

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Beyond Ebonics: Linguistic Pride and Racial Prejudice by John Baugh

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REVIEWS

els of sociolinguistic analysis – for example, the interplay among patterns of linguistic variation, emergent linguistic practices, social psychological phenomena such as language attitudes, and social institutional phenomena such as language policies and education.

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JOHN BAUGH, *Beyond Ebonics: Linguistic pride and racial prejudice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. Pp. vii, 149. Hb \$29.95.

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The foundation of the Ebonics controversy (EC) was laid centuries before its December 1996 debut. The EC was not about the name “Ebonics,” but about a legacy. In the Introduction, Baugh writes: “This text attempts to clarify several of the issues, misconceptions, and educational policies that emerged from the Ebonics controversy while striving to view them within the broader context of the linguistic legacy of American slavery and to address the linguistic prejudices that tend to inhibit improved race relations” (xiii). Within this context, Baugh clarifies how the EC happened, and why.

Baugh aims to “dispel uninformed and divisive myths about the linguistic consequences of the American slave trade” (xii); to “inform rational discussion

on how best to educate students for whom standard English is not native [SENN]" (xiii); to delineate why the US should redress the linguistic consequences of American slavery for African slave descendants (ASD); and to take the first step toward healing the nation through linguistic tolerance for all. Finally, Baugh wants readers to know that he is unequivocal in his position on the EC: "African American English [AAE] is a dialect of English, and not a separate language" (47).

Though Baugh says that "readers should know that I care much more about the educational welfare of students who lack standard English proficiency than I do about contentious squabbles over moot linguistic terminology" (xii), throughout *Beyond Ebonics* (*BE*), he stresses "the scholarly and educational perils of attempting to adopt Ebonics as either a technical linguistic term or as an educational philosophy, at least as long as multiple and contradictory definitions for Ebonics continue to exist. Just as a house that is divided cannot stand, linguistic terminology that alleges to have scientific validity cannot survive with multiple definitions" (86).

BE contains nine chapters, each a detailed and urgent exegesis of a problem or question. Chap. 1, "Linguistic pride and racial prejudice," lays the foundation for Baugh's primary aims and their importance to him personally and professionally. In this chapter, Baugh best expresses his conviction for achieving those aims: "Until such time as leaders in positions of political authority have the collective courage, vision, and wisdom to redress the linguistic legacy of American slavery within the context of providing equal educational opportunities to all children, we will never be able to fully overcome our long history of race-based inequality" (12–13).

Chap. 2, "Ebonic genesis," parses definition of the term "Ebonics" as articulated by its primary creator, the psychologist Robert Williams, in 1975. Baugh also contextualizes the definition within Williams's area of expertise and his agenda, which was to confront racial bias in testing.

Chap. 3, "A contentious global debate," relies on anthropologist John Ogbu's distinction between voluntary (e.g., European colonizers) and involuntary (e.g., African slaves and their descendants) immigrants to address an issue fundamental to the US's getting beyond Ebonics: "Are African Americans [AAs] linguistically similar or dissimilar to other immigrants who came to the U.S. speaking languages other than English? As we know, the linguistic history of ASD is unique and not truly comparable to any other voluntary group of immigrants" (36).

Chap. 4, "Oakland's Ebonics resolutions," is a very critical exegesis of the intent and implications of the Oakland Unified School Board's Ebonics resolutions. Baugh maintains that the resolutions failed to yield a better education for AA children because of their position that the language of ASD is an African language, which is in opposition to Baugh's view that it is an American English dialect.

Chap. 5, "Legislative lament," focuses on the EC in the US Senate hearings and in debates in various state legislatures. It also critiques the role linguists played in the EC. For example, Baugh chides the Linguistic Society of America's 1997 resolution supporting the Ebonics resolutions because, even though linguists misinterpreted a term that was not theirs (Ebonics), they could have clarified their position about their own terms – "dialect" and "language" – at a time when a nation was willing to listen and language policy and planning in the US could have benefited greatly. Baugh points out that "from the standpoint of educational policy . . . the difference between a dialect and a language is substantial; it's the difference between access to Title VII funding or not" (51).

