African American Vernacular English and Education

The Dynamics of Pedagogy, Ideology, and Identity

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> The reason that African American English has drawn such fire is not because it is inferior, but because it is spoken by Black people.
>
> —Michele Foster (1997, 11)

> As we ask a person to learn and use a way of speech, we are at the same time asking him or her to function (if sometimes only to a small degree) in that society. One of the problems associated with such candidacy is the strain put on a person who, because he or she is trying to assume a role in a new social structure, feels regret at leaving behind his or her parent structure and also feels uncertainty about being accepted in the new structure.
>
> —Frederick Williams (1970, 388-99)

Our perceptions of our language are integrated with our perceptions of ourselves. Because of that, when we talk about language, we should also talk about identity since it is at stake—or at risk. However, in discussions about African American Vernacular English (AAVE), or the more recent discussions about Ebonics, this issue of identity is not recognized. The issue of identity is especially important in discussions about language usage that is not highly esteemed. AAVE certainly fits that bill. Those who use less prestigious ways of speaking or who choose to identify with cultures that are not part of the mainstream are punished. They are punished by society, by the educational system, by pedagogical methods, and by the ideologies held in U.S. culture. We must keep in mind that language is part of one's culture, one's heritage, and one's being. To punish one's language is to punish the individual. As Mura has written (1992, 17),

> What I am trying to do in both my writing and my life is to replace self-hatred and self-negation with anger and grief over my lost selves, over the ways my

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> cultural heritage has been denied to me, over the ways that people in America would assume either that I am not American, or conversely, that I am just like them; over the ways my education and the values of European culture have denied that other cultures exist. I know more about Europe at the time when my grandfather came to America than I know about Meiji Japan. I know Shakespeare and Donne, Sophocles and Homer better than I know Zeami, Basho or Lady Murasaki. This is not to say I regret what I know, but I do regret what I don't know. And the argument that the culture of America is derived from Europe will not wipe away this regret.

We should not want children or adults to have to feel this way because of the language they speak and the culture that goes along with that language. Too many of us end up like Mura. In this article, I want to discuss ideologies we hold about language and the repercussions of those ideologies. I also will discuss the role of ideology in pedagogy as well as how identity is intertwined with issues of language, education, and ideology.

Language Ideologies

"Language is packed with ideology" (Freire and Macedo 1987, 128).

Mailloux (1989, 60) describes ideologies as "the defining positions within the cultural conversation. Ideologies—such as capitalism and socialism, abolitionism and white supremacy—are sets of beliefs and practices serving particular sociopolitical interests in a specific historical context, and these sets appear in the cultural conversation as strategic arguments and rhetorical figures." In other words, ideologies tend to subsume ideas according to powerful interests (Stuckey 1991, 22). For example, a dialect of a language has no special status in linguistics, but in society and in communities, supposedly clear distinctions are made to differentiate between "inferior" dialects and the "superior" dialect of a language. The selection of the "superior" dialect is based on the "sociopolitical interests" of those in power at a particular point in history—in other words, those with the army and the navy. Since African Americans and other "minorities" have not been in power in this country and since those who are not "educated" are often denied the opportunity to establish or define acceptable customs or traditions for mainstream society, tradition and custom of what is acceptable and worthy to be attained have been defined primarily by white middle-class males. Because ideology incorporates political situatedness, it is understandable how the historical insurgence of Standard English (SE) has become a political issue to be contested.

Mailloux's (1989, 152) description of Stanley Fish's *Interpretive Communities* suggests how arbitrary human-made virtues are and how "correct interpretations

always exist and can be (are already) determined. It's just that because interpretive communities can change, so too can what counts as correct interpretations." In other words, history in the United States has shown that only certain groups or "communities" have held power. Those communities are politically situated in the most favorable way. However, their position is like a historical accident in that another community (e.g., American Indians) could have been in power and, thereby, could have been defining and describing "proper" values and traditions. But that did not happen; the language of the white mainstream community also happens to be the language of wider communication. So, communities can change and, consequently, what counts as correct can change as well. In a society such as ours—one embroiled in the debate about multiculturalism and political correctness—it is important to come to terms with what the ideologies of SE actually mean and for whom they exist to serve. Given their historical context, I see no reason why those who are most negatively affected by the ideologies of SE should not pursue the issue with the zeal and urgency they deserve.

