

The Ebonics Controversy: Critical Perspectives on African-American Vernacular English

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This paper presents an overview of African-American Vernacular English using the 1996 Oakland School Board Decision on using AAVE in the classroom as background. Details of the board's resolutions are examined, and its critics' arguments are reviewed. A brief historical survey of AAVE is followed by an analysis of the variety's linguistic and sociolinguistic elements. The debate is then placed into the larger context of language rights and ideology from which suggestions are made which relate to language teaching pedagogy.

Introduction

The variety of English spoken by many African-Americans—referred to variously as Black Vernacular English, African-American Vernacular English, or Ebonics—has made recent news in the United States due to a controversial 1996 resolution by the Oakland, California Board of Education officially declaring it as “genetically based” and rejecting its status as a “dialect” of English. In taking this decision, the Oakland school board attempted to counter claims that Ebonics is either a corrupted language form or somehow inferior to Standard

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American English. The Oakland resolution has now become the focus of criticism from a number of individuals and groups who claim that it is exclusionary and has little basis in scientific fact.

In this paper I attempt to clarify the debate surrounding the issue through an examination of African-American Vernacular English historically, linguistically, and in its social context. After a brief look at the resolution and its critics, I discuss how a natural language is defined in cognitive terms and to what extent Ebonics meets those criteria. An historical survey of AAVE's origins is followed by consideration of the principal linguistic and sociolinguistic patterns of AAVE. Finally, I argue that a critical-linguistic/historical-structural approach to language awareness and curriculum planning can help educators to see beyond the narrowly instrumental and ahistorical outlook which has often led to the disproportionate evaluation of some linguistic varieties over others.

The Oakland Resolution

Despite much impassioned—and often misinformed (see Rothstein, 1993)—discussion in the United States over a decline in educational standards and the national debate over the methods and relevance of standardized testing procedures, averages for *verbal* scores on at least one major achievement test taken by many high school students have shown improvements in past years. In the period from 1980 to 1989 scores on the verbal section of the widely-administered SAT rose a modest 12 points, from 387 to 399, leading observers to remark that despite overall deteriorating conditions in American schools, improvements in some areas are still evident.¹ Yet when aggregate test scores from the SAT are broken down into different social categories, other patterns emerge.

In a notable example, overall scores for black students during the period mentioned showed small increases practically each year, whereas those for their white counterparts appear to have

vacillated, marking few changes. What strikes one most about the scores, however, is the large and persistent gap between white and black students in both verbal and math sections. In verbal skills alone this gap over the period in question measured close to 100 points (see table). And it remains so today with no apparent sign of narrowing. As a reflection of what is generally referred to in testing literature as “performance,” SAT scores are routinely used by universities in admissions processes and, in this sense, are a measure of a student’s presumed marketability in an age when education has come more and more to assume the stark characteristics of basic skills training to fill slots in a highly mobile and unpredictable labor pool.

In the Oakland, California Unified School District the average grade point average (GPA: scale of 4.0) in the 1995–96 school year for all students was 2.1. On this scale, scores for white and Asian-Americans were above 3.0, whereas African-American students found themselves at the bottom with an average of 1.80—a startling figure considering 53% of the Oakland, California school district student population is black—one of the highest percentages in the United States.

Long aware of these test score discrepancies, black community activists, members of local PTAs, and school board members have joined in the attempt to equalize school results over the years. Although the history of black activism in the Oakland community dates from well before the 1960s, it was during that time community leaders took to the streets to demand that the municipal government allocate tax funds in a more equal manner. It was in Oakland also that the Black

Scholastic Aptitude Test 1980–1989 (verbal)		
	Black	White
1980–81	332	442
1984–85	346	449
1986–87	351	447
1987–88	353	445
1988–89	351	446

Source: *Black Americans: A Statistical Sourcebook*.

Panther self-defense group first organized itself to confront police violence, to help provide poor African-Americans with better housing and jobs, and to teach inner-city children language skills and respect for black culture.

One might argue that the place of Oakland's black community in the current debate over academic standards finds its roots, at least in part, in differences between Panthers on the one hand and black cultural nationalists whose message to black children of the time was that, since Africa remained their ancestral home, all white cultural symbols should be rejected. Oakland's Panther leaders, on the other hand, argued for an approach built on radical democracy and less on purely cultural symbols as a means of instilling concepts of individual pride and self-improvement. English, they insisted, was as much theirs as anyone's, and speeches by Panther leaders such as Huey Newton served, perhaps, to convince otherwise skeptical listeners. David Gross (1986), commenting on Newton, notes that:

In his view, a new black lifestyle was not only not radical enough in itself but could deflect energy away from the more important goals of political revolution.

In contrast to cultural nationalists of the 1960s, Panthers appeared to see English more as a political weapon with which they hoped to transform society. This dispute parallels a divide in social linguistics which often contraposes those who regard language as somehow peripheral to larger social and political questions with those who insist that language is a crucial factor in determining social discourse—an issue I will turn to later.

But whether or not the Oakland board members were contemplating the radical heyday of the 1960s, it was nevertheless with this history of community activism as background that the Oakland Unified School District unanimously passed a resolution on December 18, 1996, officially recognizing African-American Vernacular English/Ebonics as—among other things—“genetically based,” a “legitimate language,” and “not a dialect of English” (see Appendix 1). The board recommended that in light of the continual underperformance of young

African-Americans in reading and writing skills, the school district should be allowed to use funds from the U.S. Federal Bilingual Education Act to fund a program “featuring African Language System principles to move students from the language patterns they bring to school to English proficiency.” The resolution of the board was at first routinely reported in the local press, but as opinion writers around the country expressed a typically mocking attitude toward the general subject of non-mainstream English, broader negative opinion began to build.

National television and radio was quick to weigh in on the issue with commentary appearing the day after the resolution was released. A flurry of news briefs followed that week and what soon became apparent—at least to the board members who had drafted the resolution—was that few editorialists, television commentators, or other analysts appeared to have actually read the resolution. After several days of furious criticism from legislators, news writers, political action groups, national politicians, and a host of others, the board reconvened and amended the resolution, removing what were considered to be the most offending phrases (see Appendix 2).

