WRITE ABOUT EBONICS: A COMPOSITION COURSE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF AKRON

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For years, I was as baffled, bewildered, confounded, puzzled, and perplexed as any other writing teacher as to how to handle the numerous persistent non-standardisms in the writing of too many African American students, in my case, at the college level.[1] My answer is finally to have my students write about Ebonics, a solution with ramifications for all levels of English education.

Write about Ebonics??!! Yes, why not? Read about Ebonics, think about it, discuss it, research it, write on it, and do the same for the culture it supports. This is what happens in a new first semester freshman composition course that has become my way of validating African American language and culture and responding to the continuing educational crisis for African American students whose speech and especially whose writing displays features of Black English. In an exciting academic adventure, I have, since 1993, been teaching and overseeing specialized sections of a first semester English Composition course I designed at The University of Akron that focuses on matters of Black English.[2] Bringing the topic of Black English and related issues of language, culture, ethnicity, and race into the open has made for a stimulating, sometimes challenging, and truly rewarding classroom experience. The course turns our usual perceptions of non-standard language in the classroom inside out. In another twist, the course targets the general population, not just African American students. In doing these things, the course suggests

curricular reforms to meet the ongoing educational challenge posed by non-dominant varieties of English in the classroom, in particular, African American English. In this essay, after some preliminary discussion of the need for the course, I will discuss the major educational "enemies" the course defeats and then the linguistic and cultural content of the course, with implications for curricular reform woven in. The major strength of the course will be elaborated, namely, the value and respect it affords African American language and culture.

As you might imagine, since the course involves Black English, a common first reaction is that it must be remedial, or must entail lowered evaluation standards, or must be lax toward the need to teach standard English. Such pre-judgments couldn't be more wrong. The course is an elective option in the regular University of Akron English Composition program. As such, its writing goals and standards conform completely to national norms for English composition programs, of which the University of Akron's is quite typical. As a first semester composition course, it is atypical only in that, like honors sections, it has a specialized academic topic—African American language and culture—that guides the reading selections, the discussions, and the writing topics.

The Educational Need

When we think of the educational challenge posed by Black English from first grade on up, we may tend to think narrowly in terms of what the African American students in question need to do to improve their competence in standard English, as if the whole problem rests with them (or their parents). This tendency of thought persists at the college level, where the number of such students is well diminished but still quite evident, perhaps most visibly at community colleges and open enrollment universities like The University of Akron. Of course, these students, like any others, need to become fully competent in standard English to succeed in the University and, more to the point, in the larger society. Competence in standard English is an axiom of all English

education which is assumed for this course as it is for any other college composition course.

However, as I see it, the pedagogical need is much broader. If the educational goal of competence in standard English is to become a large scale reality for the population(s) in question, a new level of language awareness is needed on the part of everyone whose life touches on the education of African Americans; this includes not only "Ebonics-strong" students but other African American students, white students, teachers, administrators, and citizens at large. These sentiments are captured by Geneva Smitherman:

> I *strongly* recommend that white students learn the fundamentals of Black communication. Such a learning experience . . . will not only teach them to be able to understand and communicate with blacks, but in the process they will be turned on to other linguistic-cultural minorities within America. Such a perspective will go a long ways toward retarding linguistic-cultural chauvinism, which is surely the greatest impediment to world citizenship (235),

and, I might add, toward reaching our academic goals, since finally we, the people at large, must understand and accept the linguistic realities if the educational changes needed to help linguistic-cultural minority students are to become a reality at the state and national level. Meanwhile, individual teachers can and do make a difference.

In my classroom, efforts to validate African American language have brought new self-validation to those of my African students whom I describe as "Ebonics-strong" since, sadly, among those who disparage the language are its very speakers. When they gain a scientifically-based awareness of Black English, they often experience a sense of relief, a new degree of self-respect, and a new respect for the linguistic accomplishments of their forebears, in reversal of the linguistic shame they have borne from the overwhelmingly judgmental views of Black English in our

