Ebonics: Colloquial Urban Jargon vs. Bona Fide Cultural Discourse

“If the language spoken in these contexts isn’t a language, then tell me what is,”
James Baldwin (qtd. in Smitherman 1).

Many of us are subjected to Ebonics frequently, possibly on an every day basis. We hear it walking down the street, while in line at the grocery store, even in the classroom. If we listen to ourselves close enough, we may even catch ourselves speaking the unfamiliar tongue. So if Ebonics, also recognized as Black Talk, Black English, Ghetto Speech, Street Talk or African American Vernacular English (1), is so commonplace in our society, why is its legitimacy as a language so thoroughly and frequently debated? Some argue that Ebonics is a primitive, unrefined, and uneducated means of communication, created and used solely by African Americans. Adjacent outlooks refute that Ebonics is in fact refined and has become progressively more educated as the language evolves. A wealth of research by prominent linguists such as Geneva Smitherman, J.L. Dillard, Jim Haskins, etc. prove the ladder statement to be most correct.

America is a country that prides itself on being diverse, a melting pot of any and all cultures. Consequentially, the result of this forthright acceptance of numerous ethnicities is the absence of an official national language. So why are there so many doubters of Ebonics as a “real” language, compared to a simple ethnic lingo? What makes this particular means of communication, which began in Africa and migrated to the United States with the slave trade, so frequently debated? Our acceptance of culture and diversity in comparison to the large distaste and open disapproval of Ebonics and the people that speak it condemns us as violators of the law of hypocrisy. Of course, the large majority of our country speaks English incorrectly, thus forming social and regional dialects of one of our country’s most prominent languages. With that being said, what makes these unique dialects of Standard American English less or more acceptable than Ebonics? Many of the opinions damning Ebonics are fueled by lack of experience with the language and, unfortunately, insensitivity towards African Americans and their storied culture.

Chapter twelve of author John Baugh’s book, Out of the Mouths of Slaves, rigorously covers racial identification within speech. Baugh, a renowned linguist specializing in the studies and examination of Ebonics, “evaluates reactions from 350 judges who were asked to record their impressions of different American English accents (135).” The eighteen individuals being judged were comprised of nine Caucasians and nine African Americans. Each individual spoke for between thirty and forty-five seconds about a topic selected from a vast array of themes. All racial or ethnic indicators were excluded to ensure that high-quality, unbiased samples were provided to the judges (139). The results of this cross-examination of linguistic dialects were primarily founded on perception and sensitivity towards diverse ethnicities. The linguistic sensitivity of the judges produced varying results; some speakers identified on a consistent basis as African American were diagnosed as such due to their use of “some slang expressions, along with nonstandard syntax and/or lexicon (e.g., “What it is?” or “They be gettin down at the
park”). Other speakers who were also identified as black Americans did not use nonstandard syntax or slang, but their phonological pattern was clearly influenced by nonstandard norms (143).

The struggle for racial equality in terms of language is an ongoing endeavor. Perception, both auditory and visual, played the most significant role in Baugh’s experiment, and proved to the judges as well as the participants involved, that racial insensitivity is a significant obstacle in the attempt to validate African American Vernacular English’s credibility as more than just informal patter.

“There is an underlying uniformity among Blacks, owing to the fact that race, meaning not just skin color, but also culture, history, and experience, continues to define African America (Smitherman 2).”

Historically speaking, African American Vernacular English has been in existence for centuries. This mean of communication has its roots planted deep into United States slave descendants and their struggles, documented most notably since 1619, the year that the first slave ship pulled into port in Jamestown (5). Adapting to the strict mandates of their slave drivers, Africans melded together the two languages of which they were familiar, African and English. Adaptation, “the psychological devices the human being employs in his social environment in order to ensure his health and his survival (Haskins and Butts 15),” was a pertinent as the need to become well-versed in the English language; education, specifically reading and writing, were at a premium for slaves. The more you knew, the better a chance you had to escape captivity.

As the 1800’s came and slavery was en route to becoming abolished, the African American population had grown exponentially, to over one million citizens. With the passing of the years, the diversity of African Americans reinforced the need for an all-encompassing means to identify with each other. Smitherman mentions, “There is an underlying uniformity among Blacks, owing to the fact that race, meaning not just skin color, but also culture, history, and experience, continues to define African America (2).” The adaptations made to Standard English began to take shape, warranting a need for its own classification. However, it wasn’t until the Black Freedom Struggle of the 1960’s that “a fundamental shift in linguistic consciousness as Black intellectuals, scholar-activists, and writer-artists deliberately and consciously engaged in an unprecedented search for a language to express Black identity and the Black condition (4).” The majority of work towards linguistic unity and representation took place as the Black Freedom Struggle became increasingly prevalent. The African American people still lacked terminology by which they could name their evolving dialect. It wasn’t until 1973 that the term “Ebonics” was coined. The man responsible for the term, an African American clinical psychologist named Dr. Robert Williams, wrote:

