BLACK ENGLISH: PROBLEMATIC BUT SYSTEMATIC

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Black English, the speech of the working-class Negro, is both a symptom and a self-perpetuating cause of a number of problems in American life. As a social dialect with little or no prestige outside the black community, it reinforces the social barriers between the races. As a nonstandard dialect with rules quite different from those of prestige speech, it has remained largely immune to the traditional methods of teaching Standard English. And as a part of the ethnic identity of Afro-Americans, it is an emblem of the social and political upheavals in these times of racial crisis. From the standpoint of social, pedagogical, and cultural considerations, Black English merits the attention of the sociologist as well as the educator, of the enlightened humanist as well as the trained linguist.

Let us begin a consideration of Black English by defining the term as the characteristic speech associated with working-class Negroes. Several points of this definition should be emphasized here. First of all, Black English is recognized as a social dialect with a demonstrable correlation to social status and socio-ethnic stratification; hence Black English refers to the speech of the working-class Negroes, and not to those of the middle and upper classes. Secondly, it is different from the standard and nonstandard dialects of nonblacks. Even though some features of Black English also occur in other dialects, the relative frequency of occurrence determines the classifications of such items as diagnostic features. The justification for labeling the dialect in ethnic terms is explained by William Stewart's statement that "Negroes account for most of the pedagogically problematic nonstandard dialect speakers in the large cities, and also include within their group speakers of the most radically nonstandard dialects of natively-spoken English in the entire country." Apart from the understanding that Black English can be defined and treated as a problematic nonstandard dialect, scholars and researchers have not reached agreement in some of the more abstract considerations. There are, in fact, a number of hotly disputed controversies. The historical development of Black English is a question that has by no means been settled, for there is one school of thought (represented by Juanita Williamson) that holds that Black English developed from the British English of the early
settlers; another view (put forth by Lorenzo Turner and Ursula Walker) that the dialect has its origins in the African languages; and yet another contention (supported by William Stewart and Beryl Bailey) that it results from a pidgin-creole cycle. Another controversy, related to the historical question, is whether Black English differs from nonblack dialects as a result of deep-structure, or syntactic, rules (as Stewart and Bailey contend), or whether it is determined by surface-structure, or phonological, rules (as William Labov and Susan Houston assert).

Despite the controversies, however, scholars have collected a consistent body of empirical evidence which should serve to dispel several well-entrenched folk myths about Black English. First of all, as Raven I. McDavid, Jr., and Virginia Glenn McDavid have stated, “there is no speech form identifiable as of Negro origin solely on the basis of Negro physical characteristics.” And secondly, it is not justifiable to describe Negro speech in terms of a supposed racial inferiority manifested in “misinterpreted” speech sounds and “indolence” of speech habits. Thirdly, as Beryl Bailey has pointed out, description of Black English in terms of a “confusion” of Standard English is an ethnocentric denial of its use in precise communication by a large section of the population. Finally, as Joan Baratz has demonstrated, speakers of Black English do not suffer from any native deficiencies of verbal ability, since nonblacks have as much difficulty in mastering the system of Black English as speakers of Black English have in learning Standard English. Notions that attribute the nonstandard features of Black English to physiological peculiarities, racial inferiority, or careless use of language, can be refuted by even a brief examination of the systematic quality of some of its distinguishing features.

It is essential to keep in mind that Black English is a logical, coherent language system. William Labov stresses the point that “it differs from other dialects in a regular and rule-governed way, so that it has equivalent ways of expressing the same logical content.” Similarly, William Stewart expresses the view that Black English represents the use of a “language system which, though it may differ from standard English in form and sometimes even in function, is nevertheless logical, coherent, and . . . grammatical.” Marvin Loflin also emphasizes the systematic nature of Black English in stating that “although the structure may seem bizarre . . . it is definitely the result of rule-governed behavior.”

Field studies of Black English in such widely separated parts of the country as Washington, D. C., New York City, Detroit, Chicago, Memphis, and several communities in the South, have yielded evidence that the dialect is indeed systematic and regular.
Even within minor regional variations, the systematic quality of Black English is evident in both the sound system and the syntax.\textsuperscript{16}

The sound system of Black English is one of the means by which most people tend to distinguish that dialect from nonblack speech. Systematic features of Black English phones that are distinctive can be classed in three categories: paralanguage, suprasegmentals, and phonology. The first of these, paralanguage, has been defined by William Austin as “significant noises made by the nonarticulated vocal tract.” It includes such nonphonemic items as aspiration, glottalization, nasality, openness, clipping, lip rounding, and lip flattening.\textsuperscript{17} The second category, suprasegmentals, involves pitch, stress, and juncture.\textsuperscript{18} The functions of paralinguistic and suprasegmental items seem to be quite complex and difficult to describe and contrast with those of nonblack English. Other features of the phonology, however, manifest patterns that are more easily analyzed.