SE is a highly contested issue, especially given the diversity of our society and the diversity of the English language. This problem of standards is not limited to the United States or even to English-speaking countries. It exists wherever there is a prestigious dialect and less prestigious dialects. The former is intentionally singular and the latter plural because inherent in the notion of a standard is that there is only one right way to speak. However, few, if any, can define or describe what that one right way is. For those who speak less prestigious dialects, choice and solidarity are at issue in a multicultural, multilingual, and multidialectal society (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985; Milroy and Milroy 1991; Milroy 1987).

Since the definition of SE is contested, at least the notion of standardization should be more widely known and discussed. Standardization of language is a process in which optional variability in a language is suppressed (Milroy and Milroy 1991, 8). It is also an ideology because the existence of a standard may serve to empower some while denying power to others in a political and biased way. Standardization simultaneously generates an exclusionary mentality among the people being repressed and oppressed. SE is a social construction that is a myth rather than a reality—but it is an effective myth nonetheless (Milroy and Milroy 1991). There is no text or authority that has yet produced a satisfactory basic description of SE (Sledd 1972), yet the rhetoric used to discuss SE implies that there is. The lack of an agreed standard can be seen in the variability of grammars and the disputes between the linguistic shamans (i.e., self-proclaimed authorities of language) over points of SE (Milroy and Milroy 1991).

The debate about SE has gone on for centuries at different intensities (Baugh and Cable 1993; Finegan 1980; Leonard 1929). It has shown no sign of disappearing. The problem is compounded by those who promote SE because they often make no distinction between language system (competence or the underlying rules of a

language that native speakers know) and language use (performance or actual "use") (Milroy and Milroy 1991). It is no wonder that they cannot describe or define a practicable SE. Yet, they do keep the illusion alive. Let me explain by asking what came first—language or grammars? Language, of course, came first. Since humans verbally communicated long before grammars were first written, it is an unavoidable conclusion that the grammatical structures of a language developed at a time when there were no grammarians (Krapp 1927, 78).

The need for a "practicable" SE has been felt for centuries, but what forces motivated such an increase in the "need" for English grammars in the eighteenth century or, for that matter, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? Social unrest that is assumed to threaten those in power or their cultural capital is one possible answer. The ideal of "standard" English can be used as a means for control—it is political. SE tends to belong to those in power and to those who are able to determine what is acceptable. In their view (i.e., those who have power), it is dangerous to have the masses constructing society. It is safer and better suited for those in power to direct how society is to be structured because that ensures that those in power will stay in power. One can control who gets in and who stays out by controlling how one is to talk and by establishing the rules in favor of the elites. It therefore seems reasonable that there would be an increase in grammars during the eighteenth century,[1] when the middle class was firmly establishing itself; during the 1920s, when xenophobia was in full force; during the 1960s, when people were crying out for justice; and now during the fervor over multiculturalism, diversity, and English-only legislation. Fear is powerful—if you let it be.

One ideology of SE presumes to dictate what is good and most important for those in an educated and sophisticated society to know, understand, promote, and defend. Hence, those individuals or cultures that do not speak or incorporate SE into their language varieties are "missing out on a good thing." Simply put, this "Ideology of Opportunity" says that those who speak SE will have (1) better educational opportunities, (2) greater success in school, (3) diminished social barriers because of conformity to the prestigious norm (white, middle class, Eurocentric), and (4) better job opportunities because one fits the cookie-cutter pattern of the presentable employee. The proponents of this view espouse the societal benefits of SE through opportunity.

The object of life in the United States, as it is verbally indicated and institutionally ingrained, is for everybody to get ahead of everybody else (Sledd 1972, 320) and that education is the way to something better. As Alexander argues (1979, 437, 439-40),

> The achievement of academic excellence is not possible without first mastering Standard English. . . . In one basic phase of that excellence, I am a traditionalist. I refuse to recognize that the achievement of excellence is possible without mastery of standard English. . . . The non-traditional student, as well

> as the traditional student, cannot succeed unless he has been trained from the beginning in Standard English. Standard English—not Black English or Brown English or White English—is the only foundation for effective reading, speaking, writing, and learning.

