholarship is typically motivated by an urge to explore new frontiers of knowledge, and guided by a time-honored tradition that values *objectivity* – that is, a point of view on the subject matter as free as possible of bias – totally unaffected by myth, misconception, hyperbole, and other “contaminating” features of “unscientific” thought. Such was undoubtedly the primary incentive for linguists who, in the 1960s, began to produce books, articles and other academic material on a variety of language called *Black English*.<sup>1</sup> An unavoidable source of bias,

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<sup>1</sup> It would be more precise to say that Black English came to be the generic label for a variety that has been referred to by several different labels, corresponding in part to changes in the preferred group name for African Americans, e.g., Nonstandard Negro English; Negro dialect; and more recently, African American Vernacular English. An in-depth exploration of these naming practices is undertaken in chapter four.

however, which applies to the case at hand, is the stigma associated with membership in a marginalized social group.

According to the American Heritage Dictionary of the English language, the noun *stigma*, related etymologically to the Greek word for “tattoo mark,” has expanded in meaning over time to signify “a mark burned on a criminal or slave; a brand;” and more generally, “a mark or token of infamy, disgrace or reproach.” The verb *to stigmatize*, is defined as “To characterize or brand as disgraceful or ignominious.” (Morris et al. ed. 1976)

The approach to African American language developed in the following pages takes, as a primary point of departure, frank acknowledgment of the fact that it is stigmatized – and furthermore, that it is part and parcel of the general stigmatization of African American identity in American society. In calling attention to that fact, I further contend that the stigmatization of Black American identity has functioned historically to exclude persons of African descent from full participation in American life. The stigmatization in question is so deeply embedded in the fabric of American society that its full significance has tended to escape the attention of scholars of African American language.

### **The social location factor**

W. E. B. DuBois, in his inimitable way, uses the metaphor of a “veil,” in his classic formulation of African American identity where he characterizes “the Negro” as “a seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world.” When scholars from the dominant social group engage in academic study of some aspect of the Black experience, the existence of the veil may well be an insurmountable obstacle to objectivity. Such scholars are limited, by virtue of their *social location*, in their capacity to know what it is like to experience, in DuBois’ words, “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”

In order for the scholar of African American language to attain the pinnacle of true objectivity, he or she must not only rise above the emotions of contempt, pity, amusement and such, but, further, must empathize sufficiently with the duality of selfhood through which the emotions must pass, before they replicate the essence of Black identity. In recent years, a growing number of scholars take the position that objectivity is an unattainable ideal. The best that one can do, in the view of such scholars, is to announce one’s social location “up front,”

so to speak, so that readers and critics may take that into account in evaluating the claims of a given piece of scholarship. In that spirit, I divulge my identity as an African American with Southern roots, who spent many of my formative years in an all-Black housing project in the urban North. I further claim to be a native speaker of the variety known as Black English.

The issue of social location and how it affects the objectivity of academic work is informed by the sociology of knowledge – which affords theoretical status to the distinction between academic knowledge and the “real world” of everyday experience. A fundamental claim of *the sociology of knowledge* is that what ordinary men and women take for granted as “real” is *socially-constructed*. According to the sociologist W. I. Thomas,

Things that people believe are real are real in their consequences.

Research conducted from such a perspective seeks, thus, to explicate how knowledge of the “real world” is maintained through the collective efforts of members of society. Berger and Luckmann (1966) develop a framework for investigation of “the reality of everyday life” as having its origins in the “thoughts and actions” of “ordinary members of society,” and maintained by them as real. Berger and Luckmann formulate their “primary task” as

to clarify the foundations of knowledge in everyday life, to wit, the objectivations of subjective processes (and meanings) by which the intersubjective commonsense world is constructed. (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 19, 20)

A crucial difference exists between academic knowledge and everyday experience in terms of the type and amount of conscious and deliberate thought that is devoted to questioning and critical analysis of the crucial variables according to which reality is constructed. The characterization of everyday experience as “taken-for-granted” is a fair indication of the absence of critical examination of that aspect of the world in which we find ourselves. Aspects of that experience which might involve unfair or unequal distribution of rights and privileges are just as likely to escape being submitted to critical examination, if it is part of what is taken-for-granted as just the way that things are.

The privileged position of males in American society was seen as so obvious that the Founding Fathers were able to proclaim liberty in

the words “all men are created equal,” without seeing the blatant contradictions in their own behavior of owning slaves and denying equal rights to women. Most Americans today take it for granted that Standard English is supreme, and nonstandard varieties of English are inherently “bad.” In fact, such beliefs lie at the core of language policies presently upheld by law and custom in the United States, based on *the hegemony of Standard English*.

## Hegemony

Gramsci (1971) defines hegemony as a function of “civil society;” and one of two ways in which the dominant group of a society maintains its dominant position. The other is “direct domination.” In other words, in addition to the coercive means of state power used by ruling groups to maintain direct control of society; hegemony is exercised through ideas, attitudes, myths, and values, perpetuated through education and socialization.

Gramsci’s notion of hegemony is implicit in the current practice of military strategists who characterize the “pacification” stage of a military conquest as a struggle for the “hearts and minds” of the conquered. Hegemonic ideas and values often function to legitimate the existing social order by providing justifications for inequalities in the distribution of social goods. In the realm of lifestyle and culture, the customs and practices of elite groups and individuals come to symbolize the benefits of membership in the elite and to serve as desirable objects of persons striving to attain elite status. When a particular language, or way of speaking the common language of a society, is associated with persons of elite status, the ability to speak the language, and to speak it “correctly,” may serve a legitimating function. That is, the superior position of the dominant group is justified by their “proper” speech; and the subordinate position of marginalized groups is legitimated by the characterization of their language in such pejorative terms as “poor,” “slovenly,” “broken,” “bastardized,” and “corrupt.”