society (Baugh 10). Also, in my experience and that of others who have taught the course, teacher awareness of Black English leads to a sometimes patiently won but completely new level of teacher-student rapport and to more effective teaching of English. The language awareness I have personally gained over the years (from study as well as from my students) has been invaluable from a teaching perspective, and bringing that awareness to students has had great rewards. I have seen the powerful effect of Black English validation on African American students who may be quite competent in standard English but who often have a disparaging view of the ethnic language their African, now American, ancestors valiantly forged in order to build community where there had been none, where there had been no language in common, and where educational access to the language of the new land was denied. The emphasis on Black English awareness also has a powerfully beneficial, myth-breaking effect on white students who realize for the first time that Black English is rule governed, with its own grammar and history, and not the stereotypic mistakes of supposedly linguistically deficient mentalities. (The number of non-African American students who have taken the course has been relatively small so far; I hope this changes soon, as the course becomes more institutionalized.) The same powerful stereotype-breaking effect has occurred in the thinking of citizens outside the University, including businessmen and pastors, when they are informed and understand for the first time that Back English is linguistically and mentally sound.

Educational Enemies

The course speaks directly to the great educational enemies of Black English speakers, the greatest of which is, as I have heard Geneva Smitherman say, that "Black English is 'English.'" Because Black English is "English" and gets confused with and judged in relation to standard English, it is therefore viewed as "bad English." The language and its speakers thus immediately run into stigmatization problems, the same stigmatization problems that any non-immigrant speakers of diverse Englishes automatically

face (Villanueva xiv, 11). Foreign-born speakers of foreign languages learning English do not usually face the same stigmatization problems in school. In fact, special ESL training and certification are available for teachers at all grade levels. Foreign-born students are usually given special consideration not normally extended to citizens who are speakers of historically diverse varieties of English, like Appalachian English, Hawaiian Creole, Gullah, TexMex, other Latino varieties, native American varieties of English, rural Southern varieties of English, and of course Black English. When Greek immigrant students have trouble with standard English, it would be strange to disparage their native tongue and say, "What a terrible language Greek is." No one confuses Greek and standard English, and understanding is lent to such a student. You are more likely to hear, "Oh, are you Greek? That's nice. I have some nice Greek neighbors." But when students who are raised in a linguistic-cultural minority in our own nation reveal their minority English background in their speech or writing, no praise is returned to them, no "What a great feat of language your ancestors attained!"; instead, their language of origins is most often roundly condemned for not being standard English. How different things would be if Black English and the other varieties were viewed with the same respect as other languages.

The second great educational enemy of speakers of Black English is tied to the first, and it is that a very large number of Black English speakers themselves—and the vast majority of their teachers—do not believe that their mother tongue, the language of their upbringing, is anything but English. They therefore agree with the predominant but false belief that they speak lousy English or broken English, and they thus end up living under a terrible cloud of linguistic shame. When I begin to talk about the details of Black English as an independent variety of English with its own linguistic reality, Black students will often flatly deny the reality of what I am saying.[3] Those denying the reality are often also

convinced that their Black-English-influenced version of formal English is regular standard English, when it may not be, but maybe just with some occasional mistakes or typos. In the moment of denial, on more than one occasion, the words have been spoken, "We don't be talkin dat way," at which point I write the spoken words on the board and get a good chuckle of revelation from the class. So ingrained are the negative views of this variety of English throughout our society that when I first begin discussing Black English, some students have an immensely difficult time believing that a teacher, a white teacher, especially, can be saying anything good about Black English or its speakers (they may believe that I am just patronizing them), thus often predisposing them not to believe what is being said. When students' most formal way of talking and writing is not completely standard and they—and their teachers—don't know that their everyday language is truly distinct from and contrary to the standard, the consequences can be devastating. Such students receiving red correction marks on their papers time after time after time can only believe that they are intrinsically prone to error, that they are mentally incapable of better, or that the system is against them, thus feeding educational resistance (Ogbu 54, Kutz 185-88). The extent to which students (and their teachers) disparage their own language while simultaneously believing, incorrectly, that their most formal linguistic efforts are in all respects actually standard English poses a formidable educational hurdle that must be overcome for the sake of those students.

