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## Using the Vernacular to Teach the Standard<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

I want to begin by congratulating California State University at Long Beach for holding this conference, particularly in a climate in which there is so much ignorance and hostility. I am especially glad to see so many Latino scholars here, indicating that an interest in the language and education of African American students does not imply any lack of interest in the language and education of Latino students, or any other population, for that matter. I begin with these remarks because the director of an educational program in Northern California invited me to speak on Ebonics early in 1997, just after the Ebonics controversy broke; then she wrote a little later to withdraw the invitation since one or two of her Latino board members felt that attention to Ebonics might detract from attention to, and funding for, bilingual education.

In response to that understandable but misplaced concern, I wrote to tell her what my friend Dr. Geneva Smitherman has also been emphasizing recently: *A rising tide lifts all boats*. We should not be squabbling over crumbs from the table. The needs of various groups of students in our schools are similar in some ways but different in others. We should be concerned about the success of ALL students, and work together to provide each group with the resources it needs to maximize its chances of success in school and life.

In early 1997, I was corresponding often with Don Trujillo, who, at the time, was a policy representative in Sacramento. He sent me lots of information on California Senate Bill 205, the so-called "Education: Equality in English Instruction Act." Had it been successful, this bill would have wiped out the Standard English Proficiency Program [SEP], which is specifically designed to improve the Standard English skills of Ebonics speakers. This would have been a devastating blow, not only for schools in the Oakland area, but throughout the state.<sup>2</sup> Trujillo also sent me information on California Assembly Bill 36, which would have gutted bilingual education in California of a lot of its key features, but this bill failed to pass out of committee on April 23, 1997.<sup>3</sup> Trujillo's attitude, reflecting a concern for the language-related educational challenges of ALL students of color, indeed, for ALL children, regardless of ethnicity, is commendable, and your presence here indicates that you are like him in this respect.

By contrast, California State Assemblywoman Diane Martinez successfully introduced on February 28, 1997 Assembly Bill 1206, which "prohibits school districts from utilizing, as part of a bilingual education program, state funds or resources for the purpose of recognition of, or instruction in, any dialect, idiom, or language derived from English." This bill was clearly aimed at forestalling any attempt to use bilingual education funds for speakers of Ebonics or African American English, and it was eventually approved and signed into law. It represents that defensiveness and terror in the ranks which caused the Northern California Director to withdraw my invitation to speak on Ebonics. Hopefully, we can dispel that unnecessary defensiveness and fear, and work together for the good of ALL the students in California and across the nation.

Let me go on now to explain my title, "Using the vernacular to teach the standard." By the *vernacular*, I mean more generally "the everyday [and informal] language spoken by a people as distinguished from the literary language," (*American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* 1992, p. 1984). And I mean more specifically the vernacular dialects "which seem to be typified by the use of nonstandard forms" (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, 1998, p. 13). By the *standard*, and more specifically standard English, I mean "the variety normally used in writing, especially printing;...the variety associated with the education system...the variety spoken by those who are often referred to as 'educated people';" (Trudgill, in press, p. 2-3). As Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1998, p. 12) point out, what linguists call standard or mainstream English is often referred to popularly (if ambiguously) as "correct English" or "proper English." These two terms tend to be defined in a negative fashion by saying, "if a person's speech is free of structures that can be identified as non-standard [e.g. ain't for 'isn't'], then it is considered standard."<sup>4</sup>

Ninety percent of what was written and said in the media after the Oakland Ebonics resolution of December 1996 represented a misapprehension of the nature of the problem and the nature of the solution which Oakland was proposing. Most writers and commentators made a big fuss of emphasizing how important it was for children to learn standard English in this society. To this the Oakland School Board might simply have replied, "Yes, we agree. But what's next? HOW are we going to do it?"

