

The Ebonics controversy in my backyard: A sociolinguist's experiences and reflections

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1. INTRODUCTION

The phrase 'Not in my backyard' – abbreviated to NIMBY – is commonly used to refer to the stiff opposition which local citizens mount to prevent individuals or institutions that they consider undesirable from moving into their communities. Linguists sometimes seem to have a NIMBY attitude towards Applied Linguistics issues and the Great Language Debates of our Times, motivated perhaps by the fear that they will distract us from the theoretical and descriptive research we consider our bread and butter (if not our fame and fortune), that they will devour our time and dilute our expertise, or that they will lead us into uncharted waters for which our training and experience provide little preparation.

In December 1996 the Ebonics controversy landed plumb in my backyard, however, before I could say or even think 'NIMBY!' The controversy which erupted from the Oakland School Board's December 18 resolution to recognize Ebonics as the 'primary language of African American children' and take it into account in their Language Arts lessons fell in my backyard for two reasons: (1) geography, since Oakland was one hour away from Stanford; and (2) specialization, since I was one of a relatively small group of linguists who had been studying African American Vernacular English (or AAVE, as sociolinguists preferred to call it) for some time, and one of only a handful of such people near Oakland, California, where the media were beginning to converge. Mary Hoover, the longtime AAVE and Education specialist from Howard University (see Hoover 1996), was working in the Oakland School District at the time, and she arranged for Carolyn Gettridge, the Superintendent of the Oakland School Board, to contact me for linguistic references and information which she could use in dealing with a skeptical if not hostile press.

Of course, to echo Laforest's point below with respect to the debates about Quebec French, linguists were not at first considered to have any special expertise to contribute to this issue, and the people initially quoted in the media were either policy makers (like Delaine Eastin, California Superintendent of Education, and Richard Riley, US Secretary of Education) or African American celebrities (like Maya Angelou, poet and author, and the Rev. Jesse Jackson, political activist). Within a few days, however, the media began turning to linguists to provide examples and descriptions of Ebonics and

opinions about the Oakland decision, and, like other specialists in AAVE, my phone began ringing off the hook.

For the next four months (that is, until April 1997, when the Oakland School Board dropped the word 'Ebonics' from its implementation proposals and the media mistakenly assumed it had reversed its plans), I fielded scores and scores of calls from newspapers and magazines, did several TV interviews, and participated in radio talk show discussions from all over the US and from overseas stations in Canada and Australia. After that, I continued to get occasional overtures from the media, but my main involvement since then has been responding to requests from conference organizers, universities, church and community groups to talk about the Ebonics controversy or participate in panel discussions on the topic, replying to email and other requests for information from high school and college students doing papers on Ebonics, and trying to expand my own reading, research and writing on the subject. All in all, this Ebonics controversy in my backyard has been the most intense, all-encompassing, exhilarating, exhausting, thought-provoking and emotion-stirring experience I have ever had as a sociolinguist, and I would not have NIMBYed it for the world. In what follows, I will delineate my involvement in it in a little more detail and reflect on what I learned, and continue to learn, from the experience.

2. THE LSA RESOLUTION(S)

Perhaps the first thing I learned from this experience is that there is a greater consensus among linguists (especially vis-à-vis non-linguists) on this and other language policy issues than I would have imagined, and less of a 'NIMBY' attitude about taking a stance on them than I might have expected. Take, for instance, the resolution of the Linguistic Society of America [LSA] on the Ebonics issue, approved at their January 1997 business meeting. The idea of a resolution on this issue was first suggested to me on December 30, 1996 by a colleague, Geoffrey Nunberg, who'd been asked by two other LSA members, Dick Oehrle and Susan Steele, whether the LSA was planning to frame any public response to the Ebonics issue at its upcoming annual meeting. Since I was a member of the LSA executive committee at the time, Geoff and some other LSA movers and shakers thought I would be in a good position to sponsor a resolution. Building on some concrete suggestions from Nunberg, I drafted a resolution on my flight to Chicago January 1, 1997; this was approved with minor modifications by the LSA executive committee the next day.

This resolution had to be approved by the membership at the LSA's business meeting on January 3, however, and I was nervous about it for two reasons:

1. Linguists are known for their divisions and divisiveness; as someone once quipped, people get ahead in other disciplines by standing on each other's shoulders, but linguists get ahead by standing on each other's necks!

2. The media, including cameramen from the major TV networks, were going to be there, partly because the Stanford public relations department, knowing that this resolution was going to be discussed, had contacted them in advance. (In passing, I cannot overemphasize how important it is to solicit the expertise and advice of your university's press or public relations department when dealing with the media; they were invaluable to me in numerous ways in responding to the Ebonics issue.)