Many of us already know (through the efforts of such writers as William Labov, Geneva Smitherman, John Baugh, and John Rickford) what we all need to know, that Black English is not just a poor man's version of standard English, not a mere dialect in the popular sense of a corruption of the standard based on social, economic, and educational deficiencies. As James Baldwin, in his concern over the constant debasement of Black English, wrote, "A people at the center of the Western world, and in the midst of so hostile a population, has not endured and transcended by means of

what is patronizingly called a 'dialect.'" In fact, to echo Baldwin again, Black English, through that "alchemy that transformed ancient elements into a new language" (19), is a linguistic system worthy of being called a language and worthy of its own name. As discussed below, the facts of Black English grammar and its distinct history speak for themselves and reach for well-deserved respect. Once we are convinced that Black English is truly a language of a culture and people that continue in too large a measure to be isolated and insulated from the mainstream, there is little doubt in my mind that we will respond throughout the school system with innovative curricular efforts that can change the educational fortunes of many more African Americans and change the landscape of racial relations in our nation.

A third enemy of speakers of Black English, related to the others, is that, as they grow up, they do not expect to have to learn another language, nor do their teachers have this expectation of them. There is no acknowledgment in our nation that Black English is an intellectually legitimate and independent variety of English, another English language. Instead, we are stuck with the shocking stereotypes well cemented into our culture that young Black Ebonics-speaking students either don't have good language abilities, are mentally slow, don't care, are resistant to learning, lazy, troublemakers, or some such beliefs. (The popularity of 1994 best seller *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* by Hernstein and Murray, with its implication that Blacks are mentally inferior as a race, and the incapability on the part of many academics to refute the implication are a sure sign of how deeply ingrained in our culture these stereotypes are.) Ordinary kids of any color or ethnicity who are raised in a standard speaking environment have no trouble speaking and writing standard English (as in my case, where I spoke mostly Greek with my parents in the home). They aren't smarter; they are just kids who grew up with standard-English-speaking playmates. But ordinary Black kids who grow up with Ebonics-speaking parents in a mainly Ebonics-speaking background playing with Ebonics-speaking playmates and with no peer-pressured

access to standard English do have trouble with standard English. They're not less intelligent or less linguistically capable; they just didn't grow up interacting on a daily basis with standard English, and they are not well-informed on the need to negotiate two different kinds of English. Wouldn't it be good if we could help those students realize that there are (at least) two legitimate kinds of English, that the two have to be kept separate, and that this could be accomplished by "code switching" according to circumstance? Wouldn't it be good if we were trained to be able to teach this idea effectively?

Respecting Black English

Clearly, the way to overcome the educational enemies of Black English speakers is to bring respect to Black English. But bringing that respect is impossible in the usual remedial way Black English is treated. What will defeat these educational enemies of Black English is an English curriculum with language awareness and cultural awareness at its base, as exemplified in the course I am discussing and which I have packaged in a hopefully forthcoming textbook currently titled *Write about Ebonics: A Course in Composition, Culture, and Language Awareness*.

The emphasis on language awareness takes its lead from insights uttered long ago, when Carter G. Woodson, in *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933), criticized educators of his time for their negative attitudes toward Black English and for teaching their students, particularly Black students, to similarly ridicule their own language: "In the study of language in schools pupils were made to scoff at the Negro dialect as some peculiar possession of the Negro which they should despise" (19). He called for curricular reform in the teaching of language which "rather directed [students] to study the background of this language as a broken-down African tongue—in short to understand their own linguistic history, which is certainly more important for them than the study of French Phonetics or Historical Spanish Grammar" (19). By "broken-down African tongue," he was not criticizing Black English but rather making a statement about the African

background of Black English, which though clearly not an African language is a language with African language elements deeply in its background and influencing its development. It is a marvelous thing, for example, when students, black and white, realize that many common American words or expressions most likely derive expressly from African sources through former slaves, words like *dig*, *hip*, *cat (for person)*, *okay*, *banjo*, *yam*, *okra* and expressions such as *bad mouth*, *be with it*, and the use of *bad* to mean good (Dalby). Thus, Woodson makes the point that Black English and its history are worth studying and that it is important for their proper education to teach these things to African American students whose lives are immersed daily in this language.