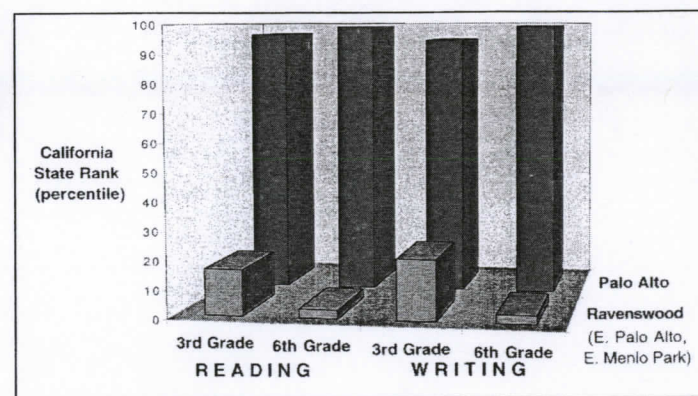
#### How (badly) schools have failed to educate African American students

Oakland's original aim was to extend the Standard English Proficiency [SEP] program which had been in place since 1981 throughout the state. That program has as its goal using the vernacular to teach the standard. I want to get that point straight at the beginning. I also want to begin where Oakland began, which is with the facts of *massive educational failure within the African American community*. The fact is that existing methods throughout the country are not working. The insinuation of the many vocal critics of Oakland's Ebonics resolution was that Oakland's innovations were misplaced, and that the existing situation in Oakland and in the rest of America was JUST FINE, thank you. However, the fact of the matter is that the status quo with respect to the teaching of African American children in American elementary, middle, and high schools is far from satisfactory. One of the tragedies of the media coverage of this Ebonics issue is that it never really got to the kinds of problems which started Oakland thinking about Ebonics and other solutions in the first place.

Many of us have heard already of the kinds of failures among African American students which are evident in the Oakland School District in late 1996; for instance, the fact that these students, who comprised 53% of the school district population, represented 80% of all suspended students, and recorded the lowest grade point average (approximately a "C-"). For more details, see this web site: <http://www.west.net/~joyland/Oakland.htm>, and for links to that and other interesting Ebonics web sites, see "Jacqueline's Ebonics Information Page" (<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Forum/2522/>). I do, however, want to point to a number of other examples across the country so that you don't think this is just an Oakland or a California problem. You know how people from other parts of the country sometimes think, "Those folks in California are different, and kind of weird, anyhow."

What I want to do, first, is have you look at the test scores from Palo Alto and East Palo Alto ("Ravenswood" school district) shown in figure 1. The tall bars at the back here represent the children of Palo Alto, California. Palo Alto is right in the middle of Silicon Valley. It includes a lot of professors' kids, many of the children of computer scientists, and other highly educated professionals. Palo Alto has some of the best public schools in the country. Looking first at reading, the first two tall bars in the back, you'll see that Palo Alto students in the third grade score at the 96th percentile on the California Assessment Program test; and by the sixth grade, they score at the 99th percentile. Scoring at the 99th percentile means, of course, that they are better than 99% of students in the state, that is, better than everybody else! In writing, they score at about the 94th percentile in the third grade, and by the sixth grade, they are at the 99th percentile and they continue like that. If they were ever to slip to the 92nd percentile, Palo Alto would have a big national conference to figure out what's going wrong.

Figure 1  
CAP Test Scores for  
Palo Alto and  
Ravenswood, 1990



Source: *Peninsula Time Tribune*, November 8, 1990, p. A12

Now step across the freeway to the Ravenswood School District in East Palo Alto. As figure 1 shows, the primarily African American and Latino students here in the third grade score at the 16th percentile on the reading component of the California Assessment Program, but by the sixth grade, they've dropped to the 3rd percentile. (Statistics that I haven't included in this figure show that by the eighth grade, their reading scores have dropped even further to the 2nd percentile.) If you look at writing, they score at the 21st percentile in the third grade, but by the sixth grade they're once again lower, at the 3rd percentile. This represents the regular pattern. Somehow, the Palo Alto Schools are able to build on the skills and talents their primarily White children bring to the school and *add value* to them, so that very rapidly kids are performing at their maximum potential. Somehow schools in East Palo Alto, with African American and other students of color, fail to do that, *subtracting value* instead. Students come in with a certain level of achievement and do steadily

worse with each passing year. This is a forcible demonstration of the point which Claude Steele (1992:68) made in his important *Atlantic Monthly* article on Race and the Schooling of Black Americans: "The longer they [African American students] stay in school, the more they fall behind."