As it turns out, I need not have worried. To my amazement, syntacticians, semanticists, sociolinguists and linguists of other stripes and persuasions rose to speak in support of the proposals (if anything they wanted to make them even more radical), and a four-point resolution was unanimously approved. Among other things, it affirmed the 'systematic and rule governed and systematic nature of Ebonics', and pronounced the Oakland school board's decision to take it into account in teaching Standard English 'linguistically and pedagogically sound'. This resolution, in turn, was used by Oakland to defend itself against its many critics, and was widely reported on and cited in the media. (The full text of the resolution can be found at <http://www.stanford.edu/~rickford/ebonics/> and in the popular Fall 1997 Ebonics issue of *Rethinking Schools*, an education periodical, which has now been reprinted as Perry and Delpit 1998.)

Moreover, the LSA has overwhelmingly approved other strong proposals on public policy issues involving language over the past twelve years. Its resolutions over this period include opposition to English Only legislation (1986/87), endorsement of language rights and the need to respect both the speakers of immigrant and endangered languages (1996), and opposition to the Unz/Tucher ballot initiative in California (1998), which is ostensibly about 'English Language Education for Immigrant Children' but which is likely to limit and perhaps effectively eliminate bilingual education in California. (The text of these resolutions can be found on the web at <http://www.lsadc.org/state.html>.)

Nor did the involvement of linguists end with the drafting of resolutions. Linguists all over the country responded to reporters' questions, penned letters to the editor, wrote newspaper and magazine articles, gave talks, and took part in TV and radio discussions on the Ebonics controversy. I'll discuss below the lessons I learned from this involvement, and I'll also indicate how much more research we need to do to maximize the quality of the expertise we have to offer schools and decision-makers on the Ebonics issue. But first I need to say a little about the involvement of linguists in the US Senate Hearing on Ebonics.

3. THE US SENATE HEARING ON EBONICS

A number of linguists and educators (William Labov, Orlando Taylor, Robert Williams and Michael Casserly) joined educators from Oakland (including Superintendent Carolyn Gettridge) in providing pro-Ebonics testimony at the US Senate Hearing on Ebonics on January 23, 1997. Several other linguists

who could not be present (including myself) submitted letters to be read into the Senate record. This Hearing was a crucial event, since it was chaired by Senator Arlen Specter, Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services and Education, which oversees the Title I education funds that support the Standard English Proficiency [SEP] program, in use in over 300 California Schools. Oakland's Ebonics resolutions were essentially a proposal to expand the SEP program – which involves contrastive analysis of Ebonics and Standard English – within its school district. Many of us feared that in the anti-Ebonics firestorm which was sparked by Oakland's proposals, Specter's subcommittee would yank Title I funding from the SEP.

However, Senator Arlen Specter seemed to be impressed with the testimony. (A videotape of the hearing is available from C-SPAN, a public interest television service, which provided TV coverage of it in its entirety.) Not only did he not withdraw funding for SEP, but he later supported a line item in the 1997 appropriations budget providing \$1million for research on the relationship between the home language of African American students and their success in learning to read and write in Standard English. The research will be jointly conducted in Oakland (under the direction of Etta Hollins), and in Philadelphia (under the direction of William Labov). An attempt to curtail SEP funding at the State level, through California Senate Bill 205 introduced by California State Senator Raymond Haynes, was also defeated, in April 1997 (see Richardson 1998 for discussion of Ebonics legislation nation-wide).

4. REACHING AND REACTING TO THE MEDIA AND THE PUBLIC

In the months and years that have passed since the Ebonics controversy broke, I have learned many lessons about dealing with the media and the public, and since they may be of interest to linguists who get involved in other language policy discussions, it might be useful to pass them on.

One of the lessons that struck me early on is the extent to which the media really do 'manufacture consent' (Herman and Chomsky 1988), serving to promote mainstream 'facts' and interpretations, and to prevent dissenting information and viewpoints from reaching the public. In the case at hand, the mainstream view was that Ebonics itself was street slang, and that Oakland teachers were going to teach in it, or allow students to talk or write in it instead of in English. It was in response to *this* misrepresentation of Ebonics and the Oakland resolutions that editorials, Op-Ed pieces (texts submitted to newspapers by the public), letters to the editor, cartoons, and agitated calls to radio talk shows were directed, and attempts to get alternative viewpoints aired were often very difficult, especially in the most prestigious media.