Since linguistic prejudice can keep one from moving up, it is taught that people who want to be decision makers had better talk and write like the people who make decisions (Sledd 1972, 320). Our society does not quite work that way in practice.

We (i.e., those not born into the mainstream and not easily accepted into it) have been told that if we acquire a second dialect, we will have two linguistic systems to call upon in oral or written communication. However, Labov and his associates have shown that "underlying grammatical patterns of standard English are apparently learned through 'meaning' and intensive interaction with those who already use standard English grammar, not simply by exposure in the mass media or in schools" (Labov and Harris 1983, 22). Ash and Myhill (1983, 16) state that "Blacks who move in white circles show a major shift in their grammar in the direction of the white norm." Education alone appears unlikely to do what Alexander promises. Instead, without "intensive interaction" or the chance to "move in white circles," we are thrown back on Stuckey's (1991, 92) assertion that "lives are defined by language if language is a tool of oppression."

Another language ideology firmly entrenched in our society and in the academy is what I call the "Ideology of Progress." This ideology claims that those who speak SE will (1) overcome the adversities and shortcomings of a deprived or deficient culture and (2) develop greater cognitive and logical abilities that will facilitate abstract thought. This Ideology of Progress is of concern because of the cultural and racial implications. It is ethnocentric and racist when the research and reasons for the research are probed. Jensen (1968), for example, was clearly in search of a way to distinguish intellectually between races. Likewise, Orr (1987, 9) believes that "for students whose first language is BEV [Black English Vernacular], then, language can be a barrier to success in mathematics and science." She believes that the grammar of SE has been shaped by what is true mathematically and concludes that linguistic systems like AAVE are inferior because they are not capable of certain abstract and logical functions inherent in SE. As a result, African Americans who speak AAVE will perform poorly in math and science. As John Baugh argues, however, Orr's "conclusions regarding linguistic differences between BEV and Standard English, as well as the cognitive assertions that grow out of her linguistic impressions, tend to be uninformed and somewhat naive" (Baugh 1988, 395). William Labov has shown in his seminal studies of urban Black youths in the 1960s that nonstandard English (which is typically spoken by people of color and those of lower socioeconomic status groups) is just as logical and just as viable a means of communication as SE (Labov 1966, 1972, 1973). In "The Logic of Nonstandard

English" (1973), Labov showed that the problem did not lie with the speakers of nonstandard English but with the failure of educational institutions to recognize and build on the existing verbal abilities, linguistic systems, and cultures of those who spoke nonstandard English. Milroy and Milroy (1991, 153) point to a bias against such varieties of English in the social system. As Stuckey (1991, 122) asserts, "Students of nonstandard languages in the United States do not fail because of a language failure; they fail because they live in a society that lies about language." The language of the child did not then, at the time of Labov's research, and does not now need to be replaced.

In 1971, "a resolution was proposed to the Linguistic Society of America which called to public attention the linguistic evidence against Jensen's point of view, stating that no natural language has been shown to be superior to another for the expression of logical thought" (Labov 1982, 186). The referendum passed and was endorsed again at the annual meeting two years later (Labov 1982). Though middle-class language is seen as superior in every respect—as more abstract and more flexible, detailed, and subtle—this is clearly not the case (Milroy and Milroy 1991, 153). According to Ralph Wiley, "Black people have no culture because most of it is out on loan to white people. With no interest" (quoted in Smitherman 1994, 21-22). Each child's language has quantity, quality, and potential for use in intellectual contexts (Milroy and Milroy 1991, 153) despite its differences with SE or the ingrained expectations that the language of an African American child, or other language minority, is deprived or deficient.

African American Vernacular English, Identity, and Education

AAVE is not a high-prestige language in the view of mainstream society. Many view AAVE as a bastardized form of English that is spoken because the speakers do not know any better (Baugh 1983). However, AAVE survives because there is a population of speakers who use it in their daily lives and know that it is the appropriate style of speaking for their personal needs (Baugh 1983, 6). Like most language varieties that are considered nonstandard, it developed and continues to persist, in part, because the communities who speak it often do not have much contact with other ways of speaking or because such communities define themselves partly by their speech.

