Black language is 'right on' with professor

By LORETTA GREEN

"What is distinctive about non-standard dialects is that they are held in low esteem by the speakers of standard dialects and usually by their speakers as well. Non-standard dialects are not any less a language or any less capable of performing all of the tasks of a language than a standard dialect.'

-Orlando Taylor

Dr. Orlando Taylor, a tall, friendly man, can greet a visitor with a "hey" that is a casual standard English salutation or a "hee-e-y" that is definitely black and

He can follow with a resonant, "How are you doing?," that is formal and well articulated: "How're you doin'?" that is informal; or a "How you doin-n-n'?," that is very black and heavy with the inflections and kinesics of the

Taylor, a visiting Ph.D. in Stanford University's linguistic pluralism department, has just completed teaching a course in black language. He is a professor in the department of speech, school of communications, at Howard University, Washington, D.C., the nation's largest predominantly black

Over the years the question of the validity of a true black language or black English, as it is sometimes called, has been debat-

"To say that black language does not exist or is sub-standard English is in itself racist," Taylor said, pointing out that every ethnic group has language variations.

"It's saying all people - German, Italian - can have different kinds of speech except black people. No group expects language to be static.'

"Some think black language is slang - an urban argot used by people like J.J. on TV. Some think it's southern. Some think it's uneducated English, non-standard English, talking proper or preacher talk," he said.

"People who make these arguments usually are outside the black community, or scholars focusing on very narrow subject matter, or the lay public with few exposures to black people."



Black language is a conglomerate - the myriad way black people communicate verbally and nonverbally in the United States, according to Taylor. It varies with social class, age, region, sex, education and social setting. There is no set or standard way to speak it and not even blacks should set rigid guidelines for it.

'We don't want to end up playing the game of who's blacker," he warned.

Not all blacks speak the same variety of black language. Indeed, some are so assimilated as to speak practically none.

Taylor pointed out that as many as 400 languages were spoken by blacks brought from Africa. As a result, many of the expressions and pronunciations used by blacks today are extensions of these native tongues. "Classically blacks have been described as having lazy lips and tongues but it is the influence of the West African languages," he explained.

For example, Yerba, Hausa, Swahili, Ewe, Twi, Wolof and Fulani generally end in vowels. Therefore the tendency is for blacks to employ consonant cluster reduction as in "tes" (test) and "han" (hand).

Black language plural formations for "desk, test, and ghost" may become "desses, tesses and ghosses.'

The "r" and "l" frequently are absent as in "sistuh" (sister); "hep" (help), "foe" (four), "show" (sure), and "Ca'ol" (Carol). Consistent dropping of "r" in "their" results in, "It is they book."

Dropping the "1" affects contracted forms. For example, "He be here in a few minutes," or "I be working tomorrow." "Have" often is omitted as in, "I been here for hours," or "He gone home."

In place of the standard English "there," some blacks may say, "It's a store on the corner," or "Is it a show in town?'

Indirect questions are used by some as in, "I want to know where did he go?" or "He wanted to know could he go?" Posses-sives often drop the "s" as in, "John cousin died."

"Th" may be omitted in the cases of "dey" (they), "bruvah" (brother) and "souf" (south).

The use of the verb "to be" is used in black language much the same as it is used in West Africa and is gaining new popularity with culture conscious contemporary blacks. For example, "we be partyin'" refers to a habitual behavior and describes the frequency with which an act is done. By contrast, the standard English usage of the verb must tell when it happens - past, present or future - as in "We were partying."

"Based on what we know about all language, people's language is influenced by history. First or second generation Spanish have Spanish influence and Germans have German influence. This tends to persist in direct ratio to social isolation," Taylor said.

"Blacks have been away from Africa long enough for this continuation to be eroded," he stated, adding that racial divisions have perpetuated black language. Isolated areas, such as the 13 or 14 islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia, still retain what Taylor described as "the blackest of all black language" -Gullah.

Taylor said as early as 1938 Lorenzo Turner, father of the study of black language, pointed out the presence of African phases in Gullah. American scholars claimed that these expressions were simply mispronunciations of American English.

But 11 years later Turner had identified approximately 4,000 West African words, whole unchanged African phrases and many survivals of the syntax, inflections, sounds and intonations.

4

Black language is a complete grammar, Taylor insists. One could not write all of the rules for it in a single article any more than one could write all of the rules of English grammar. "It is thorough, comprehensive and one needs formal training to understand the dynamics."

Taylor has degrees in speech pathology, psychology, sociology, reading and linguistics from Hampton University in Virginia, Indiana University, Denison University in Ohio and the University of Michigan.