Resolution critics

One of the first groups to express an opinion on the matter was the conservative “language rights” movement English First, whose proposed amendment to the U.S. constitution designed to make English the official national language has quickly gained momentum over the past several years. Executive Director Jim Boulet Jr.’s claim that “Black English classes are a waste of the students’ time and the taxpayers’ money” suggests that the Oakland resolution’s stated intention of merely using Ebonics as a stepping stone toward Standard American English (hereafter SAE) might have been conveniently overlooked, perhaps in the interests of furthering English First’s openly-stated nationalist agenda. Although this group does allow that other languages are worth knowing, the purist stance behind their efforts frequently shines through. Commenting on

similar motivations for opposing unfamiliar influences on one's language, George Thomas (1991) defines linguistic purism as an

...attitude prompted by some perception of a shortcoming with respect to one of more of the values associated with 'purity.' It is motivated by the implicit assumption that purification confers superiority.

He goes on further to distinguish nationalism as "the aesthetic principle which dwarfs all others." This would not be an unusual concept for many African-Americans, whose exclusion from U. S. social and political affairs has often been framed in terms of national purification. Pennycook (1994), Auerbach (1995), Tollefson (1995), and others similarly emphasize the hegemonic role Standard English has played in subordinating cultural differences around the world, as opposed to the unifying role in which it is most often portrayed.

Another vocal opponent of the Oakland resolution was Ray Haynes, a California state senator whose passionate opposition to Ebonics compelled him to introduce national legislation which would penalize schools that attempted to put the Oakland resolution into effect. Haynes claimed that "What the ebonics [sic] program is saying is that we are going to allow you to engage in bad speech patterns" (Gunnison, 1997). According to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Senator Haynes was introduced to the Ebonics issue through the efforts of Richard Delgaudio, president of the Legal Affairs Council, an ultra-conservative organization which has defended individuals such as Oliver North, a Reagan era military adviser convicted of directing massive arms and drug trade deals, as well as policemen filmed viciously beating black motorists on Los Angeles streets. Delgaudio reveals a thinly disguised contempt for certain sectors of society when he contends in the same article that "Militant black extremists in Oakland and elsewhere would encourage *street-land* talk inside our classrooms and separate and unequal education for a slice of the bilingual education pie" (emphasis added).

But as has often been the case, many of the strongest critics

of the Ebonics resolution were African-Americans. Some, like the television personality Arsenio Hall (“It’s absurd. Absurd. I think it creates awful self-esteem in black kids . . .”; Olszewski, 1997) and well-known comedian Bill Cosby (“Legitimizing the street in the classroom is backwards”; Olszewski, 1997) might possibly be dismissed as somehow lacking informed opinions. But a number of prominent black intellectuals involved in local and national policy-making have also spoken out against the resolution. Ezola Foster, a veteran black educator in the Los Angeles Unified School District, joined the above-mentioned Senator Haynes as co-leader of a national campaign to oppose Ebonics. Respected black newspaper columnist William Raspberry also appeared to see little connection between the social effects of language education policies and poor student academic performance when he remarked in the *Washington Post* (Raspberry, 1997) that “the solutions lie less in changing the way teachers teach than in the commitment of the rest of us—particularly the black middle class—to change the way these youngsters view their world.” Even Jesse Jackson, perhaps the most prominent liberal black leader in the U.S., initially called the resolution “an unacceptable surrender bordering on disgrace.”

The disparate nature of these detractors provides an example of the ways that ideologically hot topics are often manipulated to support a variety of political positions. The threat of a bastardized “street talk” taking over and usurping a purer Standard English is a familiar emotional appeal employed by groups like English First in zealous campaigns against the use of other languages in the United States. For their part, a number of well-known liberals berated the Oakland school board for what they claim amounts to the relegation of black students to second-class citizenship through a system of linguistic apartheid. The different claims and terminology in the resolution were thus employed as rallying points by each group for their own particular purposes.

In situations such as these in which emotions run high, it will come as no surprise that sensitive issues can be less easily

exploited when terminology is clearly and unambiguously defined. As I will attempt to illustrate, this was a major fault of the Oakland resolution.

The Genetic Basis of Language

The board's use of the term "genetically based" in referring to Ebonics was clearly the most controversial point in the entire December 18th resolution. It was quickly replaced in the amended version due to loud protests from around the country which accused the Oakland administrators of racial determinism, reverse discrimination, bigotry, and simple ignorance of human evolution and cognition. Considering how genetic research has been used over the years to legitimize a variety of racist legal and social measures, widespread objections to the phrase are understandable. The turn of the century eugenics movement is a prime example of this distorted application—having led to forced sterilization in many states and miscegenation laws throughout the South. Robert N. St. Clair (1982) describes how many of the same academics who led the eugenics movement were important in later psychometric research and eventually in development of the IQ testing at the heart of much of the current controversy over cultural bias in schooling. Arthur Jensen (1969), basing his work on what was described as "verbal deprivation" theory, concluded that "racism, or the belief in the genetic inferiority of Negroes, is a correct view in light of the present evidence." And genetics remains a factor today in continued attempts by American academics, such as Richard Herrnstein, Charles Murray, and others, to explain black academic inferiority.

In comments made after amending the resolution, Oakland school board officials denied having intended this phrase to refer in any way to racial determinism. Implying that the language abilities of African-Americans are genetically different in some way than those of other races was not, they insisted, their intention in using the term "genetically-based." If we accept

the board on its word, then, one must assume they had in fact adopted one of two dramatically different interpretations of the term “genetically-based.”

The first of these accords with standard language acquisition theory, which holds that all humans are born with a language “faculty” allowing them to acquire a particular language given they are cognitively unimpaired and have not been totally deprived of linguistic input. In this view, any particular language a child is raised speaking would be genetically-based, deriving as it would from the human language faculty. Creoles—pidgins which have become the principal language of a community—are genetically-based in this sense, since they have linguistically-developed grammars comparable to other natural rulegoverned languages. Thus, if the English spoken by African-Americans were actually a kind of pidgin with a limited lexical range and no fixed grammar, it would only have persisted a generation or so before the process of creolization initiated by second- and third-generation speakers began to fill in the various linguistic “gaps.” According to this definition, by referring to Ebonics as genetically-based, one is simply designating African-Americans as cognitively-normal and claiming that their speech habits are rule-governed and therefore not wholly random. It is difficult to imagine a group of people living together on a day-to-day basis without recourse to a common, underlying set of speech rules—grammatical and social—by which to communicate. (Some of the particular rules which govern AAVE are discussed in the following section.)