A major goal of the course is in fact to present Black English as an independent kind of English, its own language, and to delve into its origins. As will be explained further a little later, this is accomplished through language readings and language awareness exercises throughout the course and a portion of the six assigned papers. Helping to establish the independence of Black English was the burden of my *College English* article, "Liberating American Ebonics from Euro-English," which forms the basis for the lessons contrasting Black English and standard English. In the article, I set forth many of the well-known grammatical features of Black English in contrast to Standard Written English in a way that emphasizes the deep and enduring differences between the two. Among the differential features discussed, ones that show up regularly in student papers, are absence of present and past tense endings, absence of possessive and plural endings, indirect questions that don't sound so indirect, use of "had" to mean past tense, past tenses used as past participles, negation agreement ("double negatives"), topic-comment ("double subject") constructions, and different approaches to subordination, among others. When these differences are taken seriously, Black English is seen not just as a variety of English but as a different kind of English with its own grammatical principles, different from and equally respectable to standard English or any other language.

I have found that putting the cleaver to standard English and Black English, separating them as far as possible, has had the most profound impact on students and the greatest impact on my ability to teach the grammatical aspects of standard English. Emphasizing that Black English is a language, or a separate variety of English, generates controversy and plenty of discussion, the eventual result of which is deep validation of Ebonics-speaking students and their heritage as well as desirable changes in others' attitudes toward Ebonics and its speakers. On the practical side, distinguishing Black English and standard English gives Ebonics-speaking students the strongest tool they can have for monitoring their code switching efforts. On more than one occasion, the rewards of this realization on the part of students have been almost instantaneous. A notable example is that of Dorthea, a student with "ghetto" childhood origins, who jumped from failure to high B when she retook business writing for the third time, but this time after taking the Black English section of composition. In giving her account of her remarkable improvement, she has written (in a follow up composition course): "Once I realized there was a reason for the way I speak and write, it made it easier for me to correct my mistakes. Black English is a "'legitimate' language, and should be recognized in the schools, community, and the world." Usually, the rewards for the more Ebonics-immersed student come after much longer periods of study and practice since, after all, the problem is not just one of correction, like going over an addition or subtraction mistake, but a problem of learning another grammatical system, which every linguist, language teacher, and ESL teacher knows is not an overnight accomplishment.

The legitimacy of and the separateness of Black English are not difficult to demonstrate once the grammatical facts of Black English are examined. Two examples from the course will suffice. The first has to do with the fact that, unlike standard English, Black English splits the past grammatically into the recent past and the remote past. Thus, standard English "Candace has done her homework" could be "Candace done did her homework" or "Candace been did her homework," the first meaning that she

had recently completed her homework and the latter, with prominent accent on "been," meaning that she had finished her homework some time ago. These uses of "done" and "been" both lend emphasis to their point. This two-tiered grammatical view of the past is not part of standard English grammar, nor has it ever been—and so could not have been derived from standard English grammar. The famous Black English "be" is another example of grammatical usage that is quite alien to standard English. In Black English, so-called "invariant 'be'" means "characteristically," or "over a period of time." It does not mean the same as standard English "is." For example, "invariant 'be'" can be used in a sentence like "I be livin' each day like it's my last"[4] where the standard English translation "I live each day like it's my last" has no form of "be," at all, and the attempt to use a standard form of "be" produces "I am living each day as if it's my last," which has a different meaning in that it answers a different question in context.

Such examples give solid evidence that Black English grammatical usage is quite distinct from standard English usage (see Labov 1998). Interestingly, these uses of "been" and "be" only very rarely show up directly in student papers; their utter distinctness is fairly easy to monitor out, although use of invariant "be" does occasionally crop up in the more Ebonics–strong students' writing. However, these forms may show up indirectly in "camouflaged" form that takes more training to discern (Spears 850). Exercises help students become aware of such differences between Black English and standard English and of the legitimacy of Black English grammar. Comparative exercises also help the Ebonics-strong student become more conscious of when code switching is called for and how to recognize camouflaged forms. Finally, discussion of such forms gives Ebonics speaking students a chance to affirm the reality of such usage, and, as experts, to discuss circumstances when they might use such verb forms.

