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AFRICAN-AMERICANS, EBONICS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR CULTURAL IDENTITY

‘The nation could not survive being deprived of their (African-Americans’) presence because, by the irony implicit in the dynamics of American democracy, they symbolize both its most stringent testing and the possibility of its greatest human freedom.’

(ELLISON 2003 : 588)

Introduction

“Yeh,” replied the realtor, but there’s one more thing I wanna get straight: How about that darky dialect? You can’t change that.”

“It isn’t necessary, my dear Foster,” explained the physician, patiently. “There is no such thing as Negro dialect, except in literature and drama. It is a well-known fact among informed persons that a Negro from a given section speaks the same dialect as his white neighbors. In the South you can’t tell over the telephone whether you’re talking to a white man or a Negro. The same is true in New York when a Northern Negro speaks into the receiver. (...) There are no racial or color dialects; only sectional dialects.”

The above excerpt comes from George S. Schuyler’s *Black No More* written in 1931. Despite the fact that Black English and White English do influence each other, it would be a gross mistake to say that no differences exist. As John McWhorter demonstrates:

“Most Americans, and especially black ones, can almost always tell that a person is black even on the phone, and even when the speaker is using Standard English sentences” (J.R. RICKFORD and R.J. RICKFORD 2000 : 101, DILLARD 1977 : 5)

There is abundant research that suggests American English has a colour, so that listeners are able to identify a caller as Black or White on the basis of his/her

pronunciation. The success rate is in the range of 80 to 90%. In one particular study John Rickford observes that one sentence is often enough for the listener to determine the hue of the caller. In his research conducted in 1972 Rickford asked speakers to say: "Hey, what is happening?". Incredible as it may seem, the accuracy of identification was 86%. The listeners' decision was made on the basis of inflection, intonation or the pitch of the utterances.

Ebonics¹ goes by a number of names: *Spoken Soul* – coined by Claude Brown, *this passion, this skill... this incredible music* according to James Baldwin (J.R. RICKFORD and R.J. RICKFORD 2000 : 3), *Soul Talk, jive, the Black vernacular, African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), Pan African Language in the Western Hemisphere, Negro Non-Standard English, African Language Systems, Black dialect*. Rickford and Rickford (2000 : 3) point to the love-hate relationship concerning Spoken Soul in the USA today. It is revered and reviled, beloved and beleaguered. One fact remains certain, though, it cannot be brushed aside by the general public because of its importance, dynamism, symbolism, and pervasiveness among African-Americans.

What exactly is Ebonics?

Whether Ebonics is a bastardized form of English, a dialect or a language in its own right has become a moot question ever since it was first posed. Essentially, the answer to this baffling question does not seem to be contingent upon the power of intellect but a political affiliation. The Linguistic Society of America (LSA), articulating its support for the drafters of the Oakland Resolution and its pedagogical merit, had this to say:

"The distinction between 'language' and 'dialects' is usually made more on social and political grounds than on purely linguistic ones. For example, different varieties of Chinese are popularly regarded as 'dialects', though their speakers cannot understand each other, but speakers of Swedish and Norwegian, which are regarded as separate 'languages', generally understand each other"). (LSA, Chicago, Illinois, January 3, 1997)

Those who are apt to equate Ebonics with a sub-standard, unrefined, or lazy form of Standard English seem to forget that in the 17th century newly-emerged, Africans-cum-slaves were prohibited from and punished for reverting to their native tongues. Being compelled to use English they were also expected to leave behind the baggage of their cultures as well as their social and religious rites. They had a new name and an outlook on life thrust upon them. To ease the process of de-Africanization, slaves were

¹ The term was coined by the psychologist Robert L. Williams in 1973, by combining *ebony* (black) and *phonics* (sounds). The term itself attracts criticism on many counts, including one that attacks it for the use of the *phonics* part, as there is no other name of a language that would so strongly hint at the phonetic dimension only. The critics claim that the name Ebonics may create an image that Black English is not a language per se but merely a set of sounds that are distinct from Standard American English.

mixed so that they did not have a lingua franca, for fear of revolts. These reasons, and *not* laziness or obtuseness on the part of African-Americans, have been instrumental in making Black English as distinct from SE as it is now. The overly simplistic, not to say, crude and uneducated view that Black Americans could speak SE, neglects to take on board the legacy of history – Blacks were denied education for political reasons. Teaching them meant running the risk of revolts. To keep the Black man down was a well thought-out course of action motivated by the desire to keep him politically, culturally and yes, linguistically, too, isolated from the rest of society. This very reason is one of the many determinants that has created the linguistic rift between Black and Standard English. Sadly, the yawning gap between the two variants is widening – they are not converging but are growing more and more apart for reasons that will be elucidated below.

What for some White Americans may seem a broken, uneducated and inferior form of English, '*the patois of America's meanest streets*', or '*a mutant language*' is, in reality, an expression of identity, racial solidarity and respect for African-American traditions – so much so, that 'going standard' or doing the white 'thang' is frowned upon among members of the Black community. To speak '*whitese*' is to betray one's Black cultural past and to risk social stigmatization as a result. So much importance is attached to Black talk that it is used despite the palpable linguistic prejudice and many erroneous notions about Black speakers' intelligence. Those who want to '*keep it real*' know that Black talk is the medium of expression.