Throughout the history of racist oppression of African Americans, hegemonic ideas have functioned to legitimate the unequal position of Black persons, and reconcile it with prevailing democratic ideals. In slave society, direct domination often took the form of a whip, in the hand of the overseer; or barking bloodhounds, hot on the heels of runaway slaves – while hegemony was exercised through the power of words like “savage,” “primitive” and “heathen,” used in conjunction

with the presupposition that being “civilized” is a prerequisite to full participation in American democracy. After emancipation, the continued subordination of Blacks to the lower tier of a color caste system was justified by the stigmatization of key features of Black identity, including language. In the present Post Civil Rights era, the stigmatization of Blackness as a rationale for denial of full and equal status in American democracy has outlived its purpose. Nevertheless, the idea that African American language is tantamount to “Bad English” remains embedded in the hearts and minds of the public.

### Visceral reactions to nonstandard language

The association of the idea of “Bad English” with low social status is so firmly entrenched in the hearts and minds of the American people that the mere presence of certain features in a person’s language is sufficient to elicit a strong and visceral reaction of disapproval.

The adjective *visceral*, derived from *viscera*, a plural form of the Latin noun, *viscus*, “body organ,” retains the sense of an intensely emotional reaction to an experience, as opposed to a cool, thoughtful, rational or intellectual response. It is equivalent to the more common term *gut*, especially when used to describe the basis of a feeling as a *gut reaction*. A noteworthy characteristic of commonsense – as opposed to academic – knowledge is its visceral nature, the sense in which it is experienced by the whole body. It is *intuition* in the sense of “the act or faculty of knowing without the use of rational processes; immediate cognition,” and “[k]nowledge so gained; a sense of something not evident or deductible.” (Morris et al. ed. 1976) Discussions of intuition by my students inevitably bring out the idea of “gut reaction,” as well as the assertion that it is something that “you just know.”

The tendency for Americans to react viscerally to nonstandard language in general, and African American language in particular, is based on the commonsense notion that it consists of mistakes committed by persons attempting to speak “correctly.” Such a characterization of nonstandard language happens to be at odds with the current state of linguistic knowledge, according to which all human language is systematic and rule-governed.

The conflicting perspectives of linguistics and everyday experience are boldly highlighted by the claims of academic scholarship on African American language. A dynamic tension between the academic construct of Black English, and the equivalent real world construct of “bad English” has been a recurring source of controversies, the

Grandmother of which is the so-called *Ebonics firestorm*. It is of such historic proportions that it cannot be ignored in an undertaking of the nature of this book.

### **Recalling the firestorm**

On December 18 1996, the public School Board of Oakland California passed a resolution recognizing a variety of language referred to as Ebonics as a language, the public reaction to which has frequently been described as a “firestorm of controversy.” In the days and weeks following the resolution, the level of public interest expressed in the subject of Ebonics was nothing short of phenomenal. It dominated the discussion of radio talk shows and late night TV programs; newspaper headlines and the nightly news.

Colleges and universities put on workshops and forums on the subject. An Ebonics Forum at my home institution, California State University, Hayward, drew a very large audience that included news reporters, TV cameramen, children transported in busloads from local elementary and secondary schools, and a wide cross-section of the surrounding community. Everybody from the High and Mighty to the Average Joe weighed in on the subject. The Reverend Jesse Jackson characterized it as “ungrammatical;” and the poet Maya Angelou called it “an embarrassment.” When guests at a dinner party in Washington, D.C. that my wife and I attended, found out that I am a linguist, the discussion shifted to Ebonics, pitting my expertise against the experiences, feelings and mother wit of several guests.

Interest in Ebonics continued at a high level as late as August 1997, when I presented a seminar entitled “Ebonics 101,” on the campus of the University of South Carolina, Columbia, at the request of the Chair of African American Studies. The turnout was so great that the event had to be moved from the lecture hall in which it was originally scheduled to a small auditorium that could barely accommodate the standing-room-only crowd.

I could give many more examples of the Ebonics firestorm, which document the considerable extent to which it consisted of visceral reactions to the incongruous juxtaposition of what is commonly known as “bad” or substandard English, slang, or by some comparably pejorative term, with the idea of somehow using it in the classroom – as a subject, if not medium, of instruction. Either way, for the average American – accustomed to experiencing the language variety in question in a variety of ways: as the medium of performance of ethnic humor, in the lyrics of a

Hip Hop record, in overheard conversations of baggy-pant-wearing young men in animated street corner conversation, or as evidence that the persons from whose mouth it emanates is poor or uneducated – the idea of “Ebonics in the classroom” is patently ridiculous.

## Language planning perspective

While a good part of the Ebonics firestorm consisted of visceral reactions, magnified by international media exposure, to what was perceived as an incongruous proposal to use “bad English” in the classroom, there are other aspects of it that are not so easy to explain, and that is the content of the Ebonics resolution itself, which, among other things, recognizes Ebonics as a language. The actions of School Board members, linguists and other persons who came out in support of the resolution also resist easy explanation. I devote a good deal of the following pages to what purports to be a principled and comprehensive account of what I call the Ebonics Phenomenon, which I characterize metaphorically as an iceberg. The firestorm itself is treated as the tip of the iceberg, while the totality of the phenomenon is analyzed as a case study of language planning.

Readers familiar with Black English scholarship may find it surprising that I include it as an integral part of the metaphorical iceberg. My rationale for including it is discussed in the next section where I provide a number of examples of ongoing concerns of Black English scholarship that qualify as language planning issues. At this introductory stage of the discussion, I define language planning simply as *language change that occurs as a consequence of conscious and deliberate decision-making*. I not only include change in the internal structure of a language, such as the coining of new words or creation of a writing system, but also change in the attitudes of users and ways in which their languages are typically used. Change of the first kind is known as *corpus planning*, whereas the latter kind of change is called *status planning*.