The phonological system of Black English is characterized, first of all, by what Bailey calls “terminal fading”: the loss or weakening of a final consonant, final consonant cluster, or final syllable of a word.\textsuperscript{19} In words terminating in a single velar stop (/k/ or /g/) or alveolar stop (/d/ or /t/), the stop is neutralized to a glottal stop (/ʔ/), producing homonyms of such words as like and light (/laɪ/ or /laɪt/) or bad and bag (/beɪd/). In words which end in a final consonant cluster, the final consonant is not pronounced; the tendency is particularly evident in words ending in /p/, /t/, /d/, and /k/. Susan Houston suggests that “final stops which appear in . . . [nonblack] English do not appear in Black English.”\textsuperscript{20}

Another feature of Black English phonology is the absence of /r/ in medial\textsuperscript{21} and final positions. Thus Black English has /frɛ/ for nonblack four, /drɛ/ for door, /kæd/ for carried, and /təmərəʊ/ for tomorrow. Williamson notes that the prestige dialect of Memphis substitutes a schwa (/ə/) for the /r/, but that Black English has neither the /r/ nor the schwa.\textsuperscript{22} Bailey attributes the absence of final /r/ to the overall tendency of terminal fading,\textsuperscript{23} which is a general characteristic of Black English. Similarly, Labov considers this deletion of final /r/ one of the diagnostic processes of the dialect.\textsuperscript{24}

The vowels of Black English resemble those of Southern dialects at all social levels, although Black English vowels are typically nasalized when they occur before or after a nasal consonant. The middle-central and middle-front vowels (or the vowels in bit and bet, respectively) are neutralized before nasal consonants so that pen and pin are both pronounced pin. Where nonblack speech has the dipthong /aɪ/, in words like five, mine, and ride,
Black English has the low front simple vowels /æ/ or /a/. William Carroll has observed that this monophthongalization, or reduction of a diphthong to a simple vowel, is phonologically conditioned: "the diphthong is retained before voiceless consonants as in write /rayt/, but reduced to a simple vowel before voiced consonants and in open syllables as in /rad/ ride and /fə/ fly."25

The phonological conditioning of monophthong and diphthong appears to be among the diagnostic features of Black English. This feature, as well as certain other qualities of the vowel system, the terminal fading, and the loss of final and medial /r/ are features shared by most Southern dialects. The occurrence of these features not only in the South but in the North, where they are socially stigmatized, justifies their inclusion as diagnostic features of Black English. Furthermore, these features occur more frequently in Black English than in any of the nonblack dialects. The same is true for other diagnostic features of Black English phonology, such as the occurrence of final /m/ as the present participial suffix, or the replacement of voiceless th, the interdental fricative, by /d/ initially and by /v/ medially and finally (e.g. /dɛm/ them, /fəvə/ father, /briːv/ breathe).

The phonological characteristics of Black English, then, are regular and predictable, not only in terms of themselves, but also in terms of contrast to nonblack Standard English. Just as the phonology of Black English is systematic, so is its grammar. The regularity of Black English syntax is particularly evident in some of its most characteristic features: the zero copula, the form be, the verbal predications, and the zero plural and possessive.

The zero copula, as defined by Stewart, is "the absence of an explicit predicating verb [or be] in certain dialect constructions, where Standard English has such a verb (usually in the present tense)."26 Bailey has demonstrated that the zero copula occurs in four specific syntactic environments: before adjectives, before nominals, before adverbs and prepositional phrases, and after the filler subjects there and it.27 Labov notes three additional patterns: before negatives, before present participles, and before gonna.28

Like the zero copula, the unmarked form be occurs in Black English according to specific rules. Stewart and others have pointed out that speakers of Black English "make a grammatical and semantic distinction by means of be, illustrated by such constructions as he busy 'he is busy (momentarily)’ or he workin’ 'he is working (right now)’ as opposed to he be busy ‘he is (habitually) busy’ or he be workin’ ‘he is working (steadily)’." The grammar of nonblack English is unable to make such distinctions.29 Ralph Fasold notes that the meaning of be "involves repeated but not
continuous occurrence," and that be occurs with special frequency "in the descriptions of holidays (which recur at regular intervals) and in descriptions of games (which are played repeatedly but not continuously)." Fasold further notes that all the adverbs which can co-occur with be, such as sometimes, everyday, and at night, "refer either to an extended period of time within which an event occurs frequently, or to a point in time which recurs."