The only other conceivable interpretation of the resolution’s reference to genetics follows from the first condition: Ebonics is a language variety spoken by a cognitively-subnormal group that because of a genetic predisposition can neither communicate effectively among themselves nor hope to speak any differently. In other words, some AAVE speakers might like to learn SAE but are unable because of a genetic inability. Needless to say, this is clearly the view the board was contesting. Considering the thrust of the resolution was to improve the academic performance of African-American students and to

have them learn SAE (whether or not the latter follows from the former), it is difficult to imagine how the Oakland school board members would have considered this notion or anything other than the first, linguistically-unremarkable, definition of the genetic basis of language.

Cognitive impairment of entire racial categories is a phenomenon which appears in data collected and interpreted only under the most restricted circumstances. Even though data such as this is not uncommon, it should also be noted that a large percentage of Africans (to whom African-Americans would be genetically linked) regularly grow up speaking more than one language, many of which are more linguistically intricate in their inflectional systems than English. One is left with few options to choose from in this debate. Either the board members were arguing against the foundation of their own resolution, or they were simply pointing out how AAVE, as all natural languages, are genetically based.

Whether board members had clearly considered the above distinctions and were prepared to face accusations of racism based on other nonlinguistic definitions is a separate question. The members were clearly surprised at the depth of reaction provoked by their resolution, and their subsequent willingness to amend the document would seem to imply that wording was not a vital issue. The board clearly used the term “genetically-based” without regard for the extreme interpretations it often carries and in the ensuing hail of criticism was unable to debate the essential triviality (in this context) of the phrase. In a later synopsis of the adopted policy the board writes “the term ‘genetically-based’ is used according to the standard dictionary definition of ‘has origins in.’ It is not used to refer to human biology.” This disclaimer strikes one as an attempt at backpedaling, hurriedly issued in response to accusations of racism, although in view of the above discussion it seems to be a meaningless concession.

To summarize, I believe we can view use of the term “genetically-based” in the Oakland resolution as both a political blunder, considering the eagerness with which so many

groups rushed to condemn it, and as an unexceptional comment on the basis of human language.

Concepts such as Universal Grammar, the language faculty, the language area of the brain, mentalese, etc. are as yet poorly understood by cognitive scientists themselves, and debates among non-linguists are doubly contentious. This obviously does not imply that one should refrain from making inquiries. The point is that the Ebonics debate, occurring as it did in a highly conservative political atmosphere, with limited time constraints (the school board was holding its final session of the year) and within an ethnically divided community already sensitive to questions of race and language, seemed almost destined to ignite despite this fairly common reference to a shared genetic trait that in other circumstances might have passed unnoticed.

Language vs. Dialect

The Oakland school board's insistence on ensuring that Ebonics not be designated a "dialect of English" can be seen, I believe, as arising from two different sources: (1) a common misperception about the term "dialect," and (2) a desire to clarify and legitimize the origins of AAVE. Both have been points of contention in the black community for many years as educators, parents, and activists grapple with such questions as: "Isn't the way we speak at home good enough? Is our language just a poor version of English? Shouldn't our children learn 'good' English? Schools teach white English. Why should we have to learn it?" These are all legitimate concerns for African-Americans, whose history in the United States has been one of continual cultural suppression. Even so, it would seem the purposes of the Oakland resolution might have been better promoted had its drafters attended more closely to terminology.

"Dialect" as it is commonly used (i.e. outside linguistics) has certain pejorative overtones which suggest an uneducated or colloquial manner of speaking. Many SAE speakers, for

example, would not readily admit to using a dialect—that term being reserved in general parlance for regional, working class, or foreign-sounding speech. Nevertheless, there are few hard and fast rules separating the terms “language” and “dialect” among linguists. In general, mutually-comprehensible speakers are said to possess the same language, although Chambers and Trudgill (1980) note a number of exceptions to this principle. Norwegians and Swedes, two examples in their list, who, although commonly considered to speak separate languages, understand each other without great difficulty. Dialects, on the other hand, are normally considered to exist within one language and to be mutually intelligible. They will generally possess their own phonological, lexical, and syntactic features. In some countries, however, (e.g. China), what are referred to as dialects are sufficiently different from the standard variety in these features that their speakers understand each other only with great difficulty or not at all. In a similar fashion to the prestige dialects in many other countries, the SAE *dialect* in the United States has succeeded in capturing a place as the national *language* (although this remains an extremely contentious issue today).

In light of these factors, it would seem reasonable then to regard SAE and AAVE equally as two separate dialects of the English language. Although SAE is very clearly the prestige form used for business and education, *in purely linguistic terms*—as will be detailed later—there is no basis for valuing one dialect over another. Even so, the word *dialect* obviously carries a number of negative connotations, and many linguists therefore prefer to use the term *variety*.

Besides this pejorative sense of dialect, a principal objection voiced by a number of African-American linguists (and hence a possible motivation for the Oakland school board’s reluctance to use the word) is the way it has come to be contrasted with *creole* in the debate over the origins of AAVE. Creoles, as stated earlier, are fully formed natural languages evolving out of pidgins, and this is the manner in which some historical linguists believe AAVE may have been formed. The “dialect hypothesis”

in contrast maintains that AAVE is, in essence, a native form of the language with no clear basis in a West African pidgin, an implication being that the language was not properly acquired to begin with and is therefore a “bastardized” form of English. Others prefer to argue more simply that social isolation was a principal factor in preserving archaic forms of the language (Williams, 1975).

Due to the many pejorative connotations surrounding the word *dialect*, it is not difficult then to understand why the Oakland School Board shunned it as an acceptable description for AAVE. Considering the term again from a purely linguistic point of view, however, its inclusion in the resolution would simply appear unnecessary. Whether “creolization” is a viable origin for AAVE or not—and a number of researchers debate the point, Muhlhausler (1986) notably, who contests the African “substratum” theory of a deep, core layer of both grammar and lexicon underlying AAVE—it is important to keep in mind that the legitimacy of AAVE as a natural language does not depend in any way on the resolution of this question.

Origins of AAVE

Cognitive theories of mind and language are essentially approximations, data for which derive from language users. Since methods of actually examining the brain to determine how humans develop, order, and process language are limited, theories are largely based on the most readily-obtained and widely-found data available—language usage. The Oakland School Board resolution’s determination that Ebonics is a “legitimate language” can therefore only be confirmed by examining (1) historical documentary evidence of its development and (2) grammatical elements found in speech samples.