Black English is not only a set of words or some grammatical differences. Above all, what makes it dissimilar from SE are its unique verbal traditions such as *he-said-she-said disputes* among African-American girls (to determine who said what behind somebody else's back, *fronting* (being deceptive), *dissing or trash talking* (being disrespectful), *reading* (exposing someone's insincerity), *signifying* (criticism of somebody's sexuality, physical appearance or intelligence using clever, witty and spiteful repartee, e.g. *You're so ugly, you went into a haunted house and came out with a job application* (MORGAN (in:) G. BAILEY, J. BAUGH, S.S. MUFWENE, J. R. RICKFORD, (ed.) (1998 : 268-271). A sub-form of *signifying* is also known as *playing the dozens* (talking negatively about someone's mother – e.g. *Yo mamma so fat she went to the movies and sat next to everyone*).

What argues in favour of Black English being a language and not merely a sub-standard dialect of English is the presence of quite well-researched rules of grammar, syntax, and pronunciation. To claim that there is no uniquely Black lexicon is a fallacy scholars specializing in Ebonics have to dispel. There have been a number of scholarly volumes whose sole task was to compile a list of '*words from the hood*' e.g.: *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner* by Geneva Smitherman, or *Lexicon of Black English* (1970) by J. L. Dillard. Needless to say, slang, by very definition, is a very transient part of the lexicon, albeit exceptionally colourful, vivid and playful. What holds true for slang in general is also true for Black talk. The meaning of one and the same word in Black English may differ from block to block. Moreover, English words having been appropriated by African-Americans may take on an altogether different meaning. Also,

what is perhaps beneficial for the distinctiveness of black words is that a host of words simply cannot be taken from it since they denote a uniquely Black experience, e.g. *saddity* to describe African-Americans who display a rather cavalier and presumptuous attitude towards others. Another well-known feature of the Black lexicon is the fact that as soon as a black word crosses over and is picked up by Whites, it loses its *hipness*; it is not cool to use it anymore – it is shunned, and so a need to coin new, innovative, original meanings is generated among the Black community, especially by rappers and hip-hoppers (as in this case: *hip* → *together* → *cold* → *mean* → *raw* → *ill/sick* → *pro nasty*) (SMITHERMAN 1977 : 70). In 1998, Margaret Lee, a Hampton University professor, compiled a list of over sixty words from Black English that have been adopted in General American e.g. *homeboy*, *high-five*, *main squeeze*, *chill out* (J.R. RICKFORD and R.J. RICKFORD 2000 : 98) or *cool* (itself being a loan translation from the Mandingo expression for a type of slow music – *suma* (J.R. RICKFORD and R.J. RICKFORD 2000 : 52).

Ebonics and Black culture

‘For the transmission of a culture – a peculiar way of thinking, feeling and behaving – and for its maintenance, there is no safeguard more reliable than a language’. (T.S. ELIOT)

To claim that Ebonics is reflective of what we term *Black culture* and that it is a tool for perpetuating and defending the African heritage along with the contemporary distinctiveness of the Black experience, we must first begin by addressing the question whether slaves were able to retain their culture after centuries of bondage. There appear to be three theories that could be adopted here. Orlando Patterson (HALE-BENSON 1986 : 10-11) offers us the *catastrophic* view (African slaves were plagued by so many evils of White bondage that the cultural ties they shared were completely destroyed), the *contributionist* view (the focus is on the contribution to so-called civilization made by Blacks), and the *survivalist* view (the trauma of slavery notwithstanding, the Black man succeeded in retaining his unique cultural heritage). Back in the 1930s, scholars did not go to the trouble of studying the cultural roots of African-Americans because the common opinion held that there was no culture to speak of. The fallacy perpetuated at that time unequivocally stated that African societies had no culture or civilization and that Africans learned what culture was only upon setting foot on American soil. (Some researchers apparently thought of conducting research to prove whether the size of slaves’ brains has grown as a result of their encounter with the White man) (HALE-BENSON 1986 : 11).

Although data are not too abundant we should state that Blacks were, to a large degree, able to maintain the cultural heritage brought from Africa despite the nagging pressure to kowtow to the ways of *Ol Massa*. Looking only at the number of revolts,

escapes, or suicides, we must conclude that the slaves' approach to the White oppression they were under was never passive. Moreover, the enforcement of cruel laws against the population of slaves such as nailing their ears to a post for the smallest of offences helped Blacks cement their vehement opposition towards their White oppressors and become clear about the importance of rallying behind their culture and identity.

Language was certainly one of the many ways in which slaves were able not only to demonstrate their anger but also to plot against their brutal masters relying on the vernacular Blacks understood and Whites often could not penetrate. Hence, their Black talk has to be perceived as an effective weapon in the whole arsenal of measures against Whites and also a proof of what DuBois labelled '*double consciousness*'. Smitherman gave it a more scientifically-sounding name '*the push-pull syndrome*' defined by Arthur K. Spears (BAILEY, BAUGH, MUFWENE, RICKFORD, 1998 : 248) as:

the dual personality caused by the cohabitation of two consciousnesses or cultural systems within one mind, the White and the African-American, the hegemonic and the subaltern.

