

Ebonics: A Still Relevant Repertoire

by Faye Knox

"Sho do be funny how we don't be knowing 'bout things that belongs jus' to us. Seem like every time I ax folks 'roun' here 'bout this or that they be lookin' at me like they don't know what I be talkin' 'bout!"

A great deal of time and energy during the last fifteen years has been devoted to applying the general notion of "Black is beautiful" to the analysis of specific elements of African American culture. Certainly one of the most prominent movements in this regard has been the reevaluation of African American language — its roots, structures, and validity. The significance of this movement to our immediate educational history makes it a mandatory component of any serious attempt to observe Black Liberation Month. And as far as African American students celebrating BLM '82 at Stanford are concerned, "...it don't make no kind of sense for us to be tryin' to find out the earlies' history and the mos' tinies' details of all these 'ologies' when we can't tell nobody nothin' 'bout what jus' happened with stuff that mos' important to us!"

Stanford University's African American students are virtually unfamiliar with the body of knowledge pertaining to Ebonics, the latest renaming of what was formerly called Black

English (*Journal of Black Studies*, 1979). They are so unaware that Ebonics might even be considered a likely holding of the Stanford archives. This blaring example of absense of knowledge transfer is quite ironic since less than six years ago major research was being conducted on this subject at Stanford by African American graduate students (Program on Linguistic Pluralism, directed by Dr. Robert Politzer, Center for Educational Research at Stanford). To paraphrase Minister Louis Farrakhan this is but another example of our being robbed of our immediate history right in front of our faces (speech presented at Kresge Auditorium, 1979).

Black Liberation Month celebrations can and should highlight and, thus, insure the transfer of knowledge of historically significant events. Hence, a discussion of "all dat talk" about why and how we African Americans say the things we do is highly appropriate. Furthermore, a discussion of Ebonics is a fitting component of BLM '82 because of the selected theme of "Excellence in Education."

Ebonics encompasses features which are relevant to BLM '82 and its thematic context of "Excellence in Education." For example, Ebonics is the content focus of a linguistic discipline in

which African American scholars have been in the vanguard. Such noted linguists as Beryl Bailey, Anita DeFrantz, J.L. Dillard, Kenneth Johnson, Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, James Sledd, Ernie Smith, Geneva Smitherman, Orlando Taylor and Lorenzo Turner were instrumental in redefining African American language. They refuted previously used descriptors noted to be representative of the deficit view (e.g. pathological, inferior, nonverbal, destitute, bad, corrupt, sloppy, etc.). Simultaneously, they established new, positive descriptors which came to be associated with the difference view (e.g., well-ordered, fully-informed, highly structured, systematic, legitimate, etc.).

African American linguists also posited a totalistic definition of Ebonics. They emphasized historical considerations of African language continuities, pidginization and creolization processes and patterns of the social, cultural, economic and political development of African Americans in the United States. Their assertions countered the literary trend of depicting Ebonics as a singular, usually nonstandard, variety of English. Rather, they maintained that there were many variants,

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ranging from standard to nonstandard, which occurred as a function of demographic and linguistic variables (e.g. age, sex, SES, register, education and previous exposure to standard English).

Dr. Orlando Taylor, professor of Communications at Howard University and one of the leading pioneers and proponents of the contemporary view of African American language, provided a further expansion on the definition of Ebonics by positing a paradigmatic analysis of its paralinguistic features. His analysis provided a very enlightening description of culture-specific features manifested in the communicative styles of Ebonics speakers, e.g., kinesics (body language), oculistics (eye behavior), in-group-out-group rules (who can what to whom), haptics (rules of touch), narrative rules (rules governing acceptable lengths of sentences), proxemics (how closely people can stand to each other when conversing), objectics (objects and accessories worn by people), speech styles (e.g. preaching styles) and topic of conversation rules (rules governing who can speak when in a conversation) (Dr. Taylor was a guest lecturer at Stanford during BLM '82).

Another Ebonics feature

which is relevant to the theme of "Excellence in Education" is its having been cited as a crucial factor in the academic achievement of African American youth. A recurring thesis in the literature is that the more nonstandard the ideolect (i.e. individual speech pattern) of an Ebonics-speaking student, the more difficulty s/he will experience in acquiring basic skill competencies, (i. e., reading, writing, language arts, etc. Because of this there is a plethora of research has resulted whose findings indicate that there is a mismatch between the language of school instruction, i.e., standard English, and the variety of English spoken by a majority of low income African Americans. The mismatch is noted to interfere with the acquisition of reading and other standard English-related skills and diminish the effectiveness of instructional programs. Additionally, the research has effectively pointed out many other influential factors in the academic achievement of Ebonics speaking students which, while related to their language differences, do not emanate from characteristics inherent in the students (e.g. negative teacher attitudes, biased testing, inappropriate

methodologies, etc.). Hence educators have become less and less able to get away with their historical tendency to "blame the victim" for academic failure.

What is perhaps most important about Ebonics in relation to BLM '82 is the fact that it represents more than the name (or the analysis or the implications) of an African American phenomenon. It embodies the act of self determination of the same spirit as that which lead us to decide what we were going to call ourselves and institutionalize our own holidays, such as Kwanzaa. As such, it is quite germane to the theme of "Excellence in Education." Indeed, to be considered excellent, our education must encourage, reinforce and enhance our ability to determine what will be in our own best interests.

Thus, Ebonics with its embodiment of self-determination, affirmed validity and noted integral relation to the academic future of our youth, certainly merits our attention. Its undeniable relevance to those of us who are truly seeking an "excellent" education compels us to advocate its recognition and inclusion in any meaningful observation of Black Liberation Month.