

What happened in Oakland?

The ebonics controversy of 1996-97

Gertrude Stein, a native of Oakland, California, once said,

“Anyway what was the use of my having come from Oakland. It was not natural to have come from there ... there is no there there.”

Everybody's Autobiography, 1937

In 1996 the Oakland Unified School District passed a resolution declaring Ebonics to be the primary language of the African-American students in its schools.

The resolution further declared Ebonics to be a language in its own right, not a dialect of English. In the face of massive national opposition to the Oakland Ebonics resolution, this radical, separatist move shifted to a conservative, assimilationist one: Oakland retracted its declaration of linguistic independence and reaffirmed the traditional pedagogical goal of teaching students standard English.

But the Oakland Ebonics controversy reminds us that, although the English of former British colonies has come into its own in the literary, cultural, and political scene, to the point where we speak of World Englishes, the English varieties of what may be regarded as internal colonies, inner cities and the socially disenfranchised, continues to be stigmatized by speakers of more esteemed varieties.

Oakland School Board Resolution, Dec. 18, 1996:

African-American students utilize a language described as . . . Ebonics . . . or “African Language Systems” [which are] genetically based and not a dialect of English.

The Board of Education officially recognizes the existence . . . of West and Niger-Congo African Language Systems . . . as the predominantly primary language of African-American students.

Ebonics, a blend of 'ebony' and 'phonics' referring to what is commonly known as 'black English', was coined by psychologist Robert Williams in 1973.

Ebonics is a term not generally used by linguists, who currently prefer the term *African-American Vernacular English (AAVE)* and use it to refer to the inner-city speech form in question.

The Superintendent . . . 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 ... Ebonics ... and to facilitate their acquisition and mastery of English language skills.

The Oakland resolution called for federal bilingual education funds to support its Ebonics program, asserting that African-American pupils were on the same footing as Asian-American, Latino-American, Native American, and other pupils 'who come from backgrounds or environments where a language other than English is dominant,'

Federal authorities objected that the Ebonics program called for language maintenance, whereas federal bilingual education funds are earmarked only for transitional, not maintenance, programs.

African-American students comprised 53% of students in the district, were over-represented in special education classes and under-represented in gifted and talented classes.

- 64% of students retained, or made to repeat a grade, were African American.
- 67% of students classified as truants were African American.
- 80% of suspended students were African American. 19% of African American high school seniors failed to graduate.
- African American students had an overall grade point average of 1.80 on a 4.0 scale, the lowest grade point average for any ethnic or racial group in the district.

A special task force report focused on a number of issues:

- relations with the schools
- new conflict resolution programs for students
- improved nutrition with a focus on vegetarian alternatives to burgers and fries
- new community health services
- recruitment of African-American teachers
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- career and college counseling
- and neighborhood development.

The only issue that occupied the School Board as it discussed the report on December 18, the issue that resulted in a School Board resolution that day, was the recognition of Ebonics as an independent language.

The rest of the nation responded to the Ebonics resolution as a declaration of linguistic independence.

The *New York Times* declared,

‘by labeling them as linguistic foreigners in their own country, the new policy will actually stigmatize African-American children—while validating habits of speech that bar them from the cultural mainstream and decent jobs.’

A visiting African journalist wrote in the *Detroit News* that African-American children

“should not be encouraged to cling to a dialect that is bound to increase their alienation from their brothers and sisters in Africa, their fellow Americans and the rest of the English-speaking world.”

Jesse Jackson attacked the resolution promoting Ebonics as “making slang talk a second language,” “teaching down” to students, and “an unacceptable surrender, borderlining on disgrace.”

Columnist Deborah Saunders wrote,

“Apparently the board hasn’t noticed that many black students speak English just fine, thank you. Their parents may not want their kids forced into a linguistic ghetto.”

Maya Angelou argued that,

“the very idea that African-American language is a language separate and apart’ could encourage young black students not to learn standard English.”



I HAS A DREAM.