On the one hand, having spent some time in bondage, the oppressed Africans resigned themselves to their doom and accepted some forms of the White way of life. On the other hand, they resisted the influence of the dominant White culture, fearing its erosive effect upon their cultural ways. In this respect, little has changed since the dark and gloomy days of slavery in the United States, that is to say, Black talk is still a means of building a protective, linguistic rampart between Black and White America. It is used by the vast majority of African-Americans today, at least some of the time:

'black identity, it is the symbol of a culture and a life-style that have had and continue to have a profound impact on American popular life; it retains the association of warmth and closeness for the many blacks who first learn it from their mothers and fathers and other family members; it expresses camaraderie and solidarity among friends, it establishes rapport among blacks; and it serves as a creative and expressive instrument in the present and as a vibrant link with this nation's past' (J.R. RICKFORD and R.J. RICKFORD 2000 : 10).

To summarize, let us finally proceed to the crux of the Ebonics controversy and confront the most burning question – why are Blacks so persistent in falling back on this variety of language despite open hostility and animosity they must be prepared to contend with as they do so? The reasons are manifold – African-Americans cling to Black talk because:

- it is natural;
- this kind of speech is authentic;
- it is a natural avenue of expression for channelling emotions;
- it is most effective in helping reach out to the recipient of the message, to connect with the audience;
- by using SE a Black American might project the image of being somewhat

aloof;

- adopting SE may mean *acting white*;
- the ability to *talk the talk* is often the acid test whether one is actually Black or not;
- it preserves the ‘soul’ of their speech community;
- it creates a positive rapport within brothers and sisters in the Black community, e.g. when a professor switches back to the vernacular to put his/her students at their ease and to forget about the daily strife of living in a White-controlled environment (J.R. RICKFORD and R.J. RICKFORD 2000 : 221-225).

As stated above, Black idioms and words often cross over and become accepted by American society at large. Interestingly, it is not only words from the Black English lexicon that cross over to the mainstream American English. Some forms of the Black way of life follow the same path as well. This cultural trend has given rise to the emergence of a *wigga* – a white boy emulating his Black peers in speech and behavioural patterns. Just like mass culture everywhere appropriates some elite culture genres and forms, White America seems to borrow cultural products from African-Americans, often distorting them beyond recognition and taking credit for their success. The saddest part of the cultural exchange is that the only element of the Black community that has not crossed over appears to be the African-American himself. Greg Tate inquires bitterly:

Why does everyone love Black music but nobody loves Black people? (TATE 2003 : 5)

White rappers (an oxymoron?) copy the style of black rappers and hip-hoppers, forgetting that

‘From the outset rap music has articulated the pleasures and problems of **black** urban life in contemporary America. (...) They (Black rappers) rap about how to avoid gang pressures and still earn local respect, how to deal with the loss of several friends to gun fights and drug overdoses.’ (ROSE 1994 : 2)

The most fundamental and commonplace rationale behind rap lyrics is, after all, to articulate and dramatize what *Black* artists and their audiences fear and fret over in modern-day, inner-city life, becoming a social steam valve and a catalyst for further improvement of their condition. Apart from that, rap helps strengthen Black identity, the formation of which takes place very early in a Black child’s development routinely following a five-stage order: *pre-encounter* (when a Black child absorbs bits and pieces of the dominant, White culture), *encounter* (when the impact of racism is felt more personally), *immersion* (when a Black child is actively searching for symbols of his/her racial group trying to learn more about race), *internalization* (a child becomes secure in its own racial environment and accepts it) and *internalization-commitment* (a Black child is ready to grasp the broader meaning of being Black and to transcend the negative side of it) (CROSS in: TATUM 1997 : 55-76).

Conclusion

Ebonics thrives in the Black community on the grounds of linguistic isolation Blacks are in. Race, poverty and spatial segregation are largely to blame for the status quo. In 1986 Labov hammered home an unpalatable truth to the average American: many Black children start their school experience having never exchanged a word with a White person. Unfortunately but rather unavoidably, the White versus Black dichotomy has permeated the sphere of linguistics and education, too. Between the two races under scrutiny here, there is still very little of what De Bois called *intellectual commerce*. Indeed, members of respective races are still very much bound by the colour-line separating both their houses as well as their thoughts.

African-Americans are often torn between two tendencies – on the one hand they aspire to join the ranks of the Black middle-class by becoming highly-trained professionals, which means adopting the culture of mainstream America and the language spoken there, but on the other hand they are also reluctant to relinquish their way of talking, facing linguistic separation and rejection as a result. Finally, let us be mindful of the fact that Ebonics

has allowed blacks to create a culture of survival in an alien land, and as a by-product has served to enrich the language of all Americans (SMITHERMAN 1997 : 2)

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