Another kind of language comparison exercise, this time between Black English and a completely foreign language, like Malay, the national language of Malaysia, dramatically highlights the legitimacy of Black English structures. We often see African American students omitting plural endings on nouns, sometime omitting the verb altogether, or omitting possessive, past tense and present tense endings on verbs; interestingly, these are all features that can be found in Malay grammar and many other languages (such as Chinese). There have in the past been non-linguistic scholars who have ascribed such absences to supposed communicative, cognitive, and cultural deficits, a point of view that persists, even among educated people. However, a comparison of some simple Malay sentences with English straightens out such false thinking and brings very welcome respect to Black English, for speaker, non-speaker, student and teacher alike, since such usage turns out to be inherent in Malay grammar and the grammars of many of the world's languages.

In the Malay exercise, a set of primer-like Malay sentences and their English translations are presented so that it is easy to discover the meanings of the Malay words. The sentences are exemplified here:

Malay Sentence	English Translation
ini kuda	This is a horse
ini kain	This is cloth
kain hitam	The cloth is black
...	...
kuda ali bagus	Ali's horse is good
jualan ali bagus	Ali's merchandise is good
jualan ini bagus	This merchandise is good
...	...
kuda puteh ini dijual oleh ali	This white horse is sold by Ali

A student- and teacher-friendly inductive approach leads to basic understandings of Malay. It is easy enough to figure out that

kuda is "horse," *ini* is "this," *kain* is "cloth," and so on. Some true/false questions help uncover some basics of Malay sentence structure; for example: "True of false? All Malay sentences have a verb." The answer in this case is "False"; in the examples given, none but the last sentence has a verb, and even the last has no verb corresponding to English "is." Of course, this is a great place to emphasize the direct parallel with Black English.

The culmination of the exercise comes when the students are asked to do a super-literal translation of Malay sentences into English—word for word, word-ending for word-ending (no word ending in English if there is no word ending in Malay), using the same number of words in English as in Malay (the one exception to super-literalness is that the word order is to be English rather than Malay). The results are very interesting. Note the super-literal translation of the Malay sentences shown here:

Malay Sentence	Super-Literal English Translation
ini ali _____	This Ali
kuda hitam ini bagus	This black horse good
jualan ini bagus	This merchandise good
jualan ali bagus	Ali merchandise good

No one can miss the implications. The students quickly grasp how Ebonics-like these translations are. They see that Black English and Malay have properties in common that are foreign to standard English. They also see that although Black English and standard English may share most vocabulary, they can be and are structurally very different. Finally, it becomes clear that if we respect the language of Malaysia and its nearly identical cousin Indonesian as the national languages of a combined population nearly that of the United States, then this says volumes about the respect that Black English deserves but unfortunately does not get. As a follow up, students are asked to write a short response in

which they discuss what they have learned and the significance of the exercise.

Incorporating Black Language and Culture into the English Curriculum

The demonstration that Black English is worthy of respect is a central theme of the course, dissolving stereotypes and defeating the educational enemies of Black English language and its speakers. This demonstration is part of a larger picture in which Ebonics-speaking African American students are treated as students who come to school, not with a deficit of language and culture, but with their cup linguistically and culturally full. The idea that the student comes to school with a difference not a deficit enables the student—and teacher—to adopt an additive, enlarging approach to school and to proficiency in standard English rather than have to buy into the more usual subtractive, eradicationist approach, according to which African American language and culture aren't worthy of the school environment and must be abandoned (in school, at least), in favor of what the school has to offer (as if one has to "become white" to succeed). This additive approach entails a major shift in pedagogical perspective from a devaluing of Black language and culture to valuing them in the curriculum, itself. (I am not hereby espousing nor rejecting the more radical approach of Afro-centric schools, but rather arguing for changes in whatever school system that will validate previously un-validated students through the availability of curricular options, as will be discussed later.)

This shift in pedagogical perspective, which lies at the heart of the course, acknowledges that linguistic-cultural African Americans come to the table with valuable linguistic and cultural goods that add vibrancy and interest to the American melting pot and that can do the same for the classroom. When these are not valued in the curriculum, the implication, as Smitherman emphasizes in *Talkin and Testifyin* is clear: "The message of this white middle-class orientation is that the black child has nothing of

value and thus he or she must be uplifted and properly socialized by the school" (216). In other words, the current paradigm inherently patronizes and unwittingly demeans a whole class of Americans. This subtractive, patronizing approach to language, in particular, relentlessly corrects without acknowledging that Black English has a correctness of its own. It cannot be overemphasized how truly and deeply this current approach threatens the students' identity, both their individual identity and their community identity, as well as their confidence about their mental abilities. The shame of it is that this negative approach can and does cause educational resistance (Ogbu 54, Kutz 185-88), often resulting in the loss of educational opportunity.