Lest you think that this is another weird California phenomenon, let us look at some recent data from predominantly African American schools in Philadelphia.<sup>5</sup> In the 1995-96 school year, 41% of the students at one Elementary School (Birney) were reading at the basic level or above as tested on the SAT-9, and the school's overall reading score was 56.9. At a high school (Benjamin Franklin), in the same district, however, the percentage of students reading at or above the basic level was only 7.6%, and the overall reading score was 24.4. The 1996-97 statistics show a similar downward spiral, although the extent of the drop between the elementary and high school levels is smaller. Thirty-four point four percent of the students at Birney Elementary School read at or above the basic level, and the school's overall reading score was 52.7; at Benjamin Franklin High School, only 14% of the students read at the basic level or above, and the school's overall reading score was 41.9.<sup>6</sup>

More comprehensively, Michael Casserly, Executive Director of the Council of Great City Schools, presented data before Senator Specter's US Senate Ebonics panel in January 1997 summarizing the performance of students in fifty large urban public school districts, including among them hundreds and hundreds of schools. Among other things, the data indicated that while White students in these schools show steady improvement in their reading achievement scores as they get older (60.7% read above the 50th percentile norm at the elementary school in 1992-93, and 65.4% did so by high school), African American students showed a steady decline (31.3% read above the 50th percentile norm at the elementary school level, but only 26.6% did so by high school). Moreover, data from the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress which he also presented show the same depressing trend in a different way. On a 500-point scale, African American students at the age of nine are an average of 29 points behind the scores of their White counterparts; by the age of thirteen they are 31 points behind; and by the age of seventeen, they are 37 points behind.

I cite these different data sets to make the point quite forcefully that whatever you may think of the Oakland School District and their Ebonics resolutions, the educational malaise of African American students in their district is general across the United States, particularly in urban areas. Moreover, the methods currently being used to teach reading and the language arts to African American students—with which the detractors of Oakland's Ebonics solution seem to be quite satisfied—are flat out NOT working.

Now clearly factors other than language, or even methods of teaching reading, are involved in this kind of failure. Obviously, there are socioeconomic and class issues (see Rickford, in press), and issues about the kinds of *facilities* which schools in primarily African American and White school districts tend to have. I was present at a meeting which the Rev. Jesse Jackson had with Board members of the Oakland Unified School District on December 30, 1996 (when he announced his revised position on their Ebonics resolution), and I was struck by his statement that the average US prison with large African American populations has better facilities than the average school with large African American populations. There's a frenzy of prison building, expansion, and renovation across the country as communities discover they're good business. There's not a similar frenzy of school building and improvement, so we should not be surprised at declining levels of school performance.<sup>7</sup> And unfortunately, those who drop out of schools are more likely to end up in prisons or otherwise

fall into the clutches of the criminal "justice" system. As Jones (1995, p. 9) has noted, drawing on a 1995 report by the Sentencing Project, a national non-profit organization, "one in three Black men between the ages of 20 and 29 are within the grasp of the criminal justice system."

There are also problems in terms of the kinds of teachers which most urban school districts are able to attract and the training they have. These problems are related to the fact that urban schools tend to pay lower salaries and have more challenging working conditions. And there are problems in terms of books and supplies. My wife Angela, a reading specialist, was doing a demonstration lesson in the teaching of reading recently at an urban school in the San Francisco Bay area. She asked the teacher for a storybook to read to the class. The teacher said, "Storybook?" She didn't have any! The classroom lacked the shelves and tables of gaily colored and attention grabbing storybooks that are customary in suburban schools. Luckily, one of the students in the classroom had in her backpack a book she had happened to bring to school, and that was the book Angela used to demonstrate the teaching of reading.<sup>8</sup> Finally, teachers in schools with primarily African American and other ethnic "minority" populations tend to have lower expectations for their students (Irvine 1990:54-61) and to ask less challenging questions. The evidence is overwhelming (see Tauber, 1996; Rickford, A., 1998) that teacher expectations are closely tied to student achievement. If teachers expect you to do badly, you are more likely to do badly; and if they expect you to do well, you are more likely to do well.

#### The relevance of Ebonics

While factors like facilities, supplies, teacher pay and training, teacher expectations, parental involvement, and others are indisputably relevant, and I would add my voice to those of others urging that these receive greater attention (see Irvine, 1990; Comer, 1993, 1997; Cose, 1997), I would strongly dispute the claim of Ellis Cose (in *Newsweek*, January 13, 1997, p.80) that Ebonics, the language which many African Americans bring to school, is "irrelevant."

On theoretical grounds alone, we would assume that the language of African American students plays SOME role in the level of success they achieve in school since language is so closely connected with cognitive abilities and with performance in other school subjects. As we know, students who do well in English tend to do well in a variety of subjects across the curriculum; and those who don't do well in English, don't do well in most other subjects, either.

