What is Ebonics?
(African American Vernacular English)

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Other linguists are drawn to the similarities between Ebonics and Caribbean Creole English varieties, for instance, the fact that both frequently drop *is* and *are* , and that both permit dropping word initial *d*, *b*, and *g* in tense-aspect markers (Caribbean examples include habitual/progressive (*d*)*a*, past tense (*b*)*en*, and future (*g*)*on*). These traits suggest that some varieties of American Ebonics might have undergone the kinds of simplification and mixture associated with Creole formation in the Caribbean and elsewhere. They might also suggest that American Ebonics was shaped by the high proportions of Creole-speaking slaves that were imported from the Caribbean in the earliest settlement periods of the thirteen original colonies.

Arguments about and evidence on the origins issue continue to be brought forth. A relatively new 'historical' issue has emerged in recent years: Is Ebonics converging with or diverging from other vernacular varieties of American English? One thing is for sure: This dynamic, distinctive variety—thoroughly intertwined with African American history and linked in many ways with African American literature, education, and social life—is one of the most extensively studied and discussed varieties of American English, and it will probably continue to be so for many years to come.

Further reading

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Smitherman, Geneva. 2000. **Black talk: Words and phrases from the hood to the amen corner**. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

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At its most literal level, *Ebonics* simply means 'black speech' (a blend of the words *ebony* 'black' and *phonics* 'sounds'). The term was created in 1973 by a group of black scholars who disliked the negative connotations of terms like 'Nonstandard Negro English' that had been coined in the 1960s when the first modern large-scale linguistic studies of African American speech-communities began. However, the term Ebonics never caught on among linguists, much less among the general public. That all changed with the 'Ebonics' controversy of December 1996 when the Oakland (CA) School Board recognized it as the 'primary' language of its majority African American students and resolved to take it into account in teaching them standard or academic English.

Most linguists refer to the distinctive speech of African Americans as 'Black English' or African American English (AAE) or, if they want to emphasize that this doesn't include the standard English usage of African Americans, as 'African American Vernacular English' (AAVE). In theory, scholars who prefer the term Ebonics (or alternatives like African American language) wish to highlight the African roots of African American speech and its connections with languages spoken elsewhere in the Black Diaspora, e.g. Jamaica or Nigeria. But in practice, AAVE and Ebonics essentially refer to the same sets of speech forms. Here, we will use 'Ebonics' without ideological or theoretical qualification, preferring it to AAVE and other alternatives simply because it is the most widely-known public term right now.

What does Ebonics sound like?

To many people, the first examples that come to mind are slang words like *phat* 'excellent' and *bling-bling* 'glittery, expensive jewelry', words that are popular among teenagers and young adults, especially rap and hip hop fans. But words like *kitchen* 'the especially kinky hair at the nape of one's neck' and *ashy* 'the whitish appearance of black skin when dry, as in winter' are even more interesting. Unlike many slang terms, these 'black' words have been around for ages, they are not restricted to particular regions or age groups, and they are virtually unknown (in their 'black' meanings) outside the African American community.

Ebonics pronunciation includes features like the omission of the final consonant in words like 'past' (*pas'*) and 'hand' (*han'*), the pronunciation of the *th* in 'bath' as *t* (*bat*) or *f* (*baf*), and the pronunciation of the vowel in words like 'my' and 'ride' as a long *ah* (*mah, rahd*). Some of these occur in vernacular white English, too, especially in the South, but in general they occur more frequently in Ebonics. Some Ebonics pronunciations are more unique, for instance, dropping *b*, *d*, or *g* at the beginning of auxiliary verbs like 'don't' and 'gonna', yielding *Ah 'on know* for "I don't know" and *ama do it* for "I'm going to do it."

What does Ebonics look like?

These distinctive Ebonics pronunciations are all systematic, the result of regular rules and restrictions; they are not random 'errors'—and this is equally true of Ebonics grammar. For instance, Ebonics speakers regularly produce sentences without present tense *is* and *are*, as in *"John trippin"* or *"They allright"*. But they don't omit present tense *am*. Instead of the ungrammatical **"Ah walkin"*, Ebonics speakers would say **"Ahm walkin."* Likewise, they do not omit *is* and *are* if they come at the end of a sentence—*"That's what he/they"* is ungrammatical. Many members of the public seem to have heard, too, that Ebonics speakers use an 'invariant' *be* in their speech (as in *"They be goin to school every day"*); however, this *be* is not simply equivalent to *is* or *are*. Invariant *be* refers to actions that occur regularly or habitually rather than on just one occasion.

What do people think of Ebonics?

That depends on whom you ask. Black writers from Paul Laurence Dunbar to Zora Neale Hurston to August Wilson have made extensive use of it in their work, and some, like James Baldwin (*"this passion, this skill, ... this incredible music."*), Toni Morrison, and June Jordan have praised it explicitly. Black preachers and comedians and singers, especially rappers, also use it for dramatic or realistic effect. But many other people, black and white, regard it as a sign of limited education or sophistication, as a legacy of slavery or an impediment to socioeconomic mobility.

Some deny its existence (like the black Chicagoan whose words *"Ain't nobody here talkin' no Ebonics"* belied his claim). Others deprecate it (like Maya Angelou, who found the Oakland School Board's 1996 Ebonics resolutions "very threatening" although she uses Ebonics herself in her poems, e.g. "The Pusher").

It should be said, incidentally, that at least some of the overwhelmingly negative reaction to the Oakland resolutions arose because the resolutions were misinterpreted as proposals to teach Ebonics itself, or to teach in Ebonics, rather than as proposals to respect and take it into account while teaching standard English. The method of studying language known as 'contrastive analysis' involves drawing students' attention to similarities and differences between Ebonics and Standard English. Since the 1960s, it has been used successfully to boost Ebonics speakers' reading and writing performance in Standard English, most recently in public schools in DeKalb County, GA, and in Los Angeles, CA (as part of the LA Unified School District's Academic English Mastery Program).

Where did Ebonics come from?

On this point, linguists are quite divided. Some emphasize its English origins, pointing to the fact that most of the vocabulary of Ebonics is from English and that much of its pronunciation (e.g. pronouncing final *th* as *f*) and grammar (e.g. double negatives, *"I don't want none"*) could have come from the nonstandard dialects of English indentured servants and other workers with whom African slaves interacted.

Others emphasize Ebonics' African origins, noting that West African languages often lack *th* sounds and final consonant clusters (e.g. past), and that replacing or simplifying these occurs both in US Ebonics and in West African English varieties spoken in Nigeria and Ghana. Moreover, they argue that the distinction made between completed actions (*"He done walked"*) and habitual actions (*"We be walkin"*) in the Ebonics tense-aspect system reflects their prevalence in West African language systems and that this applies to other aspects of Ebonics sentence structure.