Chap. 6, "Legal implications," spotlights California's Standard English Proficiency program, which resulted from the decision by Judge Charles Joiner in *Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children et al. v. Ann Arbor School District Board* (1979). Judge Joiner recognized AAE as the language of many AA children, and the need for teachers to understand AAE as a way to combat their linguistic prejudice, which interferes with successfully educating AA children.

Chap. 7, "Disparate theoretical foundations," details the problems of divergent definitions of "Ebonics" among Afrocentric proponents and the impact of those definitions on getting beyond Ebonics. The four definitions are:

- (1) Ebonics is an international construct, including the linguistic consequences of the African slave trade.
- (2) Ebonics is the equivalent of black English and is considered to be a dialect of English.
- (3) Ebonics is the antonym of black English and is considered to be a language other than English (Oakland's position).
- (4) Ebonics refers to language among all people of African descent throughout the African Diaspora. (74–75)

Baugh also considers here "the relevance of corresponding educational debates regarding linguistic-cognitive differences versus linguistic-cognitive deficits in connection with poor academic performance among low-income and minority students" (85).

Chap. 8, "Racist reactions and ebonics satire," surveys Ebonics "humor." Baugh broadly segments this into two groups: "(1) mean spirited, overtly racist attacks that were akin to any of the worst racist discourse ever produced in American history and (2) benign linguistic prejudice toward vernacular AAE, based on combinations of false linguistic stereotypes" (87).

Chap. 9, "Beyond Ebonics: Striving toward enhanced linguistic tolerance," examines the rhetoric and ideologies portrayed in the narratives of prominent AA men as they reflect the primary aims of the volume. Baugh analyzes these linguistic narratives within the context of the history of education of AAs before *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and the rise of racialization in schools after it, as well as addressing the current controversy regarding "the potential benefits of educational resegregation for black students" (109) in grades K–12. Certainly,

in connection with racialization and resegregation, the excerpt from reflections by Richard Wright of Howard University while a guest on the Gordon Elliot television show in January 1997 is one of the most powerful in Baugh's book:

I wanted to make a statement that the whole problem of black children going to school and not learning standard English is a relatively recent phenomenon. It is not the case that black people used to go to school came out the way they went in, okay? I went to school during the 1940s and 50s. We didn't go to school as speakers of black English. We went to school understanding that the purpose of school was to clean up whatever you took in. . . . Since desegregation you've had to deal with the weight of color. When we went to school, we just went to school. You didn't go to school as a black child, you just went to school as a child. . . . The weight of race is something black people have to carry today. When I went to school I did not carry the weight of race. . . . During the period of segregation there was not such a thing in your mind as you were going to a black school. . . . You were simply going to school and the assumption was that you were going to school to learn because you had something to do there you couldn't do away from school, and that's learn something (110).

I think the above excerpt best reinforces a recurring message Baugh is trying to send: This nation will not heal and cannot move forward educationally, socially, or politically until it redresses not just the linguistic consequences of slavery in America, but all its consequences. The sign-off I heard once on a National Public Radio program emphasizes this idea that we fail or succeed together: "If it's important to Latinos (ASD, descendants of Chinese railroad builders, survivors and descendants of Japanese internment camps, etc.), it's important to America."

With tenacity, conviction, and eloquence, Baugh achieves his goals. He attacks uninformed and divisive myths about AAE by providing a detailed elucidation of the EC sociohistorically, educationally, and legally. He provides a conceptual model for how best to educate SENN students. He provides compelling arguments for why the US should redress the linguistic consequences of American slavery for ASD. He is steadfast in his plea for linguistic tolerance.

Although *BE* is very short and intends that its audience span "the entire political spectrum" (xiii), its style, tone, and vocabulary make it a book unsuited for a general audience (as indicated by the reactions of my graduate and undergraduate students who read the book during Fall 2000 in a course entitled "Language use in the AA community"). Nevertheless, *BE* deserves attention and reflection. It informs us about the EC in an intellectual and dispassionate way, which is a far cry from what we got in the midst of the controversy. With Baugh's book, sanity has finally arrived.

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