But there is empirical evidence that language might be related to achievement. We know, for instance, that most of the students who fall behind in reading and otherwise fail in inner city schools (see above) are from the working class, rather than middle class. And we know that the distinctive pronunciation and grammatical features of African American Vernacular English or Ebonics are used most commonly by members of the working and lower class. Consider table 1, which summarizes data from Wolfram's (1969) study of Detroit.<sup>9</sup> Except for consonant cluster simplification and absence of plural -s, every other Ebonics feature in that table is far more frequent among the working class groups than among the middle class groups; for instance, the lower working class uses multiple negation 78% of the time, while the upper middle class does so only 8% of the time.

**Table 1**  
Use of selected AAVE features in Detroit, by social class (from Wolfram 1969)

FEATURE	Lower Working	Upper Class	Lower Middle	Upper Class
Consonant cluster simplification NOT in past tense (p. 60)	84%	79%	66%	51%
Voiceless th [θ] --> f, t or Ø (p. 84)	71%	59%	17%	12%
Multiple negation (p. 156)	78%	55%	12%	8%
Absence of copula/auxiliary <i>is, are</i> (p. 169)	57%	37%	11%	5%
Absence of third person present tense -s (p. 136)	71%	57%	10%	1%
Absence of possessive -s (p. 141)	27%	25%	6%	0%
Absence of plural -s (p. 143)	6%	4%	1%	0%

Actually, the Detroit figures for working class Ebonics usage are not even as vernacular as the data we have from East Palo Alto (source of the Ravenswood School District figures in figure 1). In the latter community we have recorded working class teenagers (see Rickford, 1992) with copula absence figures of 81% and 90%, compared with the means of 57% and 37% in Wolfram's Detroit study, and with third singular present tense -s absence of 96% and 97%, compared with 71% and 57% in Wolfram's Detroit study. So there's definitely a socioeconomic class boundary which operates with respect to Ebonics usage.<sup>10</sup> And the fact that working and lower class African American students tend to do worse in school than their middle class counterparts may well be related to differences in their language use or to teacher's attitudes and responses to their language use.<sup>11</sup>

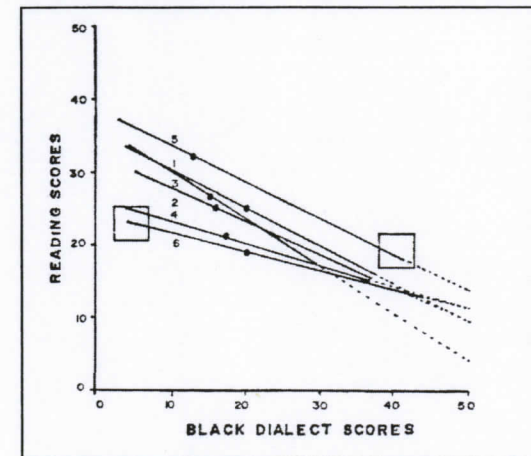
The relevance of negative teacher attitudes to Ebonics was a key element in the 1979 ruling of Justice Joiner that the Ann Arbor, Michigan school district had failed to take adequate measures to overcome the barriers to equal education posed by the language of the African American children at Martin Luther King Jr. elementary school (Smitherman, 1981; Labov, 1982). But the evidence concerning negative teacher attitudes and responses to the vernacular of African American children had existed even earlier. Williams (1976) reported from a series of experiments that there were regular correlations between teachers' assessment of the relative "standardness" and "ethnicity" of students' speech and their ratings of the children's status and their confidence or eagerness: Students who sounded more non-standard and/or non-White were also rated as being less promising or effective students. What was worse, Williams and his associates also found in a separate experiment that prospective elementary teachers' perceptions of the relative standardness of children's speech were also affected by the children's race; "...the same sound track, when accompanying a videotape of an African American or Mexican American child, was rated as less standard than when accompanying a videotape of a White child" (Williams, 1976, p. 105). So students of color got a double whammy negative effect in terms of how teachers perceived and evaluated them in terms of race and language.

