

Lecture Thirty-Two

What Is Black English?

Scope: This series allows us to gain a better understanding of Black English than was possible during, for example, the Ebonics controversy of 1996. Black English is a nonstandard dialect of English, with its own rules and complexities. It contains many features found in nonstandard English dialects of the United Kingdom, which slaves in America were exposed to in contact with settlers and indentured servants who spoke these varieties. Some have argued that Black English is an African language with English words, but this would make it a creole, and we can see that it does not have the traits of those languages. Rather, to the extent that it simplifies English a bit more than other dialects, Black English is lightly influenced by being created by adult learners—just as standard English itself was after the Viking invasions.

Outline

- I. Before we proceed to the final four lectures, we are now in a position to understand the nonstandard English dialect most immediate—and controversial—for Americans. Because of the widely covered Oakland School Board controversy in 1996, it is now best known as Ebonics. Linguists have called it Black English or, more technically, African-American Vernacular English (AAVE).
- II. Features.
 - A. It is often thought that Black English refers only to slang, such as the colorful language well known from rap music. But this is only the surface. Black English is a distinct dialect of English on all levels.
 - B. *Sounds*. For example, what is sometimes referred to as a “black sound” is due to a different sound system from the standard dialect’s. This is often thought of as “leaving off sounds” because of how we spell English words but is often just a matter of using a different sound.
 1. For example, Black English has *wif* instead of *with*, but if you think about it, *th* is two letters but one sound. Norman French has *carbon* while standard has *charbon*, but there is no *h* “left out” in Norman.
 2. In other cases, Black English’s vowel is more complex than Standard English’s. *Bill* in Black English is more like “beal.”
 - C. *Grammar*. Black English has systematic grammatical differences from Standard English.
 1. *To be*. In places, Black English is simpler: *She my sister* is good Black English.

2. *Habitual “be.”* Elsewhere, Black English comes out ahead. To say *She be walkin’ to the store* does not mean that she is doing it right now but that she does it on a regular basis. Standard English usually leaves this difference to context: to indicate regularity, Standard English uses the bare present—*She walks to the store*.

III. Is Black English an African language?

- A. Some have argued that Black English is less English than an African, or African-derived, language with English words. However, these claims do not stand up to scrutiny.
- B. Black English as African language.
 1. For example, especially in the context of the Oakland controversy, some proposed that Black English is based on African grammar, just as such creoles as Sranan and Haitian are. This claim is partly based on traits of Black English, such as the ability to use the same verb form with any pronoun: *he walk* instead of *he walks*. Many West African languages pattern like Chinese and have no endings.
 2. But Black English does not match up with any African grammar the way creoles do. For example, no African-American would say *The hunter that been buy one house give his friend*.
 3. Black English also retains too much of English’s “mess” to qualify as a creole, such as irregular verbs (*stood, went*) and plurals (*men, feet*).
- C. Black English as a creole continuum.
 1. Others have argued that Black English began as a creole, namely Gullah, and that a continuum formed between Gullah and Standard English. Black English would now be in the middle of that continuum, while Gullah itself remains only in the Sea Islands and somewhat inland.
 2. But there are many problems with this idea. There is no historical evidence of Gullah spoken anywhere far beyond where it is today. There were blacks who migrated to other countries in the 1800s when they supposedly would have been speaking Gullah, but the descendants of these blacks do not speak anything like Gullah even when English itself is not spoken in the country (such as the Dominican Republic).

IV. Black English as British dialect?

- A. In fact, many of the features we associate with black American speech are found in regional Englishes in the United Kingdom.
- B. Habitual *be* is used by Irish English speakers, and black slaves learned it from indentured servants who spoke this dialect. *Even when I be round there with friends, I be scared* is good Hiberno-English.

- C. Black English uses *it* where the standard uses *there* in such sentences as *It's somebody at the door*. We see parallels to this in good old Cornwall: *'Tes some wan t'the dooar*.
- V. What is Black English, then?
 - A. Yet the fact remains that there is an obvious difference between Black English and the English of the rural Brit. For example, there is no British dialect where *She my sister* is typical. There are also other features where Black English simplifies the standard, such as in not switching the order of subject and auxiliary in questions: *Why you didn't call me?* instead of *Why didn't you call me?*
 - B. Although Black English hardly “undoes” English enough to qualify as a creole or even semi-creole, there are enough traits like the above to show that the people who created Black English streamlined it slightly. We would expect this of African slaves learning the language quickly outside of a school setting. We would also expect in this situation that Africans would have left a slight impact from their accent—the hardest thing to shed when speaking a second language—on their rendition of English. Hence, certain aspects of the black “sound,” as distinct from the British accent.
 - C. Thus, Black English can be described as a semi-semi-semi-creole of regional English dialects of the United Kingdom, standing in a relationship to Standard English rather like English does to Old English.

Essential Reading:

McWhorter, John H. *Word on the Street: Debunking the Myth of a “Pure” Standard English*. New York: Perseus, 1998 (chapters 6–7). (A more detailed, but accessible, exposition of the topics in this lecture.)

Supplementary Reading:

Rickford, John Russell, and Russell John Rickford. *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English*. New York: Wiley and Sons, 2000.

Questions to Consider:

1. In 1996, the Oakland School Board proposed that black American students be taught in Black English as a bridge to acquiring Standard English, arguing that Black English is an African language with English words, different enough from the standard to pose a barrier to black children's learning to read. After this lecture and the course so far, what are your views on this? Even if you suppose that the school board harbored some exaggerated notions, do you think that there was some truth in their perspective? Why or why not?

2. The temptation is great to hear young blacks' speech as "bad grammar." Yet this lecture and many previous ones suggest a certain challenge: listen to the rawest speech of this kind that you can find—rap lyrics or youngsters chatting in public. Can you wrap your head around the fact that they are not using "bad grammar" in any logical sense? Cockney English is one thing, but to Americans, this is largely rather "cute"—try to really bring it home!