The additive approach, incorporating African American language and culture into the curriculum, is the inner strength of the course because it acknowledges and shows respect for the heritage and community-developed talents of the students (such as verbal wit and love of poetic language). The additive approach validates the students' origins and asks the student to add what the school has to offer to their already existing linguistic and cultural repertoire so as to become versatile in both cultures. This approach still maintains the goal of the school system—to make citizens who are proficient in standard English and who can navigate the educational, professional, political, and commercial world where standard English is required—but incorporates language and cultural lessons that validate the student from the non-dominant English background.

Course Content

Thus, beyond the assumed writing goals of a first semester English Composition course (such as teaching thesis, detailed development, organization, transitions, sentence variety), the curricular goals of the course, ones easily applicable to other non-dominant linguistic-cultural groups and ones easily transferable to any level education, are to:

- demonstrate the respectability of the
  language variety as a language
- affirm the student's linguistic heritage
- affirm the student's cultural heritage
- place the student's language variety in its
  cultural context
- provide language awareness lessons that are
  accessible, interesting, and relevant to all—
  to speakers of the variety as well as to
  observers of the variety.
- provide pedagogical bridges to the standard
  as necessary.

In other words, provide an intellectually-based, language-centered, intercultural curriculum that will appeal to and benefit members of the culture as well as inquirers. The goals, it should be stressed, are anything but remedial and must avoid a remedial atmosphere and remedial attitudes. To implement these goals, the course incorporates language awareness lessons of the sort already illustrated plus readings and paper topics that touch on aspects of African American language and life.

In the first days of the course, a base-line diagnostic essay asks the students to write about their current attitudes toward Ebonics, Black English, or Black Talk. The readings then plunge them into the controversies surrounding Black English and Ebonics, with editorials like Chuck Stone's "Black English be Bad, Teaching it Much Worse" and Benjamin Alexander's "Black English: a Modern Form of Paternalism," on the one side, and James Baldwin's "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me What Is?" and Geneva Smitherman's "It Be's Dat Way Sometime," on the other. No need to tell you that with these readings, the course is instantly alive!

As in many college-level beginning writer's courses, the paper topics move from experiential through reflective to analytical modes, as in the following table, which shows the six

major paper topics for the semester and the general discussion topics out of which the papers emerge:

Discussion Topic	Paper Topics
0. What is Ebonics?	Baseline essay: "How I view Ebonics."
	I. Experiential
1. Language and slang	Paper #1: Definition of a slang word or expression
2. Culture and Communication	Paper #2: Ethnic communication styles
	II. Reflective
3. Culture and Names	Paper #3: What's in a Name?
4. Ethnicity, Language, and Self	Paper #4: Ethnicity and Identity
	II. Analytical
5. Language Attitudes	Paper #5: Attitudes toward Ebonics
6. The Ebonics Language	Paper #6: Explaining Ebonics

Because the topics are not everyday topics and require thoughtfulness, the students find it very helpful that model essays are provided for each of the paper topics; the essays were written by students who have taken the course. The authors of the model essays, like the authors of the readings for discussion, are mostly African American. The students seem to especially value having student models and also like to hear each others' papers read aloud.

The first four major topics don't require any special expertise on language. The first, on language and slang, helps the students distinguish slang as a fad-like complement of any language or variety from the enduring grammatical and lexical properties of Black English. The conclusion is that, although so many people view Black English as "slang," it is not essentially slang. The readings for this topic include a selection from Nathan McCall's *Makes Me Wanna Holler* on "jonin," also known as roastin, and a play called *Black Cycle*, by Martie Charles, which is written in Black English but which, nevertheless, contains little, if any, slang usage. Also lots of fun is Hurston's "Story in Harlem Slang," which is humorously overdosed with slang. The final reading by

Richard Dalby, "A tentative list of Africanisms and probable Africanisms in American English," was mentioned earlier.