We got an even more powerful demonstration of the relevance and role of children's language — and how teachers respond to it in school — in Piestrup's (1973) study of over two hundred first-graders in predominantly African American classrooms in Oakland, California. One of the things she found is that there is a very strong inverse correlation between reading score and vernacular dialect score. The lower your dialect score, that is, the *less* of the vernacular you use, the *higher* your reading score; that is, the better you do on standardized tests of reading. This is interesting, but not unex-

pected, given what we know of the relationship between vernacular English usage and other factors like socioeconomic background which themselves correlate with school success. More interesting, because less well-documented, is the relationship Piestrup found between children's reading scores and the different ways in which teachers responded to the vernacular in the classroom. In what Piestrup dubbed the "Black Artful" approach, (Piestrup, 1973, p. 131) teachers "used rhythmic play in instruction and encouraged students to participate by listening to their responses . . . attended to vocabulary differences and seemed to prevent structural conflict by teaching children to listen to standard English sound distinctions. Children taught with this approach participated enthusiastically with the teacher in learning to read." By contrast, teachers using the "Interrupting" approach (ibid.) "asked children to repeat words that were pronounced in dialect many times and interpreted dialect pronunciations as reading errors. Teachers in this group presented standard English sounds for discrimination without ensuring accuracy of response." Some children taught by the Interrupting Approach "tediously worked alone at decoding without reading as if they understood; others seemed to guess at almost as many words as they were able to read. Some children withdrew from participation in reading, speaking softly, and as seldom as possible" (pp.131-132). The latter result was not surprising, because each time they opened their mouths, they were met with rebuke, reprimand, or correction.

Figure 2 shows more concretely the difference between these two approaches (and four other approaches which we don't have time to consider) in terms of their correlations with dialect and reading scores. Note that children taught by the Black Artful teachers had higher reading scores overall than children taught by the Interrupting teachers. Moreover, if you look at the slopes for the two groups of teachers (lines 5 and 6), you'll see that the students with the highest dialect scores (i.e., who spoke the most dialect), when taught by the Artful approach, read about as well as the kids with the lowest dialect scores (i.e., who spoke the least dialect) when taught by the Interrupting teacher. This is very clear evidence that the way in which teachers respond to and build on the vernacular can have a *powerful* effect on the level of success in reading which African American children attain.

**Figure 2**  
Correlation between reading scores, dialect scores, and teaching strategies in Oakland first-grade classrooms



Source: Piestrup 1973, p. 162

**Notes:**

- (a) Higher numbers on the "Reading Scores" axis indicate higher scores on tests of reading achievement.
- (b) Higher numbers on the "Black Dialect Scores" axis indicate MORE vernacular dialect of AAVE usage and LESS standard or mainstream English usage.
- (c) "Solid lines indicate the regression lines for actual scores; broken lines show the extension of these lines." (Piestrup 1973, p. 162)
- (d) "Children with the highest dialect scores in Group 5 have reading scores approximately equivalent to children with the lowest dialect scores in Group 6. (Indicated by □ at the end of regression lines for Groups 5 and 6)" (ibid.)

The sad fact, however, is that most teachers do NOT build artfully and skillfully on the vernacular. And most members of the public support them in this. In the hue and cry of the Ebonics controversy in December 1996 and the first few months of 1997 the predominant public response was, "Stamp out Ebonics; or if you can't do that, ignore it, leave it alone, and hope and pray that it will go away. Bury your head in the sand; cover your ears with mufflers. Hear nothing. Don't let that virus anywhere near the classroom." The undeniable fact, however, is that most African American children come to school fluent in the vernacular. It WILL emerge in the classroom, and HOW teachers respond to it can crucially affect how the students learn to read and how well they master standard English. Ignoring or condemning the vernacular is not a particularly successful strategy, as shown in Piestrup's study, and as suggested by the massive educational failure associated with this approach nationwide.

If you asked then, "How might the vernacular of African American children be taken into account in efforts to help them do better in schools?" I would say that there are basically three different approaches.

**The linguistically-informed approach**

The first is what I call the "linguistically-informed" approach. This encompasses the specific suggestions made by Labov (1995) based on decades of research on Ebonics or African American Vernacular English (AAVE). One of these is that teachers should "distinguish between mistakes in reading and differences in pronunciation;" so AAVE speakers who read "I missed him" as "I miss him" should not automatically be assumed to have misread, in the sense of not being able to decode the letters. On the contrary, they may have decoded the meaning of this standard English sentence correctly, but they may then have reproduced its meaning according to the pronunciation patterns of their dialect, in which a consonant cluster like [st] — the final sounds in "missed" — is often simplified to [s]. Labov (ibid.) also suggests giving more attention to the ends of words, where AAVE pronunciation patterns have a greater modifying effect on standard English words than they do at the beginnings of words. He also suggests that words be presented in contexts that preserve underlying forms, for instance, words that are followed by a vowel which favors retention of final consonants: *testing* or *test* of, rather than *test* in isolation. He also suggests using the full forms of auxiliary verbs (e.g. "He will be here," "He is tall") and avoiding contractions (e.g. "He'll be here," "He's tall"), because of evidence that once you go through a contraction stage, Ebonics is much more likely to proceed to deletion ("He Ø be here," "He Ø tall"). These are sound ideas that should not be terribly controversial; but how much of an impact they will make on reading instruction for African American students