Does this bother you? It should. We've spent over 400 years fighting for the right to have a voice. In this town we'll use it. More importantly, is the how we'll teach our children to use it? If we expect more of them, we must not throw our hands in the air and agree with those who say our children cannot be taught. By now, you've probably heard about Ebonics

(aka, Black English). And if you think it's become a controversy because white America doesn't want to mixing with their precious language, don't. White America couldn't care less what we do to segregate ourselves. The fact is language is power. And we can't take that power away from our children with Ebonics. Would Dr. Martin Luther King,

Malcolm X and all the others who paid the price of obtaining our voice with the currency of their lives condemn this? If you haven't used your voice lately, consider this an invitation. **SPEAK OUT AGAINST EBONICS**
This message brought to you by America's Black Professionals.

The “I Has a Dream” ad in the *Atlanta Constitution*, placed there by an organization called Atlanta’s Black Professionals, warned,

“if you think [Ebonics] has become a controversy because white America doesn’t want us messing with their precious language, don’t. White America couldn’t care less what we do to segregate ourselves.”

Faced with such opposition, Oakland retreated to a more conservative position, passing a new resolution on Jan. 15, 1997:

- *genetically based* becomes “have origins in West and Niger Congo languages and are not merely dialects of English”
- new emphasis on learning standard English

The intention of the amended resolution was not to teach ebonics, but to employ

“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 new resolution adds,

“the Superintendent shall devise a 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’ . . . or other description.”

That didn't stop elected officials from trying to criminalize
'Speaking while Black':

A bill in the Georgia State Senate, passed Feb. 27, 1997, was sponsored by Sen Ralph Abernathy III and says,

“No course of study which teaches Ebonics as a distinct language shall receive state funds.” [Bill S.B. 51]

South Carolina's House passed a bill stating,

“The teaching of Ebonics is prohibited in the public elementary and secondary schools of this State, and in the state-supported institutions of higher learning.” [H.B. 3145]

And Oklahoma passed a bill banning Ebonics instruction and suggesting that black English could actually prove a threat to public order:

“Ebonics means an Africanized form of English reflecting Black Americans’ linguistic-cultural ties to their African heritage. Ebonics may also be known as Black English or Black dialect..... [As this action is] immediately necessary for the preservation of the public peace, health, and safety, an emergency is hereby declared to exist.” [, H.B. 1810]

The Oakland Board also put out the message that what they were really advocating was the Standard English Proficiency program, or SEP, a twenty-year old California program in use in many schools in the state and, in some instances, actually funded by the federal government.

SEP uses the methodology of foreign language teaching to move students from nonstandard to standard English.

Stressing contrastive analysis, teachers take the language that their students produce and ask them to 'translate' it into standard English.

Jesse Jackson visited Oakland and, happy with the revised resolution, confirmed as well the common assumption that black English is bad English:

“Just as you go from Spanish to English, you must go from improper grammar (ebonics) to English.”

The legal scholar Patricia J. Williams, writing in the *New York Times*, picked up on the complexity of black English:

“Can the notion of a singular black vernacular (if that is what ebonics purports to be) account for the enormous variations in black American speech?”

She noted wryly that black English is understood by those who don't use it:

“The contorted battles over rap lyrics as political speech – however densely vernacular the language is – have not been about the failure of the larger society to understand the words as English.”

She went on to challenge the equally problematic notion that there is a single agreed-upon variety of standard English:

“Is so-called Received Standard American English what most Americans speak anyway?”

And Louis Menand, writing in the *New Yorker*, concludes,

“The initial resolution of the Oakland school board was a reminder that linguistics has often been as much ideology as science ... Politics march right alongside the ‘scientific’ conclusions.

The notion that African-Americans speak an underdeveloped form of the speech of Southern whites who emigrated from England connotes racial condescension; the notion that they speak an independent dialect connotes racial pride; and the notion that they speak a distinct language connotes cultural separateness.

Everything seems to turn on which explanation you prefer.”