As alluded to previously, it has been suggested that AAVE lacks the appropriate grammatical means of expressing complex thought patterns and that its speakers are thereby

somehow incapable of fully rational thought. Among other claims one commonly hears about AAVE are: that it cannot express tense and therefore its speakers wander in and out of temporal speech at random; it is lazy speech which fails to show correct verb inflections and noun markers; its speakers enunciate poorly and do not pronounce certain SAE sounds properly; its speakers use verbal elements randomly, sometimes leaving them out altogether. Many of these criticisms, although heard recently from opponents of the Ebonics resolution, are far from new. Some date back to the early days of African slavery in both the Americas and in West Africa—the principal “source” of slaves taken by Dutch, British, and Portuguese traders.

Had 17th century businessmen exported their human commodity from a single port on the West African Coast, the likelihood of one or two African languages persisting among a displaced populace would have been greatly enhanced. The policy among slavers, however, was to mix tribal and language groups in order to prevent communication among prisoners and thereby to avoid revolt. In his book on the origins of American English, Dillard (1972) quotes an earlier historian who explains:

The means used by those who trade to Guinea, to keep the Negroes quiet, is to choose them from severall parts of ye Country, of different Languages; so that they find they cannot act joyntly, when they are not in a Capacity of Consulting one an other, and this they can not doe, in soe farr as they understand no one an other. (From Richard Simpson's 1689 *Voyage to the Straits of Magellan & S. Seas.*)

Slaves brought to the American colonies therefore were initially either compelled to learn English (or in earlier cases, Dutch) directly from their overseers or eventual owners or had as their only means of communication a pidgin pieced together from English, languages of other slaves or Indians with whom they came into contact, and their own tribal languages. These two possibilities form the basis of the ongoing debate as to whether modern AAVE is actually a creole—perhaps, as some suggest, with a West African substratum—or was simply learned directly and, by implication, imperfectly from the

English of the overseers.

The earliest literary records of a pidgin English in use in the American colonies appears to date from the late 17th or early 18th centuries, although there are records of Guinea Coast Creole English from as early as 1600 (Dillard, 1992). According to Loewen (1995), the first non-native *settlers* in the United States were actually black not white, since Spanish colonizers in the early 17th century had brought and later abandoned 100 slaves in what is now South Carolina. Slaves brought by British colonizers, however, first arrived in the colony of Virginia in 1619. Since around that time Dutch traders had been conducting trade in humans from the West Indies principally to New York, and when the British gained control of the colony, they resumed the business themselves. Documents of that time provide evidence that a pidgin or creole variety of English was spoken by at least some slaves in New York and Philadelphia prior to 1741 (Dillard, 1992). Some maintain that even at this early stage, black populations, often considered by some to have been too small in any one locale to sustain the process of creolization, clearly maintained the social relationships necessary outside of their workplaces to keep this process active.

In the sea islands of Georgia and South Carolina, Gullah is perhaps the best documented and notably the only African-American creole whose West African origins remain uncontested. Although speculation ranges widely, lack of documentary evidence still leaves unclear the questions of whether there was once a much wider creole variety similar to Gullah and whether modern AAVE can trace its origins to this language (Mufwene, 1997).

Throughout the 18th century there was a steady influx of West African and maritime (ship hand) pidgin speakers to areas of the eastern U. S. seaboard, and, although AAVE is often associated with the southern United States, there had been slaves in the northern and eastern states for a hundred years or more before they were brought to areas of the deep South. The colony of Georgia, first chartered in 1733, had initially banned slavery but repealed that law in 1751, and trade

in humans with other colonies and directly from West Africa began several years afterwards.

But considering the older northern colonies' increasing inclination to officially end the slave trade, the event that truly opened the country to large-scale slavery—and one that would therefore shape the future of AAVE—was the government's forcible removal of the native American population from southern areas of the country, thus opening it up to large-scale planters. The dramatic increase in slaves in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana from 1820–40 thus began what has been called the “southernization” of Black English. According to some researchers, large concentrations of slaves on a single plantation allowed for more intense linguistic interaction and some limited measure of family life, both of which led to a sustained community (Dillard, 1972). But as mentioned earlier, plantations would not necessarily have been the boundaries of all social life. Under conditions such as these, the creole hypothesis is a distinct possibility, although in many areas by the late 1800s it also appears that AAVE was undergoing a reverse process of decreolization in which features that were noticeably unlike the mainstream variety (e.g. anterior verb markers such as *de* and *blan*) were being lost (Mufwene, 1997).

Historical linguists mark the final stage in the evolution of AAVE from Emancipation through the end of World War II. During this time a large number of newly liberated slaves began to congregate in isolated rural areas throughout the South (due largely to discriminatory policies established by majority white residents, but in many cases through their own initiatives) to found all-black settlements. Before 1900, 90 percent of the black population lived in the South. With increasing industrialization in the 1880s and later due to crop devastation, African-Americans slowly began to move into northern cities. Recruitment of southern soldiers in the first World War exposed rural blacks (and whites) to other varieties of English from around the country and in Europe.

During the 1920s and 1930s jazz entertainers and (more slowly) other unskilled laborers migrated from the Mississippi

basin to industrial northern cities like Chicago, bringing with them their own linguistic traditions. And finally, World War II and the prosperity that followed (at least in the United States) allowed African-Americans greater freedom to travel and the opportunity to enter higher education in increasing numbers, factors which had marked influences on their language. The increasing monoculture of commercial television that began in the 1950s has had a leveling effect not only on AAVE but on many regional dialects.

By 1960, AAVE was no longer thought of as a strictly southern regional variety. Only 60 percent of all African-Americans continued to live in the South, a statistic which may be thought of as signaling the “nationalization” of AAVE. Throughout these historic transformations, and despite different attempts at assimilating African-Americans into mainstream society, sincere or otherwise, AAVE has remained distinct from SAE phonologically, grammatically, and to a lesser extent lexically. Why this should be so is a major point of contention in U. S. educational thinking today. In order to explain this “discrepancy,” policy makers have variously claimed that African-Americans are socially deprived, learning disabled, or in extreme cases that they are simply incapable of learning standard English due to genetic IQ insufficiencies. A discussion of the ideology behind such questions will be taken up in a later section.