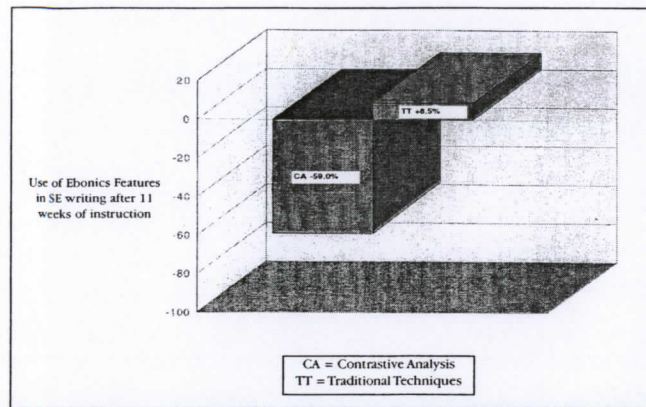
is not yet clear, since no one has systematically implemented them or assessed their effects.

More recently, Labov and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania (Labov et al., 1998) have begun an empirical study of the kinds of decoding errors which African American elementary school students make in attempting to read. Their results are quite striking. Among other things, they report that the children almost never have trouble with single initial consonants (e.g. *b* in *bat*), but they have considerably more trouble with consonant blends and other complex initial consonants, with vowel nuclei, and with the codas or final consonants of words. The details (which will be refined as research in this paradigm is extended at the University of Pennsylvania, Stanford, and elsewhere) should prove useful to teachers as well as the designers of phonics textbooks.

**Contrastive Analysis**

The second approach is to do some form of contrastive analysis in which you draw students' attention specifically to the differences between the vernacular and the standard language.<sup>12</sup> One of the best examples of this was some work that was done by Hanni Taylor (1989), at Aurora University, just outside Chicago. She was faced with a number of students from inner city Chicago who used a lot of Ebonics features in their standard English writing. She divided her students into two groups. With the control group, she used conventional techniques of teaching English and made no reference to the vernacular. But with the experimental group she used contrastive analysis, specifically drawing their attention to the points on which Ebonics and standard English were different. What she found after eleven weeks (see figure 3) was that the students who were using traditional techniques showed an 8.5 percent *increase* in their use of Ebonics speech in their writing while the kids who had benefited from contrastive analysis showed a 59 percent *decrease* in their use of Ebonics features in their writing. This is a very dramatic demonstration of the fact that even if we agree with the pundits across the country that you want kids to increase their mastery of standard English, the contrastive analysis approach — essentially what Oakland wanted to do — is more likely to be successful than the conventional approaches that are currently being used. If I can give a very specific example, one of the features that Taylor looked at was third person -s absence, as in "He walkØ," instead of "He walks." She found that students taught by traditional techniques did show a small reduction (-11%) in the use of this feature over the course of eleven weeks, but the kids who were taught by contrastive analysis showed a massive decrease in the use of this feature (91.7). The point Taylor made overall is that this process of comparing the two varieties seems to lead to much greater metalinguistic awareness of similarities and differences between the vernacular and the standard and allows students to negotiate the line between the two much more effectively.

**Figure 3**  
**Effect of**  
**Contrastive**  
**Analysis vs.**  
**Traditional**  
**Techniques**  
**Among Aurora**  
**University**  
**Undergraduates**



Source: Constructed from data in Taylor (1991, p. 149) TT +8.5%

There are at least two other instances in which this approach has been successfully used to help Ebonics speakers improve in standard English and reading. Parker and Crist (1995) extol the virtues of the bi-dialectal contrastive analysis approach in teaching minorities to play the corporate language game. In this approach, you try to respect the home variety of the students and help them negotiate between that variety and the standard language, teaching them about appropriate contexts for different varieties of speech. The authors say they have used this approach successfully with vernacular speakers in Tennessee and Chicago at the preschool, elementary, high school, and college levels. There's also a program which I just visited in DeKalb County, Georgia, just northeast of Atlanta. It's the brainchild of Kelli Harris-Wright, and involves use of contrastive analysis to help fifth and sixth-grade students switch between home speech and school speech. According to Cummings (1997), the program "has won a 'Center of Excellence' designation from the National Council of Teachers of English. Last year, students who had taken the course had improved verbal scores at every school." Harris-Wright (in press) also provides specific evidence of annual improvements in Iowa Test of Basic Skills test scores for students in her experimental program, compared with control groups of students in the DeKalb County school district. So we have evidence from these programs that contrastive analysis works.