The second paper, on ethnic communication styles, banks off of Smitherman's chapter in *Talkin and Tesifyin* on "The Form of Things Unknown," which elaborates on four common elements of Black communication strategies. The students are asked to write on their experiences with these and other forms or elements of communication in their experience, such as elements of greetings and departures, or the way rap is a means of communication and solidarity. Another sometimes useful reading is Deborah Tannen's chapter, "Ethnic Style in Male-Female Conversation" in *Gender and Discourse*. This chapter can open up interesting conversations about ethnic differences between the way males and females communicate.
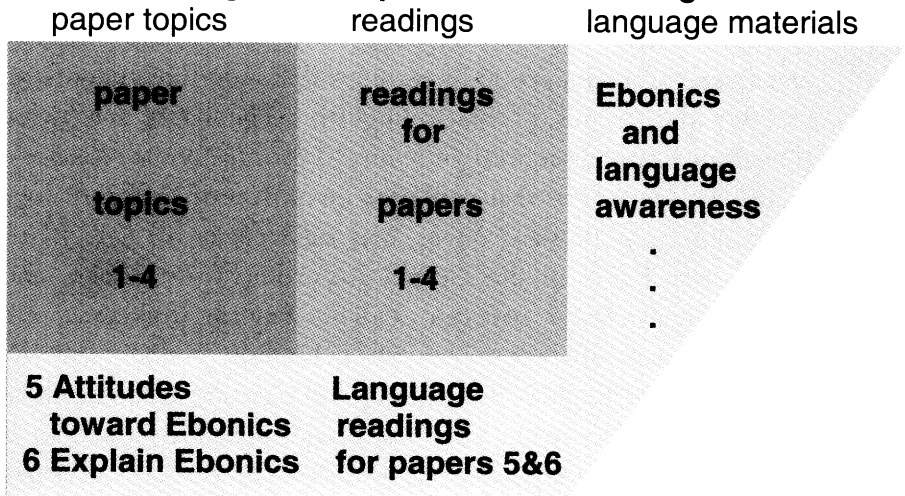
In paper 3, students explore and reflect on the origins, significance, and ethnic dimensions of their personal names— given name, family name, and nicknames. Through the discussions and papers, I have enjoyed discovering the rich significance of names and naming traditions in African American culture, as well as the interesting use of nicknames to mark eras and events in a person's life as well as different personal relationships. The readings for this topic include "Onomastic Divergence" by Eleanor Pharr, which discusses trends in coined names in African American culture. Excerpts from Lorenzo Turner's *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* show how alive African naming tradition is in America, in Gullah society (slave descendants located in Charleston and the islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia who speak an English Creole).

Readings for the paper on Ethnicity and Identity include Zora Neale Hurston's essay, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me"; a selection from Brent Staples' autobiography *Parallel Time*, "At The University of Chicago," in which he discovers how scary his race is to some people; Imamu Amiri Baraka's brief essay "Soul Food," in which he argues for the reality of Black culture; and Langston Hughes' "Theme for English B," an appropriate poem for the course.

Papers 5 and 6 are more analytical and require deeper understanding of Black English. Throughout the course, language awareness lessons along with grammatical and punctuation lessons have been accumulating in parallel with the readings on which paper topics 1 to 4 have been based. These language awareness lessons and exercises, together with the readings for papers 5 and 6, which are entirely on Black English, provide the background for these final papers, especially #6, in which students are asked to explain to others what they now think and believe about Ebonics. The background also includes two videos: "American Tongues" and the PBS documentary "English in Black and White."

The accumulation of background materials for papers 5 and 6 can be visualized in the following course schema showing three parallel streams that merge completely on the topic of Ebonics for papers 5 and 6:

Schema for English Composition I: Black English

paper topics	readings	language materials
paper	**readings for**	**Ebonics and language awareness**
topics	**papers**	.
1-4	**1-4**	.
		.
5 Attitudes toward Ebonics	**Language readings**	
6 Explain Ebonics	**for papers 5&6**	

For paper 5, students interview a variety of individuals to uncover their attitudes toward Ebonics. They are prepared for

the paper and the interviews by discussion based on Doss and Gross, David Shores, "Black Attitudes," selections from Bebe Moore Campbell's novel *Brothers and Sisters* in which language questions are highlighted, and position statements of the Linguistic Society of America and American Association of Applied Linguistics on the Oakland school board efforts of 1996. The interviews often produce interesting and often unexpected interactions and results which can make for interesting papers.