A familiar example of corpus planning is the recent proliferation of gender-neutral occupational titles, such as *firefighter* and *flight attendant* to replace such traditional terms as *fireman* and *stewardess*, in response to demands of the feminist movement. The word *Kwanzaa*, appropriated from KiSwahili by Dr. Maulana Karenga, in creating the Afrocentric holiday of the same name, is a noteworthy example of language change resulting from the conscious and deliberate action of a particular individual. It qualifies as such as language planning.

## Language planning issues of Black English scholarship

Linguists engaged in the academic study of African American language, by virtue of their recognition of its systematic and rule-governed nature, and publication of the findings of research based on that premise, are engaged in status planning. As a consequence of linguistic scholarship, the commonsense belief that Black language consists of mistakes and failure, has been superseded by knowledge to the effect that it is correct according to the rules of a different grammar. The traditional status of “Bad English,” and the implication that it is inferior, has been replaced by that of a *dialect*, in the technical sense used in linguistics which simply means one of several different, but equal, varieties of the same language. There are ongoing debates among scholars concerning a number of disputed claims about the nature of African American language, including its classification as a dialect of English, and those are taken up further below. My immediate aim is to support the basic point that it merits study as a case of language planning.

In characterizing the entire body of scholarship on African American language as a case of language planning, I acknowledge that the linguists involved in it have not considered themselves to be engaged in language planning. The point is made, however, that their work qualifies as such, in a manner that becomes clear when attention is called to specific ongoing actions and behaviors in which Black English scholars have been engaged, which are, in essence, language planning issues.

## Corpus planning issues

One type of decision-making that repeatedly thrusts itself upon scholars of African American language, and which, to that extent, qualifies as corpus planning, involves questions about how to represent tokens of Black speech and language on the printed page in a manner that faithfully represents salient features of pronunciation. The most common response has been to use conventional English spelling modified in accordance with established practices of literary writers faced with the need to represent dialectal or vernacular speech in print. A common example of such *modified conventional orthography* is the use of apostrophes to represent contracted and abbreviated word forms. The casual pronunciation of *talking*, for instance, is commonly spelled *talkin*.

One problem with the use of modified conventional English orthography to represent casual or dialectal speech is its lack of standardization, in the sense of consistency. A cursory review of the literature on Black English reveals many examples of spelling decisions that have been thrust upon scholars in the course of reporting the findings of their research, and the ways in which they have dealt with them. Labov explicitly characterizes as “dialect spelling,” *inte’ested*, “interested”, and *Ca’ol*, “Carol,” cited as examples of “r-lessness” in the speech of informants for a study carried out in Harlem, New York. (Labov 1972: 14) In the same article, Labov uses dialect spelling to represent “[v]arious forms derived from *going to*” which “are quite frequent” in Black language “*gonna*, *gon’*, *’on’*, *gwin*, and with *I*, *I’m’na* and *I’ma* [amənə, amə].” (25) His use of phonetic symbols to more precisely represent the last two variants calls attention to a potential trade-off between precision and reader-friendliness that a scholar must consider when discussing Black English research with diverse audiences. It also raises the question of why researchers tend to opt for dialect spelling, notwithstanding its imprecision and lack of standardization.

Fasold and Wolfram discuss the form *gonna* in a section of an article on linguistic features of Black English dealing with how future time is expressed. While they use the same spelling of *gonna* as Labov in the above-cited article, they write the reduced variant, which Labov spells *gon’*, without an apostrophe. They note that in Black English “there are three reductions not possible in standard English, *mana* (*I’mana go*), *mon* (*I’mon go*), and *ma* (*I’ma go*). When the subject is something other than *I*,” they continue, “Negro dialect may give the reduced form *gon* (*He gon go*).” (Fasold and Wolfram 1975: 68) Another spelling issue raised by the form *gon* is the difficulty of modifying conventional spelling in a manner that accurately represents how it is pronounced. Using a phonetic alphabet, the sequence of sounds that occur in the pronunciation of *gon* can be precisely described as beginning with a voiced velar stop, represented by the symbol /g/, followed by the nasalized vowel, /ō/, i.e., /gō/.

A reader unfamiliar with Southern American English, and the dialect spelling conventions applied to representation of its typical forms in print, would probably be misled by the “n” in the spelling of *gon* to assume that the form is pronounced like *gone*. The full set of options to be considered, therefore, in decisions about the spelling of African American language, should not only include modified conventional, or, “dialect” spelling, with and without the traditional use of apostrophes; but also, the use, whenever needed, of symbols of the phonetic

alphabet to make explicit the pronunciation of forms that cannot otherwise be adequately represented on the printed page.

The question of how African American language should be spelled is one of several specific, often interlocking, issues discussed in the following pages that qualify as language planning issues. The variation in apostrophe usage just noted in the spelling of the clipped form *gon'* calls attention to another language planning issue that interfaces with that of spelling. A central feature of the stigmatization of Black language is its characterization as failure or inability to speak Standard English. The use of apostrophes serves to reinforce that attitude by suggesting that whatever is replaced by an apostrophe is something that should be present in the "correct" form of the word or expression. A conscious decision to avoid apostrophe use in the spelling of African American language forms may be seen as a language-planning decision insofar as it seeks to affect one of the traditional ways in which African American language is used, i.e., to stigmatize African American identity.

The issue of how Black language should be spelled also interfaces with the issue of how its basic grammatical structure is best characterized; and whether or not it has the same system of rules as other varieties of American English. The argument that it has the same grammar, characterizes *gonna*, as a variant of the Standard English *be going to* construction. One of the most intensely studied grammatical features of African American language, known as "copula deletion" (Labov 1969) and by other terms discussed below, is marked by the frequent absence of present tense forms the copula/auxiliary forms *be*, illustrated by examples 1–4.

1. *She nice.*
2. *They at home.*
3. *He my brother.*
4. *We dancing.*

Labov and other adherents to the "same system" view of Black English grammar invoke a copula-deletion rule to account for the absence of any trace of *is* or *are*; not only in sentences like 1–4, but also in sentences like (5) and (6)

5. *She gonna meet us at the Mall.* "She is going to meet us at the Mall."
6. *We gonna miss the train.* "We are going to miss the train."

Such scholars – in crafting arguments against the position that Black English has a different grammar than Standard American English – find it significant that although the copula forms *is* and *are* rarely co-occur with the future marker *gon*, the copula is practically always present, at least in the contracted form of *am*, spelled *'m*, when *gon* occurs with the first person singular subject pronoun, *I*, as in

7. *If I don't hurry, I'm'on miss the train.*

"If I don't hurry, I'm going to miss the train."

The second apostrophe in 7, represents the initial /g/ which the rules of Black English permit to be suppressed when *gon* follows *I'm*. The specific focus on the presence or absence of forms of *be* and its relationship to whether or not the subject is *I*, is motivated by the generalization that wherever Standard English can contract the copula/auxiliary *be*, Black English can delete it (Labov 1969) One acknowledged exception to that generalization is that the contracted form *'m* is generally present under conditions where the contracted forms *'s* and *'re* are frequently absent in Black English sentences, e.g., sentences 1–4 above. The contracted form *'s* is also rarely "deleted" from the pronoun forms *it's*, *that's*, and *what's*. Thus, while it is common to hear an African American say, *We dancing*, the same person would never say *\*I dancing*, but rather, *I'm dancing*. (The asterisk is used in linguistic argumentation to indicate that a cited string of words is ungrammatical, in the technical sense of not sounding right to a native speaker) Likewise, the sentence, *She nice*, is acceptable Black English with the copula "deleted." Deletion of the *'s* from *It's nice* or *That's nice*, however, results in an ungrammatical string; i.e., *\*It nice*, *\*That nice*.

The specific issue of whether or not the copula/auxiliary *be* is in the underlying structure of sentences like 1–4 is a language planning issue insofar as it relates to the more general question, *What is the grammar of Black English?* When scholars such as Labov, Fasold and Wolfram speak of the grammar of Black English, what they seem to have in mind is *a systematic and exhaustive account of the ways in which Black English diverges from Standard American English in pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar*. In existing descriptions of that kind, each point of divergence from the Standard is referred to as a *feature*, and given a name, such as *r-lessness*, or *copula deletion*. Another such feature is known as *habitual* or *invariant be* (Fasold 1969) illustrated by examples 8, and 9.

8. *Most mornings, they be at home.*

9. *Every time she call, we be dancing.*

The action or event expressed by the invariant *be* feature is understood as not occurring at the present time, but habitually, or on occasions. The action of “dancing” expressed in sentence 5 is understood as occurring at the present time, whereas in sentence 10, the time frame for our “dancing” is the recurring occasion when whoever “she” is calls. Another feature commonly attributed to Black English is illustrated by the verb *call* in example 9. It is the absence of the suffix *-s* that attaches to present tense verb forms in other varieties of American English in agreement with a third-person singular subject, e.g., *she calls*.

The so-called lack of subject-verb agreement in the verb *call* in example (9) is sometimes seen in the speech of working class Americans of other races, although its occurrence tends to be restricted to special constructions such as the negated form *don't*, in sentences like 10.

10. *He don't have no change.*

In African American language, however, any verb may occur without the *-s* suffix – including positive forms of the auxiliary *do*, as in (11) and the main verb of a clause as in (12).

11. *Do she still smoke?*

12. *She smoke when she at home.*

The past tense *-ed* suffix also tends to be absent from verb forms under conditions where it would be present in other varieties, e.g.,

13. *I cook a mess of greens yesterday.*

“I cooked a measured quantity of greens yesterday.”

The tendency for the *-ed* suffix to be absent where it would be expected to occur in Standard American English is related to a feature of African American pronunciation, commonly described as a tendency for final consonant clusters to be “reduced” or “simplified,” with the result that pairs of words such as *lost*: *loss*; and *ask*: *ass* tend to be pronounced the same. The same process may affect a past tense verb formed by addition of *-ed* to a verb like *cook* that ends in a consonant, in which cases the suffix consists of a single sound, /t/, and the resulting past tense form ends in a consonant cluster, /kt/. Such facts have led some scholars to claim that the *-ed* suffix is present in the underlying structure of the

verb in sentences such as 12, but has been deleted from the surface structure as a consequence of the final consonant cluster simplification feature.

One way in which contributions to such an account constitute language planning is the fact that once a given feature has been identified and described, the mere naming of it has implications for ongoing issues such as the extent to which Black English is a “separate system.” (Labov 1972: 36–64)

Scholars such as Labov, in arguing that Black English is *not* a separate system, refer to the variable absence of present tense forms of the copula/auxiliary *be* as “copula deletion.” Scholars who contend that it is a different system tend to use a different name, such as “zero copula,” or “copula absence.” The selection of particular names for the features selected for inclusion in the grammar of Black English also qualifies as language planning. Insofar as the names have a tendency to evoke attitudes of one kind or another toward African American language, they have implications for status planning as well as corpus planning.

There is a notable tendency for feature names to employ words that construe it as the absence of something present in Standard English. All of the terms for the copula feature currently in widespread use include a word of that nature, i.e., “deletion,” “zero,” “absence.” Indeed, all of the above-listed features, and others not yet discussed, are similarly named, “r-lessness,” “l-lessness,” “final consonant clusters simplification,” etc. Even the prefix *in-*, meaning “not” in the first word of the feature label, “invariant *be*” is a subtle instance of the tendency to characterize Black English as the absence or opposite of what is normal or expected in non-stigmatized varieties.

## Status planning issues

The work of describing the internal structure of African American language, by whatever means, clearly qualifies as corpus planning. The very idea that Black English has grammatical structure is unprecedented, however, and the antithesis of the traditional characterization of it as Bad English. The mere act of endowing it with grammar, therefore, not only affects its corpus, but also its status; particularly, the manner in which it traditionally functions in the stigmatization of African American identity.

One aspect of the status of African American language that is clearly language planning involves ongoing decision-making regarding what it

should be called. The term *Black English* is one of a variety of names that have been proposed and used by scholars since the academic study of African American language began in the sixties. Most of the names conform to the model of combining the currently preferred group name with “English,” or the name of a particular language type such as “dialect.” The term “Negro dialect,” in the above quote from Fasold and Wolfram (1975) is typical. An indication of how much the naming of the variety was subject to conscious decision-making is found in the preface to a 1969 work in which Wolfram reveals his inner turmoil on the issue,

Somewhat apologetically, I have used the term “Nonstandard Negro English” to refer to the linguistic system of working-class Negroes. In other publications, I have used the term “Black English”, first suggested to me by my colleague Ralph W. Fasold. (Wolfram 1969: X)

Inasmuch as the various names by which African American language is known are the result of conscious decisions of scholars, the decision-making processes by which they are formed qualify as status planning. To grasp the full significance of this fact, it should be remembered that at the same time that scholars were debating whether to call the variety “Black English” or some other name; none of the proposed names meant anything to most African Americans.

Several years ago, when I undertook a pilot study of African American language – and sought to involve friends and acquaintances as sources of tape-recorded data – it was necessary to explain the goal of the study to them in a roundabout way that did not use the term “Black English.” Instead of asking our prospective informants to “talk some Black English,” we had to say,

*We’re not interested in “proper” English. We just want you to “talk normal.”*

In fact, one informant is heard on tape saying to a visitor, who happens to drop in on a taping session,

*Come on in! We just in here talkin normal.*

Since that time, a different name for Black language has caught on, and virtually become a household word. Were I to find myself in a similar situation today, I could ask a similar group of African

Americans to, *Talk some Ebonics*, and they would know exactly what I meant.

The names Ebonics, and Black English, correspond to two different academic approaches to the study of African American language, i.e., *Black English studies*, and *Ebonics scholarship*. The main contributors to Black English studies are linguists, whereas Ebonics scholars represent a variety of academic disciplines, and are united by a critical and Afrocentric approach to the subject; an approach that predates by over two decades the public controversy ignited by the Oakland School Board resolution.

Few people watching the Ebonics controversy unfold were aware of the fact that the name *Ebonics* had existed, in an embryonic state, since January 1973 when it was adopted by a group of Black scholars attending a conference in Saint Louis on "cognitive and language development of the black child." The psychologist R. L. Williams is credited with having created the word *Ebonics* as a blend of "Ebony" and "phonics," intended to evoke the idea of "black sounds." In the introduction to a collection of articles on the subject, Williams describes the immediate context in which the Ebonics concept crystallized:

A significant incident occurred... . The black conferees were so critical of the work on [Black English] done by white researchers, many of whom happened to be present, that they decided to caucus among themselves and define black language from a black perspective. (Williams ed. 1975 ii).

One of a number of issues that Ebonics scholars have with orthodox Black English scholarship is its characterization of Black English as a nonstandard dialect. A typical way that Ebonics scholars express that concern is by insisting that Ebonics is not the same thing as Non-standard English. (c.f. Williams and Brantley 1975) The details of the argument are discussed further below. One point of a general nature, that is relevant to the present discussion of status planning issues is a claim advanced by some Ebonics scholars to the effect that the linguistic repertoire of the African American community includes two different varieties (in addition to Standard English) corresponding to the names Ebonics, and Black English. The opposing view of Black English scholars tends to characterize the African American linguistic repertoire as *bidialectal*, further characterizing the two component varieties Black and Standard English as coexisting in a pattern of *class stratification*.

The linguistic repertoire of a speech community offers its members a set of choices in the form of different languages, or different varieties of the same language, that may be selected for various situations of use. It may be characterized informally by the analogy of a wardrobe. A typical American would think of a tuxedo as appropriate for wearing to a formal ball, and blue jeans as appropriate for a barbecue. The *incongruity* of wearing clothing that is inappropriate for a given the situation, e.g., wearing a tux to a barbecue, calls attention to the act, and elicits predictable reactions of shock, humor, amazement, and such.

Two aspects of African American language that are at the center of ongoing status planning issues are its *typological status* and its *social function*. The question frequently raised during the Ebonics firestorm as to whether the variety is a dialect, or a separate language is a question about its typological status. The controversy over its typological classification in Black English literature as a nonstandard dialect was mentioned above. The decision of Black English scholars to classify it thusly constitutes status planning insofar as it involves change from the traditional pejorative characterization of Black language as “bad,” or substandard English. One other relevant aspect of the typological status of African American language, which is at the center of ongoing discussions of its origin, is the issue of whether or not it was at some earlier time a creole. The question about whether or not Ebonics should be taught in the schools concerns its social function.

Linguists have developed several useful and interesting ways of analyzing the social function of language varieties. One is by matching the ways in which a variety corresponds to one or more of the categories on a list of language functions, such as: *official, religious, literary, group, medium of education, school subject*, etc. (Stewart 1968) Another approach that seems well suited for expressing relevant dimensions of use of African American language is based on the notion of *societal domains*. According to such a model African American language is often characterized as normal and acceptable in such domains of use as Black home and community life, the church and the performing arts; but unacceptable – due to its stigmatized status – in the spheres of business, government and education.

While the use of African American language is normal and acceptable within the African American speech community, speaking in a markedly standard way – known traditionally as “talkin proper,” and in recent times as talking “bougie” – has the effect of distancing oneself from the in-group. A student in a modern English grammar class that I recently taught, confided that although her family commonly speaks

“Ebonics,” she found herself making a conscious effort to speak “correct” English; an effort that provoked her sister to ask her in all seriousness,

*How come you talkin all bougie? “Why are you speaking in such a Bourgeois manner?”*

The complementary roles of Standard English and African American, highlighted by the above example are enforced by visceral reactions such as that of the students’ sister to incongruities in the use of a variety with a particular situational context.

The number one question of the Great Ebonics debate, “Do you think Ebonics should be taught in the classroom?” may be seen as a reaction to the incongruity of African American language, in the minds of many persons, with the domain of education – as well as a challenge to explain to the questioner how anyone in their right mind could propose such a thing.

Black English scholars have been involved in several ways in actions and decisions that involve the use of African American language in the Domain of education. Scholars who hold faculty positions at colleges and universities began to infuse the findings of Black English research into the content of the courses they teach, and even launch new courses on the subject of African American language. The decision to offer college courses on Black English qualifies as a status planning decision in that it expands the list of societal functions of Black language to include that of school subject.

Some Black English scholars enthusiastically endorsed a proposal for using so-called *dialect readers* to facilitate the teaching of initial reading skills. (Baratz and Shuy eds 1969) The fact that the proposal never got the crucial backing of Black parents and community leaders, necessary for them to have any chance of success, however, speaks to the incongruity – in the minds of many persons – of African American language with the functions of school subject and medium of instruction. The proposal qualifies nonetheless as language planning insofar as it sought to use Black English in an unprecedented way, by producing children’s textbooks written in it.

In the foregoing discussion, several instances of conscious and deliberate decision-making have been identified that affect either the internal structure of African American language, or the ways in which it is used in society, and qualify as such as language planning. They are summarized on Table I.1.

**Table I.1** Summary of Language Planning Issues

---

**Corpus planning issues**

How should African American language be spelled?

- Modified conventional orthography
- Phonemic alphabet
- Consequences of apostrophe usage for stigmatization

How is its grammatical structure best characterized?

- List of features representing points of divergence from Standard English
- Autonomous, self-contained system, described without reference to Standard English

**Status planning issues**

What typological categories best describe African American language?

- Dialect/vernacular
- Separate language

In what situations is the use of African American language acceptable?

- Black home and community
- Literature and performing arts

In what situations is the use of African American language stigmatized?

- School subject/medium of instruction
- Business and government

What should African American language be called?

- Ebonics
  - Black English
- 

Those issues are further examined in the next section, in which I focus on issues of language policy.

**Language policy issues**

The terms “language planning” and “language policy” are frequently employed in the literature in ways that are, if not synonymous, at least similar enough that they may be used interchangeably as it best suits the stylistic interests of a writer at a given moment. In the present context, I use the term language policy in reference to issues that go beyond the scope of the definition of language planning, given above, as planned change, and raise questions in the area of law and ethics as they pertain to the rights and privileges to which speakers of a variety of language are entitled under the laws and administrative regulations of a given social order, and how such concerns relate to goals and objectives in the sphere of education with respect to speakers of the various language varieties maintained in that society’s linguistic repertoire.

Some of the major language planning issues embedded in Black English scholarship were reviewed in the previous section, sub-classified as corpus planning and status planning issues. A pervasive concern, or underlying issue, is the stigmatization of African American identity, and the manner in which it is maintained through the construction of Black language as “Bad English.” A dynamic tension between the “real world” construct of Bad English, and the construction of Black English as systematic and rule-governed, characterizes ongoing dialogue between linguists and members of the general public. The tension is resolved when someone “gets it.” That is, they get the linguists’ point that there is nothing wrong with African American language.

People who are still at the “don’t get it” stage may react to the experience of being introduced to African American Vernacular English (or AAVE) as the variety is currently known, with head-scratching confusion. Those who eventually get around to reacting verbally may pose a rhetorical question of the form, “*Do you mean to say that I should accept this kind of language coming from students in my classroom?*” At that point it is clear that material presented with the aim of describing the linguistic features of a language variety that may be spoken by some students in some American classrooms, so that teachers will be able to do their jobs in a manner that is informed by the current state of linguistic knowledge, has had the effect of raising a different concern, the *policy question* of *What should be done about African American language, in the classroom, and in society?*

As the discussion focuses on the policy question, typical audiences express a great deal of concern about the fact that African American language is stigmatized, although the word “stigma” is rarely spoken. Frequent references tend to be made, however, to the “real world,” and how important it is to be able to speak Standard English is a job interview situation. Persons making such references to the real world, and the hypothetical job interview requirements would probably agree, if pressed, that what most concerns them about the real world is the fact that African American language is stigmatized as Bad English. They would probably not want to go on record as in favor of the right of employers to discriminate against job applicants on the basis of their dialect, or grant preference to applicants who speak non-stigmatized varieties of the common language. Nevertheless, such concerns translate into strong and overwhelming support for the current policy in which Standard English reigns supreme.

## The crucial variables

A general account is developed in the following pages of how contrasting orientations to the policy question tend to correspond to the contrasting academic approaches of Ebonics and Black English scholarship. A key explanatory concept is the above-mentioned social location hypothesis. Within that framework, attention is focused on a tendency for scholars of African American language, and members of the general public as well, to deal with what I call *the crucial variables*, i.e., the *stigmatization of African American language*; and *the Hegemony of Standard English*, in predictable ways, characterized in the following discussion as policy options, with specific reference to the theoretical construct of hegemony:

- 1) *Active support* of the Hegemony of Standard English;
- 2) *Acquiescence* to it; and
- 3) *Resistance* to it while calling for Full recognition.

In the world of everyday experience, the construction of Standard English as superior is supported by the stigmatization of African American language as consisting of mistakes and random deviations from what is expected to occur in Standard English. For uncritical members of the general public, the crucial variables function to justify the unequal treatment and marginal status typically afforded to speakers of Black language. For linguists, however, the stigmatization of African American language, and its role in supporting the Hegemony of Standard English has to be weighed against its incompatibility with the current state of linguistic knowledge.

The policy option of full recognition of African American language is strongly supported by the consensus of linguistic scholars that to be human is to be a native speaker of a particular dialect of some particular language. Furthermore, linguists hold that all dialects are equally suited to the demands of the societies in which they exist, and that, to such an extent, all languages, and all dialects of such languages are equal. One particular aspect of the equality of dialects is their systematic and rule governed nature. The stigmatization of African American language as failure to perform according to the rules of a different language variety, Standard English, and the implication that it has no rules of its own, is totally contrary to the current state of linguistic knowledge.

In view of the fact that the current state of linguistic knowledge effectively refutes both of the foundational ideas of the hegemony of

Standard English, i.e. – the stigmatization of African American language; and the superiority of Standard English – one might predict that linguists would come out strongly in support of a policy of full recognition. As a matter of fact, however, the most typical response of linguists has been to opt for what I have previously characterized as a policy of limited recognition, and characterize here as acquiescence to the Hegemony of Standard English.

A working hypothesis, introduced here and further discussed in the following pages and chapters, is that the tendency for Black English scholars to opt for a policy of acquiescence to Standard English is, motivated by a sincere commitment to academic objectivity, and a corresponding obligation not to cross the boundary from objective scholarship to advocacy. “Is it the my role?” a scholar might sincerely ask, “to condemn the way in which Black language is constructed in the real world, and actively campaign for its recognition as a language in its own right? Or am I required to maintain a detached and unobtrusive perspective, stating the facts and leaving it to prophets and firebrands to condemn any evils and injustices my research might bring to light.” It is the kind of ethical dilemma faced by medical researchers who attempt to advance knowledge of a dread disease by withholding treatment to patients in a control group whose lives might be saved by it.

The ethical conflicts sometimes faced by scholars engaged in the study of phenomena that harbor social inequalities can be exacerbated by the social location of the scholar, inasmuch as the principles and practices in which the inequality resides are part and parcel of the taken-for-granted commonsense world of everyday experience. Such inequality tends to pass “beneath the radar screen” of critical analysis to which scholars submit crucial variables of an academic investigation.

In addition to the points just noted about aspects of the social location of Black English scholars that may explain their policy choices, the social location hypothesis is further supported by a strong tendency for Ebonics scholars to favor a different policy option. The typically marginalized social location, and Afrocentric perspective, of such scholars accounts for a marked tendency on their part to resist the hegemony of Standard English, further characterized by an interest in African American language – *not as an end in itself – but as an means of cultural revitalization*.

For present purposes *cultural revitalization* may be defined simply as the reconstruction of negatively defined identity traits in positive terms that imbue them with a sense of dignity and worth. A simple

example of it is the slogan "Black is Beautiful," promoted by the Black Freedom Movement of the Sixties, to counter the traditional construction of Black identity in negative terms. Another is the above-mentioned Kwanzaa holiday, insofar as it is the outgrowth of a project to promote an Afrocentric alternative for high celebration during the traditional American holiday season, imbued with rituals explicitly designed to elicit feelings of pride and dignity in persons of African descent.

In general, Ebonics scholarship may be characterized by a central interest in the implications of Black language for the construction of African American identity, an interest which contrasts markedly with the above-noted concern of Black English scholars with the implications of Black English for the employability of its speakers. Such contrasting interests and concerns are amenable to further analysis through the lens of DuBois' model of double consciousness; a model which serves not only as a useful frame of reference for studying Black identity but also as the basis for a more definitive characterization of cultural revitalization.

Within the theoretical framework sketched in above, contrasting positions that the two camps have taken, on a number of crucial issues are highlighted, e.g., what should African American language be called? How should it be classified typologically? And whether or not Black English and Ebonics are different words for the same thing. The willingness of certain Black English scholars to acquiesce to the hegemony of standard English as part of the "real world" as well as the tendency just noted for Ebonics scholars to adopt a policy position of resistance, rather than acquiescence to the hegemony of Standard English add up to strong support for the claim that a scholar's position on the policy question is a function of his or her social location.

I do not fault my fellow linguists for their social location, or its possible effect upon their perception of what is real and normal. Nor do I wish to focus the following discussion on advocacy of my preferred policy position, but, mainly, to make a novel contribution to the academic study of language planning based on the issues raised by the case of Black English scholarship. I draw freely from my own experience as a participant-observer in the phenomenon under study, in which I have, when called upon to state my position on the policy question, expressed my preference for a policy of full recognition. The basic structure of my argument has been to call attention to the overwhelming testimony of linguistic knowledge to the effect that there is nothing wrong with African American language; as well as other per-

suasive points; and then invoke the logic of the folk proverb, “If it ain’t broke don’t fix it.”

## Plan of the book

The real world of everyday experience, and the visionary world of linguistic knowledge with which it coexists in a dynamic tension, are both made explicit by the theoretical perspective of the sociology of knowledge. The fundamental claim that the “real world” is socially constructed is of crucial importance insofar as it allows for the critical study of such variables as “hegemony” “stigmatization” “Bad language” “dialect,” and “Standard English,” as social constructs, that is, features of everyday reality that seem to be immutably of a particular nature, but are amenable, nevertheless, to change. A case in point is the once firmly established belief that the Earth is flat, which – with the exception of a few reactionary persons affiliated with the Flat Earth Society – has, with the advent of global consciousness, become outmoded.

The socially-constructed nature of the real world is highlighted in Chapter One, through the characterization of *linguists as visionaries*. The chapter begins by calling attention to the role of scientists, inventors and other persons whose visionary ideas place them ahead of their times, and often subject them to laughter and ridicule – but which once accepted entitles them to scoff at the ones who once made fun of them, singing the rhetorical question that is the title of a popular song, “Who’s got the last laugh now?” The chapter includes a cursory overview of the field of linguistics, and stresses the overwhelming degree to which linguistic knowledge supports the full recognition of African American language. Chapter Two, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it;” not only suggests a logical answer to the policy question based on the “clean bill of health” given to African American language by linguistic knowledge, it also includes continuing discussion of the effect of the social location of scholars on the policy options with which they chose to align themselves.

Chapter Three focuses on Language Planning as a Field of Inquiry, with special emphasis given to policy issues identified in the foregoing discussion that relate specifically to the case of African American language. The chapter includes a review of the literature on language planning, and the key concepts and analytical perspectives that have characterized its development.

Chapter Four, “What’s in a Name?” is an occasion to revisit the theme of the social construction of reality as it informs the phenomenon of

*naming*, and the specific question of what African American language should be called. It includes a section on typical naming practices of various groups in Africa and the African diaspora, as well as the diverse names that African Americans use for their own group, and others, in-group as well as public settings. The chapter also includes discussion of how the changing preferences of African Americans for naming their group is informed by the subject of taboo words and euphemisms. The main focus of the chapter is on names for Black language that have been proposed and adopted by different persons and groups at different times.

A good deal of Chapter Five is organized around the pros and cons of the Creolist Hypothesis of the origin of African American language, and concludes with discussion of the implications of the hypothesis for ongoing issues of language planning and policy. Chapter six adopts the perspective of recent work on the origin of African American language based on insights from approaches to historical linguistics that group language varieties into families of languages based on evidence of their descent from a common parent. Alternative accounts of the origin of African American language are introduced in this chapter which focus on African language influences, and the genetic affiliation of Black language with African and the African diaspora languages. An archaic variety of African American language spoken in the Dominican Republic, known as Samaná English, spoken by descendants of free Africans who migrated from the Northeastern United States to Hispaniola in the early 1800s is a central focus of the discussion.

Chapter Seven, "The Language Situation in the African American Speech Community: The Status of Variety X" compares and contrasts alternate accounts of the language situation based on class-stratification, bilingualism, diglossia, and a speech continuum. The discussion is driven by the insight that the situation in Black America is a microcosm of the general language situation in the United States of America. The question of whether or not Black English and Ebonics are different words for the same linguistic phenomenon permeates the discussion. The contention of some scholars that Ebonics is a different language than English is also discussed.

Chapter Eight, "Cross-Over: From African American to National and World Culture," examines the frequently noted potential for African American culture to transcend established boundaries of cultural identity and nationality. The singular impact upon national and world culture that has been made by such diverse genres of African American creativity and artistic expression as Jazz, Blues, Spirituals, and most recently, Hip Hop music, is examined with the aim of finding a satis-

factory explanation for the phenomenon. Specific conceptual tools introduced and developed in previous chapters contribute to a systematic analysis of cross-over, a term that first appeared in the jargon of the sound recording industry. The concept of double-consciousness, alternatively characterized as the “Push versus Pull Syndrome” (Smitherman 1977) is shown to be a major explanatory variable, which accounts for, among other things, the push of commercial forces in Show Business and the recording industry, and how it is countered by a pull toward validation of the dignity and worth of African American identity, and the latent genius and creative power it embodies. Another explanatory variable is a culture of resistance to hegemonic forces that appear relentlessly determined to reduce and contain Black identity within simplistic stereotypical boundaries created for purposes of stigmatization and exclusion.

Chapter Nine, “Ebonics and Black School Achievement: The Language Difference Hypothesis,” examines the chronic underachievement of African American students, and diverse ways in which it has been addressed by academic scholars of various disciplinary backgrounds. At the time that Black English studies emerged in the sixties, a long tradition of academic scholarship had established various kinds of “deficit models” to account for typical patterns of Black behavior, including verbal performance. Although there are a number of possible reasons for this, it is not surprising that the difference between Black and Standard English has been singled out by some scholars as a possible causal factor. Several noteworthy projects have emerged over the years, based explicitly or implicitly on such a *language difference hypothesis*.

A major source of insights into the relationship between the language of African American children and their academic achievement is a research effort which grew out of the politics of the Ebonics controversy called the *African American Culture and Literacy Project*, an effort which brought together scholars from various disciplines to study how the achievement of school literacy by African American children is related to various approaches to teacher development and the design of reading materials that take into account distinctive features of African American culture and the surface features of their language.

The title of Chapter Ten, “The Grammar: We be following rules,” appropriates a typical African American language syntactical pattern to introduce the following detailed overview of its grammatical structure, presented as an autonomous system. The chapter includes critical discussion of the “list-of-features” approach to the grammatical

description of African American language that has dominated Black English scholarship. The discussion centers on recent contributions that use native speaker intuitions as well as empirical data to describe the variety as an autonomous and self-contained system.

Chapter Eleven, "The Standardization of African American Language" discusses prospects for using language planning to attain an unprecedented level of standardization of African American language, in which it is recognized as a language in its own right and functions as a medium of all kinds of published material including dictionaries, grammars, newspapers, magazines and creative writing for persons of all ages. The options of specific language planning measures are discussed especially in the area of orthography development, and sample texts are presented, written in a proposed phonemic orthography for precisely representing African American language in a manner that highlights its distinctive features of pronunciation and grammar.

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