In addition to the occurrences of be that are found exclusively in Black English, there are also syntactic environments in Black English in which be occurs just as it does in Standard English. The instances of unmarked be occur with the modal auxiliary, in the imperative, and in the marked infinitive. Labov, observing that Standard English cannot contract the form be in these constructions, has postulated a rule to account for these occurrences of be as well as the zero copula. He states that "wherever Standard English can delete is and are, and vice versa;" but "wherever Standard English cannot contract, [Black English] cannot delete . . . and vice versa." In addition, Fasold observes that, since all of these occurrences of be are without an accompanying tense indicator, "the absence of tense might be the solution to the analysis of be as a main verb."

The status of tense in Black English has not yet been defined, but J. L. Dillard and others have suggested that the dominance of aspect over tense is one of the major diagnostic features of the dialect. Bailey, who observes that "time information is not obligatorily carried by the verb," indicates that the inflected forms of be are nevertheless systematic in signalling time and duration. According to Bailey, was "is reserved for events which are completely in the past," been "extends from the past up to, and even including, the present moment," gonna is the intentional future, and be sometimes indicates simple future.

The question of the status of tense in Black English applies not only to the form be but also to the verbal predications. Verbs in the third person singular indicative, in the simple past, and in the past participle, are not inflected. The nonoccurrence of the past tense and participial suffixes (/d/ and /t/) is probably best explained in terms of the phonology, but it may also be evidence that the grammar of Black English does not require inflections of the verb to signal time.

Nouns and pronouns in Black English have zero inflections—that is, no obligatory inflection for plural number or possessive case. Bailey suggests that such inflections are optional, while Carroll suggests that there is a strict regularity governing the use
of the plural inflections. He observes that "nouns preceded by a
word indicating plurality, such as numerals and other qualifiers,
are not inflected for plurality," but "when there is no such indi-
cator . . . the noun is marked." Possession seems to be signalled
by simple juxtaposition. Zero inflections are also manifested in
unmarked pronouns, or "the use of the same pronoun form for
both subject and object, and sometimes for possession as well."39

There are, of course, more complete and more detailed descrip-
tions of Black English than the present paper. Even a brief and
selective examination of some of the defining characteristics should
serve to indicate something of the complexity and regularity of
the dialect. The contrast between the system of Black English and
that of Standard English has important implications for educators.
A pedagogical consideration of Black English should begin with
an awareness of the systematic quality of the dialect and a realiza-
tion that structural interference apparently complicates—or even
prevents—the mastery of Standard English. Stewart has described
the dialect-based language problems of black ghetto children as
"the purely structural conflict between . . . the patterns of a non-
standard dialect . . . and the equivalent patterns of Standard
English."40 He recommends an oral-aural approach analogous to
the methodology of teaching English as a foreign language.41

It has indeed become clear in recent years that traditional
teaching methods have not been successful in imparting a working
knowledge of Standard English to speakers of Black English. A
new pedagogy is clearly called for. Instead of the well-established
methodology that attempts to eradicate Black English and then to
replace it with standard textbook English, Roger Shuy advocates
what he calls "biloquialism"—teaching a standard school English
as an additional dialect, to be used in social situations where Black
English is not acceptable.42

James Sledd has challenged the entire concept of Black English
as a social problem, charging that the social stigma attached to
the dialect is a manifestation of white racism.43 Deploiring racial
intolerance, however, does not remove the fact that Black English
is a social dialect stigmatized by the majority of the dominant
culture. Even if the negative social value of Black English were to
be removed through a genuine appreciation of cultural differences,
the fact would remain that Black English creates problems in the
teaching of reading and writing as well as in social acceptability.

The field of sociolinguistics is not concerned so much with
eradicating racial prejudice per se as it is with investigating the
characteristics of Black English, determining which features are
socially stigmatized, and developing a pedagogy that is capable of
Black English

giving black ghetto children an alternative dialect that is not a social liability.

NOTES

2. “Relative frequency of occurrence” is a subjective criterion but a serviceable one. The definition of Black English here follows the precedent of Ralph W. Fasold, “Tense and the Form be in Black English,” Language, XLV (December, 1969), 763.
7. Ibid.
10. Ibid., p. 7.
16. Since it has not been determined whether the diagnostic features of Black English are entirely phonological or both phonological and syntactic, it might be more appropriate to consider all such features entirely from the standpoint of phonology. For the purposes of the present paper, however, it is more convenient to treat phonology and grammar separately.
21. For the absence of medial /r/ in Black English, one possible explanation is the combined influence of other Southern dialects and the social stratification
that reinforce the diagnostic features of Black English. Some analogies seem to exist in the linguistic situation described by Raven I. McDavid, Jr., in "Post-vocalic /-r/ in South Carolina," AS, XXIII (October-December, 1948), 194-203.


25. Teaching a Second Dialect and Some Implications for TESOL, ERIC Document ED 015 479 (September, 1967), p. 34.


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