Paper 6 is the culmination of the course. By now the students have learned quite a bit about Black English, have struggled with the controversies surrounding it, have reflected on aspects of African American culture, and have arrived at a usually new but if not new a well-informed position to write about. They are asked to pick a specific audience, perhaps individuals or a group that emerged from the interviews for paper 5, and explain their current thoughts on Ebonics to that audience. The students often take stands that are controversial outside the classroom and are rather surprised at how far they have come. As preparation, the students read some summary material based on my "Liberating Ebonics" article, as well as John R. Rickford's "Suite for Ebony and Phonics," and a group of readings that help the students get a feel for the origins of Black English. The latter set includes selections from Susan Straight's novel *I Been In Sorrow's Kitchen and Licked Out All the Pots* that contain a good deal of Gullah dialogue, selections from *De Good Nyews Bout Jedus Christ Wa Luke Write*, a Gullah translation of the Gospel According to St. Luke, and a Cameroonian West African Pidgin English folktale. The grammatical parallels between Black English, Gullah, and West African Pidgin English are striking and exciting to contemplate, giving final fodder to the idea that Black English has a history that adds depth and significance to the linguistic heritage of African American culture.

Concluding Comments: Curricular Reform

To effect the pedagogical changes needed for the proper education of African Americans immersed in Ebonics and the

culture it supports, it is not enough to announce to students that Black English should be respected. The language must be shown to be a reality and to be worthy of respect. Doing so and maximally distinguishing Black English from standard is pedagogically very powerful, removing the shackles of debilitating stereotypes and liberating speaker of Black English and non-speaker alike, student and teacher alike. Weaving Black language and culture into the curriculum liberates the Ebonics speaker toward standard English, which is no longer the great threat to community, self, and personhood, but something that can be added as a tool for economic betterment and ability to negotiate life in the society at large.

Ironically, Ebonics, perhaps the most highly stigmatized variety, is also the best studied and has the best chance of setting the trend for a new pedagogy. For, as the Honorable Augustus F. Hawkins said, as quoted by the Oakland School Board, "Black children are the proxy for what ails American education in general. And so, as we fashion solutions which help Black children, we fashion solutions which help all children." The course I have outlined can be modified for any linguistic-cultural background as a way, in Eleanor Kutz's words, of "work[ing] toward the goal of making our particular academic community a welcoming one" (137), where, by "welcoming" she means the open and explicit welcoming of students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This is not a call to make all English courses into this kind of linguistic-cultural course. But it is a call to make such courses available as an option for members of the linguistic-cultural minority and for any interested parties. The idea that one generic composition course fits all has been proven wrong by the many years that this has been the norm and by the poor comparative performance of linguistic-cultural minorities in those courses for those same years. The success of the course I have discussed (to be elaborated in a forthcoming presentation) suggests that the most successful curriculum for students with African American linguistic-cultural heritage and thereby for students from any linguistic-cultural minority is one that

inherently values and respects that heritage and incorporates that message into the fabric of its curriculum. Such curricular change gives voice to those who have not had a voice (and in fact have often been quite silent in class for fear of embarrassing themselves), affords them a level of self-respect that has not previously been granted by the curriculum, and gives them the freedom to add the tools of the dominant culture to their repertoire—while increasing the joy of the teacher who now recognizes talent and potential where he or she had seen only deficit and inability before.

Notes

[1]This paper is an elaboration of a CCCC's 2000 conference paper, which was supported by a University of Akron Excellence in Teaching summer grant.

[2] I shall be using the terms Ebonics, Black English, and African American language equivalently.

[3] Part of this is sociolinguistically explained. When language is illustrated outside of its normal social and conversational context, it will never sound right. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to mimic a natural social and conversational context in the classroom. Also, when a teacher reads examples of another variety, the teacher, especially a teacher like myself who is not a native speaker of the language variety, reads or speaks with the wrong pronunciation and intonation, giving the students pause about the reality of the points being made.

[4] Example thanks to Timothy Sullen.

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