Black English and Implications for Teachers*

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Today there is a wealth of research available which contains evidence that there is a variety of the English language spoken primarily by Blacks, especially in the large urban centers of our country. This "Black English" has been studied extensively, using a number of research designs focusing on various aspects of the language. Black English has been studied from a cultural, sociological, linguistic, psycholinguistic, psychological and an education perspective.

While little of the research is conclusive, and not all is in agreement by any means, there have emerged some points of commonality so far. There is general agreement that Black English is a viable language with a linguistic distinctness of its own. There is general agreement that this linguistic distinctness causes problems for teachers in the schools and a general agreement that the existence of Black English is a cause of a good deal of the lowered reading achievement scores and problems with written composition in urban inner city schools.

THE STUDY

Just what seems to be an appropriate response to the existence of Black English is something the researchers are not in agreement on. Some argue that teachers need to ignore the language the student brings to school and substitute a structured language program drill in an attempt to replace that language. Others claim that teachers need, instead, to recognize and build on the language

*This paper is based on the author's doctoral dissertation, "Word Associations Among Selected Groups of Junior High School Students" (Doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1972).

1William Labov, Language in the Inner City (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972) summarized most of these studies.

that the student already knows when he arrives in school, perhaps even preparing teaching materials reflecting Black, rather than "Standard" English.³

This writer did research with the latter view in mind. The study was a comparison of two groups of junior high school students on the basis of their responses to a word association task. One group of students was entirely Black and the other group was entirely White. To further insure linguistic difference, the schools were entirely separate, being about one hundred miles apart.

Students in each school were first asked to write down as many words as they could think of in a thirty-second "production task." These words were then analyzed, with high frequency words from each group being considered as "familiar" to each group. Later these students were given the word association test with stimulus items which included nouns, adjectives or other words used in previous word association studies⁴ and some of the "White familiar" and "Black familiar" words.

Analysis of the data included a study of commonality, i.e. responses given in common by the black students and the white students. If half or more of the responses were the same, the commonality was calculated at .50 or better. The figure below shows the results.

Figure 1.
Proportion of commonality over .50 by stimulus class.

⁴Labov, op. cit., p. 254.
⁵Most of these stimulus items came from Doris Entwisle, Word Associations of Young Children (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1966).
It is obvious that stimulus items felt to be familiar to the black student in this study had lowest commonality. It was also discovered that this low commonality was not due only to the fact that white students and black students rarely gave the same response to the stimulus item but also to the fact that the black responses were extremely diverse. Even comparing black responses to other black responses produced low commonality.

CONCLUSIONS

There definitely is a variety of English which can be called Black English. The existence of Black English can be illustrated through the use of a word association technique. On the basis of the word association results in this study, Black English appears to be shared rather minimally by speakers not in contact with it. Since many public school teachers come from areas where they may not be familiar with Black English, they may have to study it before attempting to teach in the inner-city. This study also shows, in addition, that Black English is very diverse and that even black students may not have the same responses to it. For this reason the study concludes that the preparation of teaching materials written in Black English for use in urban inner city schools may not be the answer to the problems of reading and writing in those schools.

Certainly there appears to be no easy solution to the linguistic distinctiveness of many black students. More study needs to be done and more teachers have to become aware that Black English is a language in its own right before we will see solutions to the problems of inner city teaching and learning of reading and writing.