- the School Board chose to focus on language status for Ebonics out of a whole range of task force recommendations
- naming Ebonics as a language sparked a strong national reaction which began to dissipate once the assertion was retracted
- claiming language status for Ebonics underscores the helplessness of Oakland, the only school district in California with a majority black student population, in the face of massive student underachievement
- and the failure of the attempt to supply Ebonics with an army and a navy forces us to consider the ambiguous position of black English in the United States.

In a 1997 interview, Secret said,

“We in the Oakland SEP . . . dared to honor and respect Ebonics as the home language that stands on its own rather than as a dialectical form of English.

We see and understand that our language patterns and structure come from a family of languages totally unrelated to the Germanic roots of English.

In some programs, grammar and drill are strong parts.

I think our using second-language learning strategies has more impact on the students.

The view is, “We are teaching you a second language, not fixing the home language you bring to school.”

Secret continued,

“Our mission was and continues to be: embrace and respect Ebonics, the home language of many of our students, and use strategies that will move them to a competency level in English.

We never had, nor do we now have, any intention of teaching the home language to students.

They come to us speaking the language.”

Secret describes the method she uses for writing:

“When writing, the students are aware that finished pieces are written in English.

The use of Ebonic structures appears in many of their first drafts.

When this happens I simply say, “You used Ebonics here. I need you to translate this thought into English.”

This kind of statement does not negate the child’s thought or language.”

Even Secret's mother got with the program:

“Even my mother told me, ‘You know, Carrie, I wish I had only known I had to learn English better, and that it wasn't that I was using bad English.’”

The pretense that SEP methodology deals with a relative difference in linguistic form rather than an absolute notion of right and wrong quickly falls away in actual practice, as we can see from the following *San Francisco Chronicle* vignette from Secret's class, where she emphasizes 'correctness' rather than 'translation' from L1 to L2:



Oakland teacher Carrie Secret.

Photo by Kathy Sloane

Yesterday, Secret had her students read essays aloud and told them to *enunciate*.

“Jist for seven days ...” one boy began.

Secret interrupted him. “You said, ‘jist.’ Use it *right*.”

The boy *corrected himself using ‘just,’ the standard English translation.*

The acquisition of standard English, problematic as it may be in terms of pedagogy, has never guaranteed success in life or even access to the economic mainstream.

Discrimination -- on account of their language -- against people who speak non-standard English usually masks other, more sinister forms of prejudice.

Women and members of every ethnic and racial minority have found that mastering the mainstream varieties of language by itself will not guarantee them equal treatment.

Even if your language is irreproachable, if teachers, employers, or landlords want to discriminate against you, they will find another way to do so.

As teacher's aide Yolanda Hernandez cynically put it when asked by a reporter to comment on the furor generated by the Ebonics resolution,

“Proposition 187, Proposition 209, and now this. It's easy to see a pattern. They don't want immigrants here, and they don't want us to get jobs. But they want us all to talk the same.”

Oakland's School Board may have sensed their attempt to celebrate Ebonics was doomed from the start. The Dec. 18 Oakland resolution also allows African American parents to opt out of defining their children's English as a different language:

“African-American parents who view their child's limited English proficiency as being non-standard English, as opposed to being West and Niger-Congo African Language based ... [may] have their child's speech disorders and English-language deficits addressed by special education and/or other district programs.”

This remedial approach exemplifies how schools have been treating the language of black children for years, and in the end it did not differ all that much from how teachers supporting the Oakland Ebonics resolution, and armed with bilingual methodologies, treated their students' first language.

Yes, the Oakland Resolution failed because it was too radical.

But it also failed because the teachers and administrators of the Oakland schools share with the public a conservative view of language that focuses, in the end, not on the language students bring to school, but on vague, idealized, and poorly understood standards of correctness that students are told to acquire.

As the Task Force argued in its report, the problems of Oakland's underachieving African-American students are complex and require multiple solutions, attention to language being only a small part of the overall picture.

It is unfortunate that the language issue drew so much negative attention to Oakland.

A true linguistic revolution might have been just what Oakland needed, but I'm not sure what such a revolution would look like, and in any case, it was not to be.