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SOCIOLINGUISTICS AND THE PUBLIC:
DIGGING AND BEING DUG IN RETURNJOHN R. RICKFORD, *Stanford University*

I am tempted first to tackle some of the big theoretical and descriptive issues with which sociolinguists (students of language in society) have wrestled for the past quarter century. But then I remember that, as the twentieth century set, two questions about the role of language in American education and social life were being hotly debated. The first was the Oakland Ebonics controversy of 1996/97, which was essentially about whether African American children's English vernacular should be taken into account in helping them master mainstream or standard English. (Most of the public said no, although existing methods which ignore the vernacular often fail miserably.) The second was whether bilingual education should continue. (California voters said no in 1998; Texas voters said yes in 1999; Arizonans said no in 2000; and other states will undoubtedly consider it later on.)

These two issues and their symbolic and practical significance for millions of native speakers and their neighbors convince me that I should use the opportunity presented by the 75th anniversary of *American Speech* to address this primarily applied issue: How can sociolinguists, whose positions on these and other language-related issues are often so different from those of the general public, learn to communicate better with the public, so that they more clearly understand our points of view and we more clearly understand theirs?

In terms of getting them to dig us (*dig* 'understand', possibly from Wolof *deg(a)*, is one of the oldest American slang terms; see Major 1994, 136; *DARE* 1985-, 1: 67; Smitherman 2000), numerous encounters with the public during the Ebonics controversy have convinced me that it's difficult but vital to present our subject in ways that nonlinguists can understand and enjoy. Moreover, it may be easier to convey the fundamental idea that vernacular varieties are more systematic with phonology than they are with grammar.

For instance, in talks and popular writing (Rickford and Rickford 2000, 104–5), I’ve tried to show that in Ebonics and other American colloquial varieties, speakers unconsciously attend to the voiced/voiceless distinction in deciding whether they can delete the second consonant in word-final consonant clusters. As sociolinguists know from early research, if both word-final consonants are voiced (as in *hand*) or voiceless (as in *past*), the second consonant can be deleted. But if one is voiced and the other voiceless (as in *pant*), the second consonant cannot be deleted. The challenge, however, is to explain the distinction between voiced sounds (in which the vocal cords are held together and vibrate noisily) and voiceless sounds (in which the vocal cords are spread apart). To do this, I draw on a pedagogical strategy in Catford and Ladefoged (1968, 3), asking people to put their fingers in their ears and alternate between prolonged *s* and *z* (sssszzzzsssszzzz). In countless presentations before nonlinguists, this somewhat goofy but dramatic exercise has proven to be VERY effective. Folks are actively involved, rather than passively listening (or daydreaming), their smiles and head nods indicate that they dig it right away, and the fact that the example involves processes and regularities they were previously unaware of helps make the additional point that most rules of language are unconscious.

When it comes to grammar, however, matters are complicated by the widespread view that forms and structures that differ from those of the standard or mainstream variety are “incorrect” or indicative of limited education. As one American Online contributor put it during the Ebonics controversy: “The kind of speech that is referred to as ‘black English’ is incorrect and substandard.” I try to hammer away at the misconception that “anything goes” in Ebonics by noting that invariant *be* is generally used only for actions that recur frequently or habitually, as in *He be dancing Saturday nights* rather than for onetime ongoing activities, as in *He be laughing right now*. But the fact that uninflected *be* is nonstandard in English if it doesn’t occur in imperatives (*Be quiet*) or after *to* and modal auxiliaries like *can* and *must* (*he must be quiet*) makes it harder for nonlinguists to see it as governed by rules of ANY kind. After my 1997 magazine article appeared, one reader wrote in to say that while she had enjoyed it, the notion that “incorrect” rules were “rules” was wrong.

Those of us who want to influence public opinion and policy with respect to language will have to search for better ways to demonstrate the systematicity and validity of vernacular grammar as well as phonology and to share successful strategies with each other. We will also have to show that we can not only talk the talk but walk the walk, as Walt Wolfram, Natalie Schilling-Estes, and their colleagues have done with dialect awareness

programs (publications, tapes, and CDs) on Ocracoke Island, North Carolina, and as William Labov, Tina Baker, and others are doing with a practical manual to help black kids in Philadelphia overcome decoding problems in reading.

We will also have to abandon the unspoken ideology that we know everything and the public knows nothing. For instance, many linguists disdain the idea of standard or mainstream English itself and the idea that speakers of vernacular varieties like Ebonics should have to learn “standard English” for success in school or at work. But I am struck by the fact that most black parents and educators say they want themselves and their kids to have access to the standard as well as the vernacular. And it seems both self-righteous and hypocritical (since most linguists control the standard) for us to deny the validity of this view. In this, as in other respects, we must learn to listen better. Or as Langston Hughes put it: “My motto / As I live and learn / is / Dig And Be Dug / In Return.”

JOHN R. RICKFORD is Martin Luther King Centennial Professor of Linguistics and Education at Stanford University and director of African and African American Studies there. His research and teaching interests include sociolinguistic variation and change, pidgins and creoles, and African American Vernacular English. His recent book, *Spoken Soul* (2000), coauthored with his son Russell, won an American Book award.