For instance, although the *New York Times* published several editorials and Op-Ed pieces critical either of Ebonics or the Oakland resolutions, linguists' attempts to get them to present a different viewpoint were all unsuccessful. I know of at least four Op-Ed submissions which they summarily rejected (by

Salikoko Mufwene, by Geoffrey Pullum, by Gene Searchinger, and by myself), and there were undoubtedly others. Similarly, other linguists (like Geneva Smitherman) had experiences similar to mine, in which leading television stations would do one and two hour interviews with them on the Ebonics issue, but never use any of it in their broadcasts. Linguists should not avoid these leading media sources, but be aware that breaking into them can be difficult if the views you represent do not correspond to the mainstream view. In matters of language, they often do not.

Surprisingly for me, the branch of the media that I found most receptive and most conducive to getting my point of view across was *radio*. Radio talk shows (like 'Talk of the Nation' on National Public Radio, but also shows on the commercial radio stations) gave me the opportunity to state my own views directly and without editorial curtailment. Even when talk show hosts and callers clearly had different opinions from mine, I had the opportunity to respond to them live, and I always came away from these shows feeling that my views had been better represented than by newspaper reporters who used only a fraction of what you told them. This is a medium and method we should increasingly exploit.

When the Ebonics controversy broke, many linguists expressed frustration at the extent to which the public still appeared to have misconceptions about this and other vernaculars which we thought we had long ago dissipated – such as that Ebonics is simply the product of laziness or cussedness, for instance, or that it had no history or structure or regularity, or that it was a loose collection of slang words in which you could do or say pretty much what you please (see, for instance, William Raspberry's December 26, 1996 *Washington Post* column). However, in harboring this frustration, we seem to have forgotten what advertisers of Colgate toothpaste and other products never forget: that the message has to be repeated over and over, anew for each generation and each different audience type, and preferably in simple, direct and arresting language which the public can understand and appreciate.

It was with this in mind that I accepted an invitation from *Discover*, the popular science magazine, to produce an expository piece on Ebonics. Although I labored long and hard at it, my first submission was rejected by the editor, who said that it was too technical. I asked for a chance to revise and resubmit it, however, and studied previous *Discover* articles to see how writers managed to cover complex subjects in simple and lively ways. Eventually, my revised article was accepted, appearing in the December 1997 issue (Rickford 1997a). Geoffrey Pullum also wrote a good general interest piece on Ebonics in the April 1997 issue of *Nature* magazine (Pullum 1997). Our university training provides *no* preparation for writing for the popular or semi-popular press (quite the opposite, we are sometimes rewarded for technical or obfuscatory writing rather than clarity), but it should if we are to contribute to the Great Language Debates of our Times.

One thing that I naively did not expect was the subtle and not-so-subtle

nastiness that issues of language can elicit from the public. I encountered this in the occasionally severe distortions of information which I had shared with reporters in good faith, and in the 'hate mail' which my quoted remarks in the press elicited. One example of distortive reporting was Jacob Heilbrum's *Ebonics* article in the January 20, 1997 issue of *The New Republic*, to which I responded with a letter in the March 3, 1997 issue. One example of the hate mail was a postcard I received addressed to 'John Rickford, Linguistics Professor (God Help Us All)' which included, alongside a newspaper report of my remarks at the 1997 LSA meeting, the comment: 'It's just amazing how much crap you so-called "scholars" can pour and get away with. Can you wonder, John Boy, why the general public does not trust either educators, judges or politicians? As a brother might say, "Be Bonic be a bunch a booshit man, but it get de muny offa de White man. He be a sucka."' Geoff Pullum also got hate mail for his *Nature* piece, as did Rosina Lippi-Green for her *New York Times* letter to the editor in December 1996. It comes with the territory.

More insidious than hate mail were the vicious *Ebonics* jokes and parodies which proliferated on web sites across the country and around the world (see Rickford and Rickford 1997, Ronkin and Karn 1998, and Scott 1998 for examples and discussion). The worst example of this was the 'Ebonics Olympics Games' web-page, which included such events as '100-yard dash chased by police dog', and 'Bitch slapping (number of bruises inflicted on wife or girlfriend)'. In cases like these, language was no longer at issue; 'Ebonics' had become a proxy for African Americans, and the most racist stereotypes were being promulgated. This cruel humor might remind us, however, that behind people's expressed attitudes to vernacular varieties, there are often deep-seated social and political fears and prejudices about their speakers. If we don't take the 'socio' part of sociolinguistics seriously, we won't be prepared to understand or respond to such attitudes effectively.