The dying out or maintenance of minority language varieties despite (or often in spite of) social or racial persecution is an historical phenomenon well documented by linguists and ethnographers (note Edwards, 1985). As one might naturally expect, a principal reason is the use of language as a means of maintaining one’s ties with families and neighborhoods and holding communities together, especially when those communities are under some form of threat. But before going on to look at the larger question of *why* AAVE has persisted over the years, let us first examine some of the elements of the variety itself to determine whether there is any substantive basis to claims of its “nonexistence.”

Characteristics of AAVE

AAVE syntactic variation

Despite attempts by some to label AAVE speakers as lacking a true language and confining them to what has been called a “non-logical mode of expressive behavior” (Labov, 1972), for most purposes AAVE and SAE speakers have few actual difficulties communicating on a purely linguistic basis. The extensive lexical and syntactic borrowings from AAVE in the field of music and entertainment (i.e. hepcat, square, alligator, jazz, boogie-woogie, ragtime, dis) illustrate how on one level language itself is not necessarily the problem. As the language of two major imperialist powers, English has a long tradition of importing new lexical items which are fitted cog-like into the more fundamental grammatical framework. There is evidence, too, suggesting the influence of West African phonology on white southern speech (Feagin, 1997). Nevertheless, there remain distinct differences between AAVE and most other varieties of Standard American English. But because of its basic structuring effect on language—or more relevant for the present argument, the importance lent to it by educators—differences in grammar tend to draw an inordinate amount of attention.

Perhaps the most noticeable of these differences is AAVE’s use of the verb *be*. When functioning as present copula, the verb is variable, as in:

- 1) *You intelligent.*
- 2) *You are intelligent.*

Traditional critics of AAVE have claimed that copula deletion in such cases illustrates an inconsistent and lazy speech pattern. As Labov and others have noted, however, one also notices a similar pattern of variability in SAE in contraction rules allowing one to say, for example:

I think you are intelligent.

or

I think you’re intelligent.

One should not therefore regard SAE as inconsistent because it follows this variable rule. And just as SAE would not allow a reduction such as “Yes, you’re,” one will not find “Yes, you” in AAVE. Here both dialects are following rules—simply different sets of rules.

Some have explained the variability in AAVE as deriving from its median position between an “extreme” form of the assumed creole on the one hand and SAE on the other, with speakers switching at different times for social purposes between the two poles. This possibility might suggest that far from being more “restricted” in their speech patterns, as some have claimed, many AAVE speakers, who are continually forced to make subtle dialectical choices, have in some ways a broader verbal repertoire than mainstream SAE speakers, who are generally limited to one variety or code.

To those who insist that lack of a copula in such cases indicates laziness, one might point out that AAVE rules are certainly not unique. In this regard Labov (1972) has commented:

We know that there are many languages of the world which do not have a present copula, and which conjoin subject and predicate complement without a verb. Russian, Hungarian and Arabic may be foreign, but they are not by the same token illogical.

Another salient feature of AAVE is the verb form *be + Ving*, as in:

I be studying English.

This form has incurred the wrath of grammarians and the ridicule of sophomores over the years. Attention is commonly focused on the fact that the auxiliary verb is uninflected, often pointed to as evidence of AAVE’s inability to express linguistic subtlety. But, as has often been noted, with few exceptions English verbal inflections have largely disappeared over time, and when compared to some African languages, for example, the verbal inflection system in English might be considered rather elementary. SAE is no less subtle or logical, for example, because one says *I go, you go, we go, they go*. Given that the meaning is not affected—not even subtly—the fact that AAVE does not follow the inflectional rules of the standard dialect for the

verb “be” in this case signifies little. Inflection here is strictly a matter of social convention.

In addition, the *be* + *Ving* form is generally equated with the continuous aspect by many SAE speakers, although when usage is examined it is clear that AAVE speakers make a distinction between *be* + *Ving* (I *be* studying) and Subject *Ving* (I studying), the latter used more often in the continuous sense. *Be* + *Ving*, by comparison, is more often used to connote a general state of affairs (i.e. *I am always studying*). Compare this with the more confined meaning of the SAE continuous and the slightly more formal nuance of the simple present (I study).

Many other distinctions, such as AAVE’s use of double negation (“Can’t no one . . .,” also found in French and Spanish) and the still disputed question as to the dominance of verbal aspect over tense, might be discussed. Others have dealt with these issues in much greater detail (see Cukor-Avila, P., Maynor, N., Bailey, G., 1991; Labov, 1972), but without taking more space than is possible here, it bears repeating that in purely linguistic terms, AAVE has proven to be a rule-governed language variety with elements characteristic of most other natural languages and as such should be judged ultimately on those linguistic criteria.

AAVE sociolinguistic patterns

Less apparent than purely syntactic differences are ways in which AAVE and SAE speakers have been shown to differ in their social patterns of communicative behavior. For years studies pointed to how speakers of European origin whose English was ungrammatical could still get their messages across, while at the same time speakers from Asia or Africa with excellent grammar seemed to experience more problems communicating. Phillips’ (1972) work with American Indians offered some of the first evidence that pragmatic factors could affect children’s learning behavior. She illustrated how failure to respond in ways expected by Anglo teachers led to the mislabeling of many native American children as learning disabled or even retarded. Similar behavioral studies in black communi-

ties, although fewer in number compared with research on grammar, have provided researchers with some of the diagnostic tools needed to analyze patterns of linguistic behavior patterns among AAVE speakers.

Many of the sociolinguistic behaviors common among AAVE speakers originated in the relative isolation of black communities and were unknown to most whites until the 1960s and 1970s, when African-Americans began to appear regularly in television dramas and comedies. Elizabeth Whatley (1981) has catalogued patterns such as fussing, toasting, sounding, and signifying, which differ from SAE in a number of significant ways. She also records what she claims is a culturally-specific form of politeness in which children are required to verbally acknowledge directives from adults before carrying them out. It is important to remember that since many of these behaviors either go unnoticed or are not properly understood by school teachers, children's learning can be adversely affected in a number of ways. Gumperz and Gumperz (1978), commenting on the social effects of failing to understand these pragmatic cues, remarked that:

Misunderstandings now tend to take the form of misreading of intent, rather than of problems in decoding factual statements; yet they nevertheless have linguistic basis. Research in this area is still in the beginning stage, but it seems clear that there continue to be significant communication difficulties which stand in the way of full participation of minority persons in public affairs and affect the education they receive.