We must stop blaming those whose language is different and start looking at the people and the system that criticize them for being different. It is not acceptable to say that corporate America wants people who can speak SE or to say that success only comes to those who speak SE. We need to break out of the mind-set that, because that is the way things are, we have to go along to get along. Tradition does not make something right. If it is broken, it should be fixed. If the social or

economic structure is unjust and perpetuates exclusion based on language, race, gender, or social status, then the structure has to change, not the people who have done nothing wrong, except physically and culturally to exist as different from a supposed norm.

In Bleich's (1988, 328) *The Double Perspective*, there is a text written by Ms. N, a young African American college student, for her white male English teacher, Tom Fox.

> While growing up I use to love to write. I wrote down all my feelings and thoughts. This was the best way I could express myself. I use to take my time and make sure that all my commas were in the right place and all my sentences were complete ones and not run-ons. I always had to go back and double check and sometimes triple check that all my grammar were correct. I never could figure out why I made so many grammar errors and I knew all the rules for them and what to use and when to use them. Since I've been to college my whole outlook on writing has changed. It's gotten to the point where instead of me actually sitting down, thinking the situation or problem out that I have to write about, I just write what I feel the teacher might want to hear. Yes, I even done this in my class with you. . . . Writing has become like an enemy to me lately.

Bleich (1988, 329) states that

> Ms. N already "knew" that black literacy styles are evidence of inabilities: the inability to analyze, the inability to be logical, the inability to concentrate, the inability to be serious, the inability to work hard, the inability to be precise.

Ms. N was no stranger to the conflict between "your language is fine for home and friends" and "you must speak and write in standard English."

> Dialect awareness for teachers has been mandated by courts and sociolinguistic concepts are emphasized in training sessions for teachers. . . . Such in service sessions will not reduce language-based racial discrimination. The recommendations may remain mild and unsatisfying: *know that these structural and discourse differences exist, and have their own logic; respect your students and their family speech patterns; but you still have to—somehow—get them to speak and write in the standard form.* Such admonishments are inadequate to overcome overt, covert or suppressive linguistic racism. (Attinasi 1993, 23)

If you want students to write, you have to let them write in their voice with their language. Beyond that, if you want students to speak and write "standard" English, they have to have meaningful interactions with those who speak and write like that (Ash and Myhill 1983; Labov 1973). Likewise, they have to value the attainment of those long-term language goals (e.g., learning SE) since they can influence the accomplishment of language subgoals (e.g., monitoring speech characteristics). A person's success or lack of success when pursuing his or her subgoals affects the development and continued pursuit of their long-term goals. In addition, goals, skills, plans, and feedback must transact with commitment and confidence in one's ability to reach the goals in order for success to occur (Schutz 1993). All these things are integral parts of the language choices we make as well as the linguistic identity we can envision and choose for ourselves. In any event, we must be aware of the language of identity (Lanehart 1996) and the role it plays in one's psychosocial development. Dialogue is silenced through the power relation that delegitimizes arguments and ideas that are not articulated in acceptable discourse or fashionable jargon (Attinasi 1993).

Ms. N may or may not have had meaningful interactions with those who speak or write SE. At one point in her life, she tried to emulate SE in her writing. After a while in college, she was no longer trying. Besides the mismatch between her understanding of SE and that of the people grading her representation of SE is the mismatch between her goals and her beliefs. She began by using language and literacy as a way to express herself for herself and others. When her attempts to do so were continually criticized because of the grammar she chose to relate those expressions, she stopped trying.

We must keep in mind that no matter how many times teachers tell students their language is beautiful or quite acceptable at home or with friends, it all goes for naught when it is paired with "but in school we must use standard English" as a rebuke. Despite how indirect or polite the rebuke, the message is still the same: "Your language is not good enough for the language required in school." Translation: "You are not good enough." Ms. N was apparently "not good enough" and, consequently, she gave up. She became another casualty of the culture war being waged in this country. She is not alone. As Baldwin concludes (1979, 87),

> The brutal truth is that the bulk of White people in America never had any interest in educating Black people, except as this could serve White purposes. It is not the Black child's language that is despised. It is his experience. A child cannot be taught by anyone who despises him, and a child cannot afford to be fooled. A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiate his experience, and all that gives him sustenance, and enter a limbo in which he will no longer be Black, and in which he knows

that he can never become white. Black people have lost too many Black children that way.