5. EBONICS AND EDUCATION: THE NEED TO KNOW MORE

Explaining to legislators, the media and the public the systematicity of *Ebonics* and all language varieties is a good and worthy thing, but it is not enough. The Oakland School Board did not turn to *Ebonics* because of linguistic interests, but because of the acute educational problems affecting African American students in their district, and the sense that taking the children's vernacular into account might help to alleviate such problems. In Rickford (1997b) I had documented the fact that working class African American students in East Palo Alto and Philadelphia do poorly in reading and writing at the elementary level and fall increasingly behind their White counterparts in middle and high school. Michael Casserly's testimony at the US Senate Hearing on *Ebonics*, summarizing data from fifty urban school districts across the US, indicated that this was a nationwide pattern. For instance, in 1992-93, 60.7 percent of White elementary students in his 50-school sample scored above the norm in reading; by high

school, that percentage had increased to 65.4 percent; by contrast, only 31.3 percent of African American elementary students scored above the norm that year in reading; and by high school, that percentage had slipped to 26.6 percent. (Casserly is Executive Director of the Council of Great City Schools, which includes fifty of the U.S.' largest urban public school districts; the data were compiled by the Council in 1993 and 1994.) Data like these made me angry, both because of their obviously dire consequences for the future of the students and the society into which they would 'graduate,' and because the media refused to focus on this massive evidence of how schools fail to teach African American students with existing methods.

While admitting that other factors (differences in facilities and teachers, for instance) undoubtedly contribute to the widening gap between African American and White reading scores, my strategy in responding to the educational problem, as a sociolinguist, was to point to the evidence of several studies that, with other factors held constant, a positive response to the vernacular by schools actually *improved* students' performance in reading and writing. This evidence was of three kinds:

1. Piestrup's (1973) study in Oakland itself which showed that teachers who constantly interrupted Ebonics-speaking children to correct them produced the lowest-scoring and most apathetic readers, while teachers who built artfully on the children's language produced the highest-scoring and most enthusiastic readers;
2. evidence from the Bidialectal program in 5th and 6th grades in DeKalb county, Georgia and at Aurora University outside Chicago that Contrastive Analysis similar to that employed in the SEP and in Oakland yields greater progress in reading and writing for Ebonics speakers than conventional methods;
3. evidence that teaching children to read first in their vernacular, and then transitioning to the standard variety, has led to better reading results, both among African American students (Simpkins and Simpkins 1981), and in Europe.

These data are quite striking (see Rickford in press for the details), but to maximize our potential to contribute to this Great Debate of our Time, we need to know more, through research, in relation to all three kinds of evidence.

With respect to the teaching of reading, sociolinguists need to reach a deeper understanding of different approaches used by educators (Whole Language versus Phonics and Phonemic Awareness, for instance), and the extent to which a nuanced knowledge of the system of Ebonics speakers might enhance their use. With respect to Contrastive Analysis [CA], we need more empirical validation of its effectiveness vis-à-vis other methods, and we need 'Error Analysis' studies to determine if the predictions of the interference model which underlie CA correspond accurately to what happens when Ebonics speakers attempt to use Standard English. Interference predictions are often

not borne out for people learning a second language (Ellis 1994: 302), and while CA may be more useful with second dialect speakers precisely because the differences between native and target dialect are subtler and need highlighting, there is some evidence (from an unpublished study by Labov) that the predictions of the interference model are not always accurate with Ebonics speakers either. Finally, with respect to the issue of dialect readers, McWhorter (1997: 3) has pointed to nine studies from the early 1970s in which 'dialect readers were shown to have no effect whatsoever on African American students' reading scores'. Having looked at most of those studies myself, I believe that the difference between their negative results and the positive results of Simpkins and Simpkins (1981) may lie in the element of *time*. The latter study was conducted over a four month period, in which the effects of the dialect readers on increased motivation and intelligibility could be more clearly discerned; the former studies were all one-shot studies, in which researchers compared the effects of reading Ebonics and Standard English words or texts at one point in time. Nevertheless, the differences in methodology and results need further consideration, and we need more replication and new research to be surer of our recommendations.

6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In sum, sociolinguists *should* be involved in the Great Language Debates of our Times. In the case of Ebonics, many linguists did get involved, in myriad ways, from passing resolutions, to helping to influence legislators, to speaking to the press and the public about the systematicity of all language varieties and the structure of Ebonics. In the process, we learned some lessons about the plusses and minuses of this kind of involvement which we can pass on to our colleagues and students for the future. But the fundamental educational problems of African American speakers with which the linguistic issues interface are staggering, and although we have some evidence that linguistically sensitive approaches are helpful, there are gaps in and questions about these approaches which require new research. Ultimately, the quality of our contributions will depend on the depth of our knowledge and understanding.

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