Power and Education

In previous sections, I have said little about the role either socioeconomic factors or ideology play in establishing and maintaining attitudes toward different language varieties. How, we may ask, do people come to accept their own speech patterns and the patterns of discourse in which they regularly engage as "just the way things are" and not as actively constructed by

various interests within society? Do various discursal patterns between teacher and student arise solely out of linguistic necessity, or are they also determined by historical, social and economic considerations? Perhaps, as some suggest, these are not so much arguments about language as about culture itself. Lippi-Green (1997) comments:

The real trouble with Black English is not the verbal aspect system which distinguishes it from other varieties of US English, or the rhetorical strategies which draw such a vivid contrast, it is simply this: AAVE is tangible and irrefutable evidence that there is a distinct, healthy, functioning African American culture which is not white, and which does not want to be white. This is a state of affairs which is unacceptable to many.

Beyond this, we may also wonder if schools may not unwittingly teach students to reproduce the inherent values of a mainstream racist (and also, capitalist) society, and if so, whether this bias in turn undermines students' abilities to appreciate their own class-based or ethnic cultures. Based on the language of the resolution itself, considerations such as these appeared to inform much of the Oakland School Board resolution.

From the discussion of languages and dialects, it should be clear how historical, social, and economic conditions rather than inherent linguistic factors often ensure the promotion of one language variety over others. Historical "accidents" which have shaped the English language have included the Norman Conquest, the Irish potato famine, Dutch colonization, and African slave trading, to name just a few. One can add to these such social factors as the attempt by late nineteenth century philologists to reform the language by bringing it more into line with Latin syntax, the desire of the upwardly mobile to speak in what they consider a more socially acceptable manner, and what many have called the leveling effect of mass communication on not only how people speak but also what is discussed.

I place the word *accidents* in quotations above not only out of convention but also as a means of illustrating how, without some special emphasis, words or expressions are generally

skimmed over without being lent any particular significance. They are understood in the context of the discussion, but not necessarily questioned as to their general applicability. In much the same way, assumptions and values about the world, what is considered acceptable or correct, how one should behave, find their ways into the forms and usages of the language we use on a daily basis. In a broad sense this gradual absorption by language of the value systems in which it is imbedded is a natural occurrence, since mutual comprehension requires common assumptions upon which discourse can be built. But as individuals adapt to routine patterns of linguistic behavior in order to adapt to specific linguistic communities, their language often begins to reflect these underlying societal assumptions in ways they are not always fully aware of.

Just as a simple “dialect” can outgrow itself to become the sole “natural” medium of discourse, value-laden patterns of discourse also find themselves occupying national and even international positions in which they often displace other possible patterns of communication. Immersed in language as we all are, how can we distinguish between what we believe is natural on the one hand and what is socially-constructed discourse on the other? For example, we might consider questioning much of the commonly accepted discourse in student history, social studies, history, and language texts, such as the daily recitation of the pledge of allegiance by many American children in which they unthinkingly celebrate their country’s presumed liberty and justice “for all.” As Stephens (1992) illustrates in *Language and Ideology in Children’s Fiction*, texts found in much literature contain subtly racist and sexist values that—at the very least—merit discussion. What seems plain and obvious to one person may appear problematic to another.

Common sense assumptions about language, therefore, must be considered ideological, and educators who leave texts unexamined bear some responsibility for the inculcation of values imparted through the materials they choose. Alternately, when discourse carrying the beliefs and values of certain interests exerts its control over other discursal types, society commonly

begins to accept it as the unquestioned norm.

An example of this contest between discourses drawn from education involves the ways in which attitudes toward authority figures are often taught as formulaic lessons, as if there were no struggles between the various sectors or classes within society. Fairclough (1989) refers to this process of discourse losing its ideological character as “naturalization.” In societies where economic benefits are stratified (i.e. capitalist societies, most dramatically), if the otherwise linguistically neutral language variety of one particular group becomes the norm, that group will necessarily maintain an advantage over others. For purposes of education, naturalized language is not thought of as being tendentious. Rather it is commonly viewed as a pure medium through which skills are transmitted, a standard upon which one bases the “correctness” of speech or writing. Questions of linguistic correctness aside, however, the very usage of one or another variety, at this point, becomes an increasingly political question, or, as Milroy (1982) puts it, one of language identity.

Due in part to the inherent bias of using a particular language or language variety, discussions of language varieties, because they are concerned purely with the description of linguistic elements or the social behavior of language groups, often fail to recognize that language is not a static concept but rather one that represents a potential area of struggle over societal values. Thus if linguistic comparisons of AAVE and SAE demonstrate their “genetic” similarity while failing to show how the two types have evolved and have been used by different sectors of society, the description cannot help us explain why AAVE is devalued in present society. Similarly, sociolinguistic descriptions of the behavior of language groups often provide what are simple measures of what is thought of as “appropriate” behavior in a given situation, rather than attempting to explain the historical, economic, or social factors behind the behaviors studied. This normative bias to linguistic analysis, rather than pointing to ways of linguistic and societal change, tends to promote the notion that social patterns—eco-

nomic or linguistic—are somehow natural and unchanging.

Linguistic usage, thus, cannot be analyzed apart from the society within which it is used; it must be regarded as one element of a societal whole—historic, social, and economic. In describing the linguistic interactions between predominantly SAE-speaking teachers and AAVE-speaking students in inner-city schools, the question then becomes not so much *what* is said but *why* it is communicated as it is. What social, economic, and historic influences have shaped the forms and social usage of both AAVE and SAE and the way they interact? How has SAE come to maintain its position as the seemingly uncontested national language to be used in exclusion of other varieties? Are there larger economic factors which make African-Americans and therefore the variety of English they speak less acceptable? To disregard such questions is to engage in a type of myopic elevation of common sense notions about language similar in some regards to children's assumptions that others should always want to play the game they are playing. Fairclough (1989) refers to this preempting of common sense assumptions by one language variety or discourse type and its resultant acceptance by a larger public as the "opacity of discourse"—an inability essentially to see through the historical imposition of one discourse upon others.

This inability affects African-Americans in particular in two distinct but related ways. First, as a separate linguistic tradition AAVE tends simply to be disregarded and eventually sublimated by the more dominant SAE. Although many African-Americans are raised speaking SAE, AAVE is used almost exclusively by African-Americans and thus the SAE-AAVE distinction is generally regarded as a racial as well as a linguistic distinction. Teachers, black or white, are very often unaware of the subtle distinctions in usage between SAE and AAVE and, as a result, often typically teach language skills from an uncritical viewpoint. The medium of instruction itself is seldom recognized as one language variety among others. This assumed neutrality in turn encourages value comparisons (as opposed to comparisons which simply examine differences)

when other language varieties are encountered in the classroom.

Of equal importance, however, is the way the opacity of discourse affects African-Americans as representatives of a large economic underclass. As a measure of the basic inequality of economic power in any society, the discourse of more powerful elements—corporate elites, government bureaucrats, media tycoons—will tend to replace other discourse types through the process of normalization. Although a corporate perspective has come to imbue discourse in virtually every sector of society, it might be argued that due to AAVE's relative isolation it has remained less susceptible to such influences. African-Americans' lower educational levels and hence their restricted access to higher-paying jobs (both of these, needless to say, affected by discriminatory attitudes within society) has ironically limited the influence corporate discourse has had upon AAVE.

Nevertheless, as corporations exert an increasing influence upon society, the discourse of the business world is spread through films, television, and other channels of popular culture. Higher educational institutions, too—businesses themselves—reflecting these social trends, regularly employ corporate discursal patterns in promotional literature aimed at attracting students. Despite resistance from African-Americans toward assimilation into white culture, the attraction corporate culture holds for many young African Americans is powerful. Inevitably, this has transformed the way they speak. What may have seemed a common mode of interaction between black customers and shopkeepers seventy years ago, for example, has undoubtedly been altered by changes in the forces of production and the accumulation of capital—matters over which they have had little control. As a result, many African-Americans who are careful to note what are usually regarded as racially distinct characteristics of their language variety may often be unaware of how fully they participate in a more subtly-designed corporate discourse. But it is this discourse that is in part responsible for sustaining many of the economic and social myths which allow inequitable conditions to reproduce them-

selves. A majority of the population—African-Americans and others—largely fails to recognize the discourse patterns of the corporate world as problematic and open to challenge.

Hence it is the ways in which different types of discourse underlay our everyday interactions that teachers might attend to most carefully, since awareness of these assumptions can be used either to further the status quo or to struggle against it. The degree to which teachers choose to act as interpreters of school texts is a case in point. As with any material produced for a mass public, texts used in schools are aimed at an idealized readership. All texts necessarily place readers into a subject position in order for them to interpret a writer's intention. Texts for larger audiences consequently must be written with a general idealized subject position in mind, and considering demographics in the United States, this position is most often written from a white upper-middle class viewpoint. Whether teachers choose to bring this normalized subject position to the students' attention or not will be one factor in determining the perspective students can hope to gain from their education.

When subject positions are either regulated by teachers or constrained by the educational structure itself, students are often confined to certain discursal roles which in time, and because of an apparent lack of alternatives, become normalized in their functions. This procrustean determination of language forms affects students from all backgrounds, but generally to a greater degree those who do not share the discursal patterns of the dominant society. They are the ones whose intelligence is immediately questioned when "simple" questions of common sense arise. Language thus becomes a question of power for some educators who understand that discourse is one—but certainly not the only—area of political struggle.

Conclusion

As much as can be said about the importance of placing language in its social and historical context so that students may

understand the role it plays in shaping their lives, one must guard against the reduction of social struggle to a simple discussion of language. Language can only ever be one part in a larger struggle for power over the productive forces of society, and it is in this realization, I believe, that some hope for change lies.

Rather than simply being places of inculcation in which the dominant patterns of society are rehearsed, schools can be and often are places that teach what might be called “liberation skills.” These can include lessons not only in critical language awareness (CLA), in which students learn to look at the reasons how and why different language varieties are used, but also the practical skills necessary to change the conditions of oppression in which students often find themselves. In the United States one of these skills would necessarily be the study of English as it is used in the mainstream society to influence social and economic policy. Despite the fact that SAE is a dialect in the same sense as AAVE, it is undeniably the dialect most often used for business and education; to act as if this is not the case is simply to ignore reality and, in the case of many poor inner-city black students, to hinder what potential they might have in the educational system. Admittedly, this is not to say that once having learned SAE, greatly improved educational and career opportunities will necessarily follow. With racism and structural underemployment so much in force in the United States, many young African-Americans may regard the beacon of hope supposedly provided by SAE as a false light—and not always without reason.

Even so, students should not have to choose strictly between a skills-based approach of learning a “standard” dialect and one that looks at language solely from a critical perspective. Seen as two elements in a process of social emancipation, they can complement each other and enrich language study by illustrating how language forms and language usage are both crucial elements of history and social economics. A frequent criticism leveled at schools is their overproduction of “educated fools”—skilled graduates without the simple common sense to under-

stand the social significance of what they produce. Nuclear engineers come to mind: people with technical knowledge that baffles the common imagination yet who compete to build weapons that will clearly destroy themselves and their own families. Simple language skills training might be viewed from a similar perspective. Without an understanding of the reasons people speak as they do, the uses that language is put to, the social and economic forces that frame and mold language forms and discourse, and the ways that language in turn affects the society in which we live, students of any racial background become unthinking consumers and reproducers of a language already designed for them.

Clearly then, skills training and lessons in the social relevance of language must go hand in hand. Looking back at the goals that initially inspired Oakland School Board Superintendent Toni Cook to propose her resolution, one feels that she understood this point. Although the resolution failed in many respects, it did succeed in bringing before the public once again larger questions of AAVE, its relationship to SAE, and the failure of public education to fully address these issues. It also raised important questions about how these relationships affect learning.

A curriculum composed of CLA and attention to skills training in SAE could begin to allow students to make their own informed choices about the language varieties they speak in a way that would prevent exclusion from either their own or a larger, more diverse language community. This would not necessarily entail the relegation of AAVE to uses outside education and business. With informed students as the final arbitrators, they should ultimately be given the choice of which variety they feel most comfortable with. It could be AAVE, SAE, or any gradation in between. The importance, finally, is that no one should keep students from doing what comes most naturally—speaking their own language.

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Note

1. Rothstein notes that while aggregate verbal and math scores have declined since 1972, this is due largely to the broadening of the base of test takers—a fact, he points out, that should be counted as a measure of success rather than failure.