But to the chagrin of the multidegreed Taylor, when he traveled North from his native Nashville, Tenn., he was ridiculed by North-

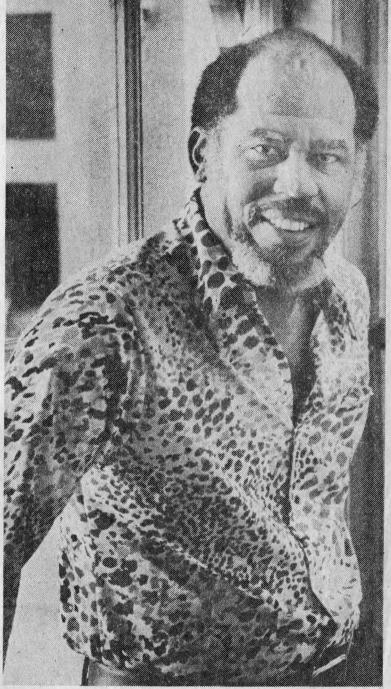
"It was recommended that I take speech therapy. That was insulting to my ego. I wondered if thousands of other blacks had been through the same thing."

Taylor says he switched from speech disorders to black language, first because he saw the need for education about it, and, secondly, because he observed a sudden surge in its popularity with language scholars.

Most of these scholars were "deprived," he said. "People who had marginal knowledge or commitment to the black community were writing things that were blatantly absurd and racist. I saw no serious black leadership.

"Whites define what's white, but black people don't define black people. It was vitally important that we black people be about defining outselves and our language," he said.

Taylor says many who are reluctant to accept black language do so because they fail to realize the completeness of its range. As in other languages, it can be formal or casual. "The issue is not whether one should be taught black language, it's what type," Taylor said. (He is the first to



Dr. Orlando Taylor denies that black language is corrupt or substandard English.

admit that his party talk would verbal contest involving teasing raise evebrows in the hallowed academic chambers of Stanford.)

Some liberal whites attempting to use the language frequently viversation, Taylor noted. "In addicommunicate - that is, who talks when, where, what subject, and who can say certain things."

For example, the action of an the language, who initiates play-

about another's relatives and is usually engaged in by black urban teens.

The purpose of offering a black olate the discourse rules of con- language workshop is not to teach people how to speak it, tion to which vocabulary is used, Taylor said, but to teach the hisit is important to know how to tory and variations mainly for the purpose of improving blacks' self concepts and non-blacks' mytho-

As for whether schools should adult white, thinking he knows teach it as the primary language for black students, Taylor replied, ing "the dozens," is inappropriate, "I would think that would be ab-Taylor stated. "The dozens" is a surd."

Black English controversial as school curriculum topic

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There has been considerable controversy regarding whether black language, or black English as it may be called, should be

taught in the schools.

Mary Hoover, of East Palo Alto, a research associate at Stanford University's Center for Research and Development in Teaching, linguistic pluralism department, recently completed a survey of parents' and teachers' attitudes in the Ravenswood, Harlem, N.Y., and Dayton, Ohio areas.

Mrs. Hoover is the wife of Bob Hoover, formerly a member of the Ravenswood school board and a founder of Nairobi College in East Palo Alto. She conducts workshops on black language for white

and minority teachers.

In a survey, Mrs. Hoover found that most black parents had rules about the use of black language. The majority felt that it was acceptable in the home and the community but preferred that it not be used in the schools.

Parents didn't want it used in reading textbooks, said Mrs. Hoover, who is herself the author of a book titled, "Patterns for Reading." She pointed to an array of books written by white authors which she said not only used black language incorrectly but were culturally offensive.



MARY HOOVER

Ninety-five per cent of parents surveyed felt teachers should know what black language is and be required to take a course in it, she said. "But overwhelmingly, they said they did not want white teachers to try to speak it. They felt this would be inappropriate and patronizing."

Parents indicated a desire to have aspects of black culture included in the curriculum but not necessarily in the grammar. They did approve of teaching proverbs, folklore, mythology and vocabulary.

Some parents said they had been made to hate black language because of the societal stigma and therefore attempted to regulate the variety of black language their children spoke in various situations. And, they wanted basic or standard English taught in school, Mrs. Hoover said.

Mrs. Hoover believes schools need more Africanized folklore. She cited the trickster figure, universal in African folklore, who has little physical force but possesses a good brain to figure his way out of difficult situations.

Mrs. Hoover stressed the importance of the teacher's attitude toward the child who speaks a form of black language. Back language must be viewed as a valid part of black culture, she declare "If the teacher thinks he spead broken, corrupt or no language all, this will influence her feeling about him."

— Loretta Gr