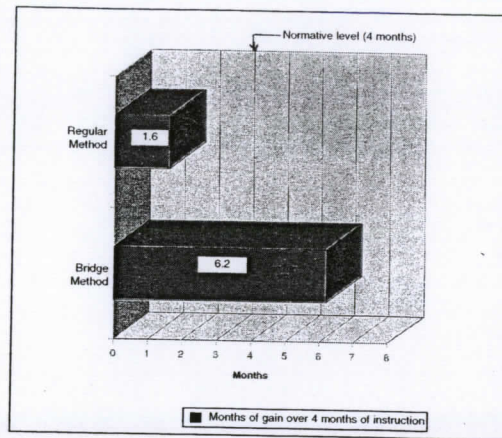
#### Introducing reading in the vernacular, then switching to the standard

The last kind of approach I want to talk about is one in which you actually begin by teaching students in the vernacular, introducing them to reading in the vernacular and then switching to the standard.<sup>13</sup> This follows a principle that was established from research dating back to the 1950's. A classic work is Cheavens' (1957) dissertation on *Vernacular Languages in Education*. Cheavens reported on studies around the world which showed that when you began by teaching students in their vernacular or native language before switching to a second language which was not their vernacular, they tended to do better than if you began by teaching them in that second language direct-

ly. One of the most dramatic examples was a study done between 1948 and 1954 in fourteen schools in Iloilo Province in the Philippines (see Orata, 1953). In this study, half of the kids were taught completely in English for four grades while other kids were first taught for two years in Hiligaynon, their native Philippine language, and then switched to English. What the researchers found is what other researchers have found in many other studies. Students who began in their own vernacular, when they switched to the second language, very rapidly caught up with the students who started in English, and even surpassed them. The students who started in the vernacular were outperforming in English the students who started in English in subjects ranging from reading to social studies, and even arithmetic. This was a massive study done over a fairly long period of time.

The closest parallel to this in terms of the United States and Ebonics or African American English, is the "Bridge" study reported on in Simpkins and Simpkins (1981). This study involved five hundred forty students, grades seven through twelve, in twenty-seven different schools in five different parts of the United States. Four hundred seventeen of the students were taught with an experimental series of "Bridge" readers which began with narratives and exercises written in Ebonics. They then went through a transitional series written in a variety intermediate between Ebonics and English, and ended with a final series written entirely in standard English. A control group of one hundred twenty-three students was taught entirely in standard English using conventional methods without the "Bridge" readers. After four months of instruction and testing, the researchers found (see figure 4) that the students who were being taught by the conventional methods showed only 1.6 months of reading gain, which would be consistent with the evidence presented earlier that the longer African American students stay in school with existing methods, the farther they fall behind. By contrast, the students that were being taught with the Bridge Readers showed 6.2 months of reading gain after four months of instruction. The experimental evidence was dramatically in support of the approach; the method offered the hope that African American students would finally be able to read above and ahead of the norm rather than below it. But the inclusion of the vernacular in some of the "Bridge" readers elicited knee-jerk negative reactions similar to those which emerged in the Oakland Ebonics debacle of 1996. The publisher of this innovative series of readers, embarrassed by the negative reactions, quickly decided against continuing production of the "Bridge" series, and this very innovative and promising experiment came to an abrupt end despite its dramatically demonstrated pedagogical success.<sup>14</sup>