“A significant incident occurred at the conference. The Black conferees were so critical of the work on the subject done by white researchers, many of whom also happened to be present, that they decided to caucus among themselves and define Black Language from a Black perspective. It was in this caucus that the term Ebonics was created… [It] may be defined as “the linguistic and paralinguistic features, which on a concentric continuum represent the communicative competence of the West African, Caribbean, and United States slave descendant of African origin. It includes the various idioms, patois, argots, idiolects, and social dialects of Black people,” especially by those who have been forced to
adapt to colonial circumstances. Ebonics derives its form from ebony (black) and phonics (sound, the study of sound) and refers to the study of the language of Black people in all its cultural uniqueness (16).”

With the birth of this term, one could assume that the credibility and recognition of Ebonics as a language among society would soon follow. Unfortunately, that was not the case.

Smitherman, with the support and backing of her colleagues, was able to narrow the list of critical forces that influence and shape the direction and evolution of African American Vernacular English down to four: African language and cultures, traditional Black church, Black music, and servitude and oppression. As previously stated, the trials and tribulations experienced through oppression contribute greatly to the evolution of Ebonics as a language. The oppression experienced by African Americans screamed for adaptation, the type of adaptation previously defined by Haskins and Butts. Together, the two linguists were able to calculate the types of adaptations to slave status employed by Blacks: overt aggression, submissiveness and a plea for rescue, vicarious aggression in folk tales (i.e. Uncle Remus), and suicide (16-17). This behavior was prodded by anti-Black racism by Whites in our country. The linguists also shed light on a concept that they state is often overlooked as an adequate response to oppression:

“Soul is love, and it’s fed by the Southern farm and the big city ghetto. It’s being flexible, spontaneous. The soul brother is sensitive and frank. He’s cool, too, he judges things by what he sees, not just by what the credentials say. Where Black people meet, you find special warmth that you don’t find any other place. Soul brothers can communicate by using only the essence of a message – straight to the point. Results are more important than procedures (26).”

This “soul” that Haskins and Butts speak of is the all-encompassing cohesiveness that Blacks desired, cohesiveness the authors describe as “an effort to achieve a life-sustaining and culture-perpetuating intimacy and affection with other blacks (26).” With the idea of soul sprouted a distinct verbal style and vocabulary, demonstrated by words such as burn, fox, jive, and whale. These distinct words aren’t alone in characterizing Ebonics; the African American language has a wealth of significant variations of Standard English.

While there are many patterns indicative of African American language, far too many to mention in their entirety, there are many that I would regret not mentioning. For instance, on pages twelve and thirteen of Black Talk, Smitherman identifies such patterns as a final and postvocalic “r” in words such as summertime (Ebonically pronounced “summah time”), the reduction of compound vowel or consonant sounds to a singular form (such as “cold,” pronounced “coal”), as well as alternative stressors on multisyllabic words (i.e. “PO-lice” in lieu of “po-LICE”). She also offers the loss of “is” and “are”, variants of the verb form “to be”, exemplified in statements such as “What up” instead of “What is up”. Further evidence of this evolving dialect can be found in the objective and contextual use of tense, be it past, present, or future, i.e. “Mary do anything she want to”. The use of “be” and “bees” as indicators of continuous action or infrequently recurring activity, along with the substitution of “da” for “the”, for example, “Da man bees dat way sometimes.”

Chapter four in Haskins’ and Butts’ publication augments Smitherman’s findings. They also draw attention to the grammatical and semantic distinction of the verb form “to
be” (42), as well as mentioning the double negative found within the general consensus regarding the use of double negatives. The authorial couple make note of society’s use of double negation in Standard English (He is not without fear), as well as its translation to Ebonics (I didn’t see nobody) (41).

While those volleying for African American Vernacular English to be classified as simplistic, unrefined jargon may offer valid reasoning, those calling for it to be cataloged as an “official” (remember, our country has no official language) language undoubtedly have the upper hand in such a debate. What started as a means of simple communication, as well as a medium for rebellion in the slavery era, evolved, as every language has, into something more worthwhile. Not only do African Americans use Ebonics to communicate, they use it for communal purposes, to unite each other under a storied and prideful past while connecting with their ancestor’s troubles. Much of Ebonics’ more recent terminology may in fact be slang, however, all Black language is not slang. What is classified today as slang often becomes a part of tomorrow’s mainstream Standard English. White America’s overall inability to completely accept African Americans into their culture is the driving force keeping African American Vernacular English from being accepted as a legitimate language. However, my research, miniscule in comparison to the abundance of work in this area, has proven to me that Ebonics maintains many of the same characteristics other languages possess, thus leaving me with the unwavering notion that Ebonics is, in fact, and will continue to be, a concrete, valid, and legitimate language in the United States.
Works Cited

Works Consulted