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Appendix 1: Original Oakland School Board Ebonics Resolution

Passed December 18, 1996

WHEREAS, numerous validated scholarly studies demonstrate that African-American students as a part of their culture and history as African people possess and utilize a language described in various scholarly approaches as “Ebonics” (literally “Black sounds”) or “Pan-African Communication Behavior” or “African Language Systems”; and

WHEREAS, these studies have also demonstrated that African Language Systems are genetically based and not a dialect of English; and

WHEREAS, these studies demonstrate that such West and Niger-Congo African languages have been officially recognized and addressed in the mainstream public educational community as worth of study, understanding or application of its principles, laws and structures for the benefit of African-American students both in terms of positive appreciation of the language and these students’ acquisition and mastery of English language skills; and

WHEREAS, such recognition by scholars has given rise over the past fifteen years of legislation passed by the State of California recognizing the unique language stature of descendants of slaves, with such legislation being prejudicially and unconstitutionally vetoed repeatedly by various California state governors; and

WHEREAS, judicial cases in states other than California have recognized the unique language stature of African-American pupils, and such recognition by courts has resulted in court-mandated educational programs which have substantially benefited African American children in the interest of vindicating their equal protection of the law rights under the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution; and

WHEREAS, the Federal Bilingual Education Act (20 U. S. C. 1402 et seq.) mandates that local educational agencies “build their capacities to establish, implement and sustain programs of instruction for

children and youth of limited English proficiency; and

WHEREAS, the interests of the Oakland Unified School District in providing equal opportunities for all of its students dictate limited English proficient educational programs recognizing the English language acquisition and improvement skills of African-American students are as fundamental as is application of bilingual education principles for others whose primary languages are other than English; and

WHEREAS, the standardized tests and grade scores of African-American students in reading and language arts skills measuring their application of English skills are substantially below state and national norms and that such deficiencies will be remedied by application of a program featuring African Language Systems principles in instructing African-American children both in their primary language and in English; and

WHEREAS, standardized tests and grade scores will be remedied by application of a program with teachers and aides who are certified in the methodology of featuring African Language Systems principles in instructing African-American children both in their primary language and in English. The certified teachers of these students will be provided incentives including, but not limited to salary differentials.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT

RESOLVED that the Board of Education officially recognizes the existence, and the cultural and historic bases of West and Niger-Congo African Language Systems, and each language as the predominantly primary language of African-American students; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Board of Education hereby adopts the report recommendations and attached Policy Statement of the District's African-American Task Force on language stature of African-American speech; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Superintendent in conjunction with her staff shall immediately devise and implement the best possible academic program for imparting instruction to African-American students in their primary language for the combined purposes of maintaining the legitimacy and richness of such language whether it is known as "Ebonics," "African Language Systems," "Pan-African Communication Behaviors" or other description, and to

facilitate their acquisition and mastery of English language skills; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Board of Education hereby commits to earmark District general and special funding as is reasonably necessary and appropriate to enable the Superintendent and her staff to accomplish the foregoing; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Superintendent and her staff shall utilize the input of the entire Oakland educational community as well as state and federal scholarly and educational input in devising such a program; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that periodic reports on the progress of the creation and implementation of such an educational program shall be made to the Board at least once per month commencing at the Board meeting of December 18, 1996.

Appendix 2: Amended Ebonics Resolution

WHEREAS, numerous validated scholarly studies demonstrate that African-American students as a part of their culture and history as African people possess and utilize a language described in various scholarly approaches as “Ebonics” (literally “Black sounds”) or “Pan African Communication Behaviors” or “African Language Systems”; and

WHEREAS, these studies have also demonstrated that African Language Systems have origins in West and Niger-Congo languages and are not merely dialects of English; and

WHEREAS, these studies demonstrate that such West and Niger-Congo African languages have been recognized and addressed in the educational community as worthy of study, understanding and application of their principles, laws and structures for the benefit of African-American students both in terms of positive appreciation of the language and these students’ acquisition and mastery of English language skills; and

WHEREAS, such recognition by scholars has given rise over the past fifteen years to legislation passed by the State of California recognizing the unique language stature of descendants of slaves, with such legislation being prejudicially and unconstitutionally vetoed

repeatedly by various California state governors; and

WHEREAS, judicial cases in states other than California have recognized the unique language stature of African American pupils, and such recognition by courts has resulted in court-mandated educational programs which have substantially benefited African-American children in the interest of vindicating their equal protection of the law rights under the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution; and

WHEREAS, the Federal Bilingual Education Act (20 U.S.C. 1402 et seq.) mandates that local educational agencies “build their capacities to establish, implement and sustain programs of instruction for children and youth of limited English proficiency; and

WHEREAS, the interest of the Oakland Unified School District in providing equal opportunities for all of its students dictate limited English proficient educational programs recognizing the English language acquisition and improvement skills of African-American students are as fundamental as is application of bilingual or second language learner principles for others whose primary languages are other than English. Primary languages are the language patterns children bring to school; and

WHEREAS, the standardized tests and grade scores of African-American students in reading and language arts skills measuring their application of English skills are substantially below state and national norms and that such deficiencies will be remedied by application of a program featuring African Language Systems principles to move students from the language patterns they bring to school to English proficiency; and

WHEREAS, standardized tests and grade scores will be remedied by application of a program that teachers and instructional assistants, who are certified in the methodology of African Language Systems principles used to transition students from the language patterns they bring to school to English. The certified teachers of these students will be provided incentives including, but not limited to salary differentials;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Board of Education officially recognizes the existence, and the cultural and historic bases of West and Niger-Congo African Language Systems, and each language as the primary language of many African-American

students; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Board of Education hereby adopts the report, recommendations and attached Policy Statement of the District's African-American Task Force on the language stature of African-American speech; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Superintendent in conjunction with her staff shall immediately devise and implement the best possible academic program for the combined purposes of facilitating the acquisition and mastery of English language skills, while respecting and embracing the legitimacy and richness of the language patterns whether they are known as "Ebonics," "African Language Systems," "Pan-African Communication Behaviors," or other description; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Board of Education hereby commits to earmark District general and special funding as is reasonably necessary and appropriate to enable the Superintendent and her staff to accomplish the foregoing; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Superintendent and her staff shall utilize the input of the entire Oakland educational community as well as state and federal scholarly and educational input in devising such a program; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that periodic reports on the progress of the creation and implementation of such an educational program shall be made to the Board of Education at least once per month commencing at the Board meeting of December 18, 1996.