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A LOOK AT EBONICS

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The term "Ebonics", coined by the author in 1973 at a conference on the language of Black children, was formed by combining "***ebony***" (black) and "***phonics***" (speech sounds). Two schools of thought on the origin of "Ebonics" are presented: (a) pidgin/Creole and (b) African retention. What sparked the national controversy on "Ebonics" was the Oakland school board's decision to recognize "Ebonics" as a legitimate language. The school board's primary goal is to discover more effective ways to improve African American children's acquisition of Standard English and reading skills. Many African-American children speak "Ebonics" or "home language". Using the language children bring to school as a bridge to teaching new language system is a widely used technique in school language acquisition [1].

Prior to December 1st, 1996, many people have never heard of the term "Ebonics". On that day, the Oakland, California, school board passed a resolution to accept "Ebonics' as a language to be used as a bridge to teach Standard English. The school board's decision created a firestorm of controversy. There was a disturbing rush to judgment on the merits and demerits of Ebonics. The media's negative spin on "Ebonics" created many misconceptions about "Ebonics". Some of these include:

Myth: The Oakland School District will teach "Ebonics" instead of Standard English to African American children.

Fact: The Oakland School District is not replacing the teaching of Standard English with any other language.

Myth: Oakland is condoning slang and street language.

Fact: Oakland emphasizes teaching Standard English.

Myth: The board is trying to reward failure and lower standards.

Fact: The board has set high standards of excellence for students.

Myth: The board is trying to secure federal and state funds.

Fact: The board already has funds to instruct non-English proficient students.

The basic goal of the Oakland School Board was to find better methods to instruct African-American children in Standard English and reading. The fundamental issue here is not whether "Ebonics" is a separate language or if the board is lowering standards. The real issue is that far too many African American children are not acquiring proficiency in Standard English and reading to facilitate academic success and career mobility. Thus, the question that needs to be raised is "Can we provide a word-class quality education for these children?"

It is clear that many African-American children speak "Ebonics" or the "home language" and they take it to school. That language is the language they have heard from their parents and grandparents. By the time they enter school, these children have internalized the basic features of the particular language in their environment. Thus, when these African American kids enter school speaking "Ebonics", they are told: "Don't talk like that" and they may be criticized and teased [2].

The important point here is that "My language is me. It is an extension of my being, my essence. It is a reflection and badge of my culture. Criticism of my language is essentially a direct attack on my self-esteem and cultural identity".

Ebonics 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 descendents of African origin. It includes the grammar, various idioms, patois, argots, dialects and social dialects of Black people. "Ebonics", also, includes nonverbal sounds, cues and gestures, which are systematically and predictably utilized in the process of communication by Afro-Americans.

If "Ebonics" is not a language, then what is it? Opinions differ. "Ebonics" is considered to be a dialect by some linguists. Others refer it to slang. There is also a strict point of view that defines "Ebonics" as deficient and lazy speech or speech of the uneducated. There are two schools of thought on the origin of "Ebonics":

(a) *The pidgin/Creole theory and*

(b) *The African retention theory.*

According to the pidgin/Creole theory, Africans were brought from many African countries to America. As a consequence, they spoke many different languages. The language developed is called pidgin, which is a simplified version of the languages of different slave groups. It is not the native language for any of the speakers. Whereas pidgin has no native speakers, Creole has pidgin as its source. The children of the slaves learned as their first language the pidgin that their parents spoke. That language is called Creole [3].

The next stage is referred to as Englishization-Ebonics, where the speaker maintains the original communication style, some lexical items and the ability to code switch. It is during this process that the language of the slaves began to level out in the direction of Standard English.

The second school of thought on the origin of Ebonics is that of the Africanist or African retention. Africanisms represent the deep structure of Ebonics. Some West African languages such as Ibo, Twi, Fon, Fante, Wolof are relatives of Ebonics. These are basically Niger-Congo languages geographically, and they are various dialects of the same system.

According to Dr.Ernie Smith, "Ebonics" is the African American's linguistic memory of Africa applied to English words. "Ebonics" is the linguistic continuation of Africa in Black Amerca. Some examples of African retention are:

1. *The absence of the double consonant: Consonant blends don't occur in the final position. West, best, test are pronounced in "Ebonics" as wess, bess, tess. With the words build, bold, hold, in "Ebonics" we get bill, bole, hole.*
2. *The lack of possessives: Daddy car, Bob house.*
3. *The lack of pluralization: Two boy, three girl.*
4. *The Zero copula or the absence of the verb: "We busy", "You tired?", "What you buy?"*
5. *Double and triple negatives: "I ain't never going nowhere with you no more".*
6. *Absent "d" and "ed": "He like my car". "It rain last night".*
7. *A good deal of "Ebonics" is found in the pronunciation of words: sandwich-samitch, shrimp-swimp, Saturday-Sadday, before-defoe, door-doe.*

Here are also given two examples of one and the same sentence in "Ebonics" and Standard English.

1. *Standard English: Mark the toy that is behind the sofa.*

   Ebonics: Mark the toy that is in back of the couch.
2. *Standard English: Point to the squirrel that is beginning to climb the tree. Ebonics: Point to the squirrel that is fixing to climb the tree.*

The resolution about Ebonics uses many different terms, each of them politically loaded: "Ebonics", "Black English", "Black Dialect", "African Language Systems", "Pan-African Communication Behaviour" [4].

We will use what we think is the most neutral term, "African American Vernacular English", abbreviated as AAVE.

1. Some linguists think that AAVE is merely an imperfectly learned approximation to real English, differing from it because the speakers are careless, and lazy, and don't follow the rules. It is "dialect", in the deprecating use of that word, or "slang".
2. To most linguists AAVE is one of the dialects of American English, historically most closely related to forms of Southern speech but with differences attributable both to the linguistic history of slaves and to generations of social isolation.
3. And there is also an opinion that while AAVE has the superficial trappings of English, at its structural core it is s continuation of one or more west African languages.

The conclusion we can make from "Ebonics" debate is the following: rather than see this language as something to be fixed, one has to understand its beauty. Then, one can acknowledge it as a wonderful language form, while one can also teach "edited" or Standard English.

LITERATURE

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