Because we live in an oppressive society, it is no surprise when those who are oppressed internalize the very ideologies of their oppressors. "Through long exposure to negative stereotypes about their group, members of prejudiced-against groups often internalize the stereotypes, and the resulting sense of inadequacy becomes part of their personality" (Steele 1997, 617). The oppressed buy into the arguments of their oppressors because they believe they can overcome their circumstances and not lose their identities by emulating those who oppress them. They believe in the American Dream and the "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps" philosophy without regard to race, class, religion, or gender. Take, for example, Shelby Steele, Clarence Thomas, and Dinesh D'Souza. They marginalize, neglect, and denigrate their culture and ways of being just like the oppressors do because they allow their oppressors to convince them that such things are true. With such a mentality, the oppressed take the blame for something that is not even a matter of fault. The issue lies within the realm of our sociocultural and historical contexts and the transactions we have with the entities included in those contexts. Furthermore, the goals, beliefs, and behavior we choose are so integrated into the fabric of our being that it cannot be expected that attacks against our language are not detrimental to who we are. Such attacks are so devastating just because they are internal.

If we look at the people who do not conform to the SE expectations, we notice that they are often the victims of oppression—people of color, the working class, and the poor. What compounds this is that all three of these groups are usually the same—people of color are often the working-class poor. The ideology of SE is really not *the* ideology: it is hegemonism rooted in fear that is based on racial, ethnic, cultural, economic class, or gender difference. That in itself is based on naïveté, narcissism, and a lack of an ethical sense and critical conception of history. History influences the present and future despite the efforts made to overlook or minimize past actions and discriminations. Instead of buying into the idea of the necessity to change oneself to a mold that "society" is comfortable with and willing to tolerate, why not challenge that society to change and admit its shortcomings?

I am not saying that African Americans should not speak or write in SE. I am also not saying that mainstream white Americans should not speak or write in AAVE. What I am saying is that it is a choice, and the choice for African Americans has been very limited historically because we have been told that our experiences do not matter or that they are not relevant, in part, because they are different and therefore inferior. We are again told that we have to melt; we have to accommodate another's sociocultural and historical contexts because ours are not acceptable. That is not acceptable.

In *Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children et al. v. Ann Arbor School District Board* in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1979, Judge Joiner stated that

> The failure of the defendant Board to provide leadership and help for its teachers in learning about the existence of "Black English" as a home and community language of many black students and to suggest to those same teachers ways and means of using that knowledge . . . in connection with reading standard English is not rational in light of existing knowledge of the subject. (Bailey 1983, 2)

Judge Joiner blamed the school board for punishing students because of the variety of English they spoke. He decided that teachers had to receive in-service training about the existing knowledge and scholarship related to linguistic variants—namely, AAVE—that students used (Bailey 1983). Today, several states (e.g., Georgia and Florida) require teacher education programs to include a language and linguistics requirement in their curriculum. That is a move in the right direction. Some are finally realizing the significance of this issue in ways not subscribed to before.

> To sustain school success one must be identified with school achievement in the sense of its being a part of one's self-definition, a personal identity to which one is self-evaluatively accountable. . . . For such an identification to form . . . one must perceive good prospect in the domain, that is, that one has the interests, skills, resources, and opportunities to prosper there, as well as that one belongs there, in the sense of being accepted and valued in the domain. If this relationship to schooling does not form or gets broken, achievement may suffer. (Steele 1997, 613)

However, we must consider a larger context; we must view those involved as "beings in a situation" (Sartre 1965, 60). In other words, we must consider language in context, people in context, and schooling in context.