**Figure 4**  
**Reading Gains**  
**using Regular**  
**vs. Bridge**  
**Methods,**  
**Grades 7-12**



Source: Constructed from data in *Simpkins and Simpkins (1981, p.238)*

For many, if not most, of you, this kind of information about the positive effects of taking the vernacular into account in education is probably brand new, even though you may have followed media discussions of the Ebonics issue for months. That's in part because "the print media did little justice to the Ebonics story" (O'Neil, 1998, p. 43), and because of what Noam Chomsky has called more generally the "manufacturing of consent" (see Achbar, 1994), the manipulation of information by the media to present certain sides of issues and exclude others. In keeping with Chomsky's insistence that "the responsibility of intellectuals is to tell the truth and expose lies," several linguists (I know of Geoffrey Pullum, Salikoko Mufwene, and the film-maker Gene Searchinger, besides myself) submitted Op Ed articles on the Ebonics issue to major national newspapers like the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. Our submissions were all declined. Some of us managed to get our points of view published in other sources (see Rickford, 1996d; 1997c). But by and large, it was an uphill struggle to get anything like a pro-Ebonics or pro-vernacular perspective aired. Sometimes the newspapers would say, "Well, the issue is passé." But the next weekend you would see another editorial or Op Ed piece ranting and raving about the horror that Ebonics represents or the wrongness of the Oakland resolutions. So it was clearly not the timeliness of the issue that was in question, but the take on it which linguists represented. Having seen what the media do with an issue you know well, makes you wonder about their other coverage of other issues. You take on faith that they will follow certain principles of neutrality and objectivity and truth, but once you see their betrayal and misrepresentation and manufacturing of consent on one issue, you question all the others.

#### Some Caribbean and European parallels

Lest I get entirely wrapped up in lambasting the media and forget my focus on education, let me give you some quick parallels from the Caribbean and Europe to give you a sense that the ways of taking the vernacular into account which I sketched out above are not completely novel. I am originally from the Caribbean, and we speak varieties of Creole English there that are very similar to African American English in many respects; in fact I have argued in a number of publications (see

Rickford 1977, 1986b, 1997a) that there is a historical relation between these varieties. Way back in the 1950s, Robert Le Page, a well-known British linguist, after going to Jamaica and noticing the appalling failures in the teaching of English and other subjects in the public schools, proposed that the first year or two should be taught in Creole before standard English is introduced. One reporter in a local newspaper damned it as an insulting idea (cited in Cassidy 1970, p. 208); in fact, if you read some of the press coverage on this issue in Jamaica from the 1950s, it sounds like press coverage of Ebonics from the 1990s in California. But as Le Page (1968) argued, there was a problem with the teaching of English across the "English speaking" Caribbean: the percentage of students from each county who passed in English on the 1962 GCE "Ordinary" level exam ranged from 10.7% to 23.1%. Le Page argued that there was systematic interference in the students' English from the Creole which was not being recognized by the teachers or the educational system, and an approach that recognized and dealt with this interference would be more effective.

There was similar controversy in Trinidad in 1975 when a new English language curriculum that took Creole usage into effect was introduced (See Carrington and Borely, 1977). More recently, teachers working with West Indian students in North American schools similarly feel the need to take their English Creole vernaculars into account; educators in Toronto have been particularly innovative in this respect (see Coelho, 1991), as have the developers of the Caribbean Academic Program for Caribbean English Creole speakers at Evanston Township High School, Illinois (see Fischer, 1992). For a more comprehensive review of attempts to take pidgin and Creole vernaculars into account in the education of their speakers, see Siegel (1998).

In terms of the European scene, I will briefly refer you to two studies, although there are others that are relevant. The first is Österberg's (1961) study of Swedish dialects and education. Österberg conducted an experiment for a few years in which he began teaching one set of kids in their vernacular dialect of Swedish and then switching to standard Swedish. A second set of students was taught entirely in standard Swedish for the same period. As you may already have recognized, this was essentially a dialect version of the most famous sets of work that Cheavens had looked at earlier in terms of languages. Again, after 35 weeks, what Österberg found was that the dialect methods showed itself superior, both in terms of reading quickly and rapidly assimilating new matter. The same positive results applied to reading and reading comprehension.

Later on a scholar named Tove Bull (see Bull, 1990) did a similar study in Norway, between 1980-1982. With ten classes of beginning students, with nearly 200 students about seven years old, she used the same kind of design as Österberg, comparing the progress of speakers of dialect varieties of Norwegian who were experimentally taught in their vernacular and then switched to instruction in standard Norwegian with a control group schooled entirely in standard Norwegian. The results showed that the experimental dialect-instructed students read significantly faster and better than the control group of standard-instructed subjects, and this was particularly true for the children who were doing worse to begin with. Bull attributed this in part to the same kinds of factors that Hanni Taylor talked about, that the explicit attention to the vernacular which the experimental students enjoyed made them better able to analyze their own speