Broadening the View of Black Language Use

Toward a Better Understanding of Words and Worlds

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One morning while driving to the airport in heavy traffic, I tuned in to the local "urban hip-hop" radio station and happened on a contest referred to (quite seriously) by the two disc jockeys as "Jeopardonics." The game was played by two contestants who were given the same word and challenged to use it in a sentence. The word in use as I tuned in was *orientated.* The first contestant used the word in the following sentence, "I orientated a meeting this morning." After acknowledgments from the DJs she was given five points. The second contestant also used the word "correctly" in a sentence referring to a man who was "not orientated before starting his new job." She was also given five points.

In the next round, both contestants were given a word that sounded to me to be *ovahur.* It was then used in the following ways by the contestants: "Tell yo baby mama to get ovahur," and "Boy you better get yo butt ovahur." After much laughter from the DJs, it was decided both contestants had done such an outstanding job they would both win free tickets to an upcoming concert. The DJs then invited us to tune in the next day for another round of "Jeopardonics."

As one who studies the role of language and identity, I was slightly intrigued by the game, which combined the title of a popular TV game show with the word *Ebonics,* a term often used in reference to language of black Americans. Although this radio game was obviously developed in the name of humor

and the quest for morning drive-time ratings, I see "Jeopardonics" as an example of the rampant misunderstanding that surrounds language use in the black community. Although designed to be entertainment to brighten the morning commute, this game was played on the air to a large audience of listeners (both black and white) and as such served to reinforce the perception that black language use also indicates stupidity on the part of the user. Such a widely held belief continues to both interest me and anger me, not only because I am a communication scholar but also because, as a black woman, I at various points in my daily life might find occasion to speak in a way some would define as black English. I take offense at being perceived as deficient or deviant because I occasionally express myself in the way of those who reared me from childhood to adulthood.

My goal here is not to discuss the controversy surrounding the use of black English in schools or clarify the validity of Ebonics; both issues have been taken up other places (Smitherman & Cunningham, 1997; Williams 1997). Rather, I briefly discuss how understanding language use in the black community has been restricted to and constricted by the recent focus on *Ebonics* as both term and concept, and offer instead an expanded view of language use that focuses attention on the ways in which one's language is a result of living, moving, and having being in multiple communities. In addition, I suggest that this

expanded view include the concept of language as a means of "marking identity" in the various worlds in which we daily participate. Such a view of language can increase the understanding of both black language use and the experiences of those who speak it.

A Brief Look at Ebonics and Black English

The term *Ebonics* as used to describe language use among black Americans has become far too overused and misunderstood since the late 1996 controversy with the Oakland School District brought the word out of academic writings and into the mainstream press. Unfortunately, the media did the concept and the black community a disservice when it tried to condense a complex concept to catchy sound bites for the evening newscast. In many cases, the idea of Ebonics as the language of black America is interpreted disparagingly like the way the radio game used it—a clear demonstration that many blacks continue to suffer from a deficiency in language use that no amount of education or social programs or both can overcome.

Although it might appear to have come out of nowhere, the term *Ebonics* was actually coined in the early 1970s after language in the black community had become a focus of study for both black and white scholars. In a historical account given by Robert Williams, he notes that black scholars were not satisfied with white scholars' descriptions of language in the black community and decided to name the experiences themselves, being members of the very communities in question. The words *Ebony* and *phonics* were combined to "name and define black pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax, structure and the whole ball of wax" (Williams, 1997, p. 210). However, the term did not capture the attention of mainstream audiences at that time, despite the prolific research and writing of black scholars.

In her groundbreaking work on language in the black community, Geneva Smitherman identified the uniqueness of what she terms both *black English* or *African American English* as evident in three areas:

1. Patterns of grammar and pronunciation, many of which reflect the patterns that operate in West African languages.

2. Verbal rituals from the Oral tradition and the continued importance of the Word as in African cultures.

3. Lexicon, or vocabulary, usually developed by giving special meanings to regular English words, a practice that goes back to enslavement and the need for a system of communication that only those in the enslaved community could understand. (Smitherman, 1994, p. 5)

Each of these features of language use is discussed fully in Smitherman's (1977) *Talkin' and Testifyin': The Language of Black America.* More recently, Smitherman (1994) authored *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner*, a dictionary that "captures just a slice of the dynamic, colorful span of language in the African American community" (p. 1). Her argument that black English is a legitimate form of speech with a distinct history and origins forms the basis for perceiving language use in the black community as indeed different (as is the case with many racial and ethnic groups), but not deficient or deviant as it has often been perceived. However, despite research such as Smitherman's that legitimizes the need for, and use of, black English, the stereotype remains of blacks being ill-equipped to speak "correct" English and doomed to a life of failure because of this deficiency.

In my observations of perceptions of black language use, I have noticed that, along with deficient and deviant, what also endures in mainstream thought are perceptions in these three distinct areas: Black English connotes stupidity on the part of the user(s); black English is slang; and black English use is static. I would like to briefly discuss each of these constricting notions more fully before moving on to ways to expand our understanding of black language use.

Black + English = Stupidity

The misuse, or incorrect use, of words by people of African descent in this country has been a perception perpetuated by images in popular culture dating back to the era of minstrel shows, the most popular form of 19th-century entertainment. In her book, *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies*, noted African American Studies scholar Patricia Turner (1994) discusses historical depictions of blacks that include awkward

speech, butchered English, and an inability to pronounce correctly multisyllabic words. More recent images have included comedic renderings of the Buckwheat character from the early 20th-century children's show, *The Little Rascals* (which demonstrates the continued source of humor of the subject), as well as caricatures of incarcerated black men incorrectly using polysyllabic words. These depictions and many more like them reinforce long-held stereotypes of black language and the deficient capacities—both mental and verbal—of the speakers.[1]

Black English as Mere Slang

The word *slang* is typically used to refer to a special vocabulary used only by a certain group of people. A popular stereotype is that teenagers adapt slang terms, using words and phrases understood only by other teens and not understood by adults. To reduce black language use to mere slang is an obvious oversimplification, but a common perception because blacks (as a distinctly different group from mainstream English speakers) appear to use words with meanings not understood by those who are not black. If one has not grown up in a community where words and phrases are commonly used by its many members, to those ears this speech does sound like slang in the same way words such as *cool, hip, happening, down, phat,* and *tight* have all been used over the past several decades to signal approval.

The difference, however, is that many words and phrases in the black community have endured and, as Smitherman (1994) illustrates in *Black Talk*, many have historical implications. Unlike slang terms, many words used among speakers of black English emerged out of the experience of slavery such as *playing the dozens*, a term used for the verbal dueling game that insults family members and more recently called *snaps* in popular culture. Other words have semantic rooting in West African words such as the use of the word *bad* for something really good. In the Mandingo language, this use of *bad* translates as "it is bad goodly."

Even the word *rap*, now used to refer to a musical style, has a long history of use although the meaning has changed somewhat. For example, my memory of early teen years and basement parties with black lights includes young black men approaching young black women asking, "Say, baby, can I rap to you?" If my memory is doubtful, Smitherman (1994) confirms this use with her definition of *rap*: "originally referred only to romantic conversation from a man to a woman to win her affection ... the term then crossed over to mean any kind of strong aggressive powerful talk" (p. 190). This crossover is evident by today's "rappers," who typically boast powerfully in rhythm as they describe the plight and conditions of what is the reality for many black people. This verbal prowess is an excellent point at which to note that the very act of "rapping," whether to win the affection of a woman or to voice opposition to injustice, illustrates yet another example of African language retention—the concept of *nommo* (Asante, 1987), which describes the power of the word and values the proficient use of the word.

You Don't Sound Black

Perceptions of black language use seem to indicate that if black English is the language of black America then *all* blacks should use it in the same way, at *all* times, and those who don't use it are the exception. This seems to be another way of constricting the concept of language use in the black community, believing that there is only *one way* to speak black (or for that matter be black, but that is another topic). If one's skin tone or phenotype denotes black or African American but the person speaks in a way considered "more standard," the speaker is often said to be "so articulate." For those of us who have heard this phrase, it implies that we are not like "other blacks" who speak the nonstandard, incorrect, butchered version of English of "real blacks."

However, despite clear articulation and the use of correct grammar, my language can still reflect my roots in a black community. The issue is not grammar when I refer to *Mother's Day* as the reason grocery stores, currency exchanges, and banks are crowded near the first of the month (*Mother's Day* has been used historically in the many black communities to refer to the day women on welfare receive checks). My pronunciation is not a factor when I joke about an event with a *boojee crowd*, meaning a function attended by only those blacks considered elite, the privileged few or bourgeoisie (Smitherman, 1994). Although lacking the obvious markers of grammar

and pronunciation, both of these phrases connect language use and identity in that they have roots in black communities and their use in many ways is a reflection of understanding and moving in those worlds.

As with other communities of speakers, black community speakers change language use depending on who uses it and how. What is most important to note here is that there is not one essentialist, monolithic black community; we are diverse. What features and forms of black English are used can depend on issues such as education, geography, and socioeconomic status, as well as the circumstances under which it is spoken. Nevertheless, the perception remains that black English as it is used and spoken by *some* at *one* time is to remain as such for *everyone* for *all* times. In other words, if you are black it is believed by many (both blacks and those who aren't) that you've *got* to speak a certain way—a way somehow sanctioned as the one and only way blacks talk. But here, again, is where I take exception to that rule and to use a phrase often heard in many black homes in heated discussions: "I ain't *got* to do nothin' but stay black and die!"

Exploring Language, Culture, and Identity

Geneva Smitherman's (1994) discussion of black English is a good starting point for expanding the discussion on the language use of many blacks living in America because, as she notes,

> Black talk crosses the boundaries—of sex, age, region, religion, social class—because the language comes from the same source: the African American Experience and the Oral Tradition embedded in that experience. On one level there is great diversity among African Americans today, but on a deeper level, race continues to be the defining core of the Black experience. (p. 2)

I would like to add here that it is this core black experience that creates a culture shaping one's sense of self and place in both that culture and the larger world. When moving between those worlds, language is a primary means of maintaining and negotiating identity.

As theories of linguistic relativity illustrate, language influences thought and perception. When a person grows up in a world with experiences that create a particular culture (as in ways of being, doing, knowing), moving into another cultural world creates challenges for both language use and identity. For instance, the university where I teach has a large student body from Spain, where we have a campus in Madrid. Students are required to attend the Madrid campus for 2 years before coming to the United States to complete undergraduate study. In classes, I have often witnessed the Spanish students, like many others who speak English as a second language, mentally search for an English word, only to shrug helplessly as they say, "There is no word in English to say this." The Spanish students on our campus also provide a clear illustration of how language use connects and connotes identity. It is commonly known among all our students that on certain evenings, a bar near campus is frequented by Spanish students who speak only Spanish as they gather on one particular side of the bar.

Although it might be easy to understand why students who are thousands of miles and an ocean away from home would want to be with others like themselves and speak the language with which they grew up, it is harder for some to understand why black students who grew up in the United States would prefer to sit together in the cafeteria and engage in lively, emotional, and sometimes colorful conversation. This behavior is often interpreted as isolation and a rejection of other races or individuals who favor integration of all. But for the black students in such settings, the language often spoken at those tables is the language of "home" and provides a sense of comfort and connection with others who understand it. As is the case with the native Spanish-speaking students, there is no need to translate or explain the meaning of things or respond to value judgments about ways of talking.

As mentioned earlier in this essay, the experience of blacks in the United States includes centuries of perceptions and stereotypes, which often influence our interactions with others as we move through our daily lives. The reality of life for those of us who grew up in black homes and communities where the language used is commonly defined as nonstandard is

much the same as for those who speak English as a second language; one is expected to develop some proficiency in standard English to move successfully between cultural worlds. The conscious choice of using one language over another, referred to as code switching then becomes a means for "marking" identity or membership in certain groups or cultural worlds. Research on code switching among speakers of black English indicates that this "skill" is recognized by its users as a means of connecting with those who are of similar cultural or racial identity and distancing from those who are not (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993).

My own research on the language use of a group of young black women in college further illustrates this point. In their descriptions of ways of talking in settings that were predominantly white (such as classrooms or meetings), the young women indicated they avoided using "black woman's talk"—a strategy enacted to be perceived as intelligent and more than tokens. However, there were times when they felt they "had" to speak *as* a black woman, *like* a black woman, such as when white classmates were operating under misconceptions about the black community. As one young woman explained, "I have to go into my blackness and break it down to them, Look, in the black community . . . ." She, along with the other women, said there were times when the language they heard used from their earliest years was the only way in which they could express themselves. In this instance, the young women, who could be categorized generally as college students and quite often on the receiving end of a well-meaning compliment, such as "You're not like other blacks," were deliberately distancing themselves from their white classmates to point out that their race, and experiences by virtue of it, had made a difference in their life (Scott, 1996).

In the same way, these young women also connected with other young black women through language, such as in the use of *girl* as a marker of solidarity (Scott, 2000). By retaining the use of their language and the experiences that had shaped it, they maintained a connection with their identity and others who were like them, rather than rejecting that identity because they had moved into another cultural world, the world of the predominantly white

university. The use of standard English—or "talking proper" in settings where black English or a vernacular, informal style is the norm—is often seen as rejecting one's identity as black and an indication that one has internalized negative connotations of being black and wishes to distance from that identity.

Distancing from one's identity through the rejection of language is an issue in other communities as well, where the effort to lose one's native language as a means of assimilating might have once been valued but is now also criticized. In the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983), women of Asian descent, Latinas, Native American, and black women discuss the role language has played in shaping their identities and connections to the reality of those who share their experiences.

To illuminate this further, I use an example from my own life and an experience I had while on a research trip to a community along the U.S.–Mexico border, where the population is obviously very heavily Mexican American. Because of my complexion and hair texture, I am often told by those meeting me for the first time I appear to be Latina. Often when traveling, I am approached by Spanish speakers to whom I can only respond in the awkward Spanish I learned in required high school and college courses. Normally my reaction in these instances only serves to strengthen my resolve to refresh my knowledge of the language. However, in this border community, my reaction to not being able to "connect" through language was different because I was involved with women health educators working among people who have been marginalized and disenfranchised. Although many of the women I met during my stay spoke English, I found myself wanting to speak *their* language as *they* did to demonstrate solidarity with both work I share a passion for and with an identity as a woman of color although not Latina. My pidgin Spanish, however, left me feeling very inept and distant; there was not the intimacy I feel among black women with whom I share a vocabulary and the nuance of words that reflect our shared world.

Connecting Words and Worlds

My research in the area of language and identity was motivated by my own experiences in growing up

black and female and finding myself moving in and out of various cultural worlds where language was a marker of identity. As light "skinned-ded,"[2] my complexion, also referred to as "high yellow" (Smitherman, 1994), often caused me to be suspect in my own community. At some point in my life, I discovered language or my way of talking was a means of marking my identity as black and connecting with others who identified as black. Because I was educated in predominantly white schools, I also developed proficiency in what is commonly referred to as standard English, which serves me well today in my professional capacities. However, I will admit there are times when I bring my native way of speaking into the classroom because "there is just no other way for me to say it," and it is at these times that I try to give students a broader view of language use in the black community. It is also a chance to emphasize that black English, Ebonics, or whatever term is preferred does not equal stupidity because it is doubtful that one who is considered deficient by design could obtain a doctorate and obtain a faculty position at a university.

When talking about language and code switching in class, I often refer to Oprah Winfrey's ability to move effortlessly between talk show host style and her more informal vernacular speech complete with voice inflections and phrases tinged with her Southern upbringing, such as when she utters, "Y'all know what I mean," as she looks at the audience then turns back to her guest and proceeds to converse in her professional style. When I imitate this in class, students often laugh, perhaps because they didn't know I, a professor, could talk black "like that." When this occurs, it then opens up the discussion that Oprah's and my language proficiency in two ways of speaking is perceived as the exception rather than the rule.

I doubt that I will ever lecture exclusively in black English; as is the case for most speakers, I use a variety of language styles and forms depending on the situation and the audience. More important, if I were to use my native way of talking, I doubt it would consist solely of grammatical errors, mispronounced polysyllabic words, and terms from the latest hip-hop artists. This is not language I use to mark myself as who I am as a black woman. I have discovered that

when I do bring into my class certain words and phrases reflecting my experiences of living black in this country, the black students give me the smile of solidarity and are of great assistance as we try to explain the meaning to those who do not share understanding.

In such instances in the classroom, I do what I have tried to do in this essay: illuminate the area of language use in the black community by challenging us to think about language in broader terms. More specifically, I suggest that students of human communication look more closely at the historical roots of language in the black community, the ways in which the black experience in this country influenced language use, and how the reality of the various worlds in which we interact daily require us to negotiate identity through language use.

A limited understanding of black English as equaling stupidity, slang, deficiency, or, even worse, deviancy is only a surface look at a complex matter. Furthermore, it ignores the history that continues to influence race relations today. By expanding the look at language use in the black community, we get a broader, better look at a language, a people, and the experiences that made them who and how they are today.

ENDNOTES

1. For a more thorough and compelling look at the origins of black stereotypes and how they have influenced perceptions of blacks in the United States, I encourage you to view the documentaries *Ethnic Notions* and *Color Adjustment*. Directed and produced by the late filmmaker Marlon Riggs, both provide a context for understanding how images of blacks since slavery have influenced race relations in the United States.

2. The adjective *light skinned* is often pronounced *light skinned-ded* in many black communities. Smitherman (1977) discusses this and other forms of hypercorrection as possibly the result of African slaves trying to appropriate white English without any knowledge of specified grammatical rules.

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