A sociohistorical look at the United States shows that African Americans are viewed differently from European Americans. Although this view runs deeper than skin pigmentation, it is still based on something as superficial as the color of one's skin. However, what is not so superficial is what these differences in skin color denote and connote. The social construction of race that results from skin color as an important marker of human status has become something very real. Culture is part of race now. Skin color matters for those whom skin color joins as a community. Such communities have identities, language, history. In other words, such communities have culture. Culture is a force to be reckoned with and respected.

How you identify yourself plays a significant role in your possibilities. If African Americans cannot or will not identify with the way society would have them be to fit in and be accepted, then they will continue not to be accepted and they will continue to be disenfranchised. On the other hand, there is no guarantee they will be accepted even if they do conform.

> [There] is the social-psychological threat that arises when one is in a situation or doing something for which a negative stereotype about one's group applies. This predicament threatens one with being negatively stereotyped, with being judged or treated stereotypically, or with the prospect of conforming to the stereotype. Called *stereotype threat*, it is a situational threat—a threat in the air—that, in general form, can affect the members of any group about whom a negative stereotype exists (e.g., skateboarders, older adults, white men, gang members). Where bad stereotypes about these groups apply, members of these groups can fear being reduced to that stereotype. And for those who identify with the domain to which the stereotype is relevant, this predicament can be self-threatening. (Steele 1997, 614)

Tension lies in the efforts of some of the disenfranchised to achieve the image of the wider (or whiter) society and the efforts of others to do everything they can to be anything but what the wider society wants to coerce them to become. In the midst of this tension are a blurring and a misconception of the history of African Americans by African Americans. We have come to associate being educated and literate with being white. We have come to view speaking SE as speaking correctly, speaking white. At the same time, we have come to view being uneducated and illiterate as being cool and more "Black" or less white. This continues to be the image while all along this is not our past. History does not bear out those images as facts. We may have been denied education for a long time, but our desire has been there (Abdullah et al. 1992; Bassard 1992).

I do not include a denial of language because we have always had language—it was just different from that of whites. Our language continues to be different. Much of that difference can be attributed to culture. That one word, *culture*, however, imparts and envelops a whole people. Within that people and within those persons that make that whole of culture is, among other things, language, literacy, goals, and identity. If you try to separate, ridicule, tamper with, or deny that one thing, you are trying to deny all those others. To do that is to destroy the essence of who we are and to limit the possibilities of who we may hope to become. According to Steele (1997), this problem is quite real and needs to be addressed. Once hope is gone, one's prospects are greatly diminished.

> *Disidentification* [a reconceptualization of the self and of one's values so as to remove the domain as a self-identity, as a basis of self-evaluation] offers the retreat of not caring about the domain in relation to the self. But as it protects in this way, it can undermine sustained motivation in the domain, an adaptation that can be costly when the domain is as important as schooling. (Steele 1997, 614)

We cannot and should not continue to lose generations of communities over language choice. The cost is too great.

Conclusion

In the midst of the Ebonics controversy, the language of African Americans was ridiculed. There were many spin-offs such as "greasebonics," or "hillbillionics," to cover any minute distinction in language use. Lost in all the ridicule was the issue at hand and the significance of the issue: there is such a thing as AAVE, and there exists a community of speakers who identify with it and use it in their everyday lives. Linguists recognize it as a language or language variety and do not proclaim its superiority or inferiority compared to any other language or language variety. The issue is not about a separate language; it is about a community of speakers with a recognizable culture. As with most cultures, language is a defining characteristic. So, the next time a "new" hot language topic such as Ebonics emerges, we can remember that

> People create their linguistic systems (and we all have more than one) so as to resemble those of the groups with which from time to time they wish to identify. Both the groups, and their linguistic attributes, exist solely in the mind of each individual. When we talk we project the universe as we see it on to others as on to a cinema screen in our own images, expressed in the language we consider appropriate at that moment, and we invite others by these acts to share our universe. (Le Page 1986, 23)

Note

1. Seventeen percent of the grammars were published before 1750 and 83 percent in 1750 or later (Sundby, Bjørge, and Haugland 1991, 14). Whereas fewer than fifty writings on grammar, rhetoric, criticism, and linguistic theory have been listed for the first half of the eighteenth century, and still fewer for all the period before 1600, the publications in the period 1750-1800 exceed 200 titles (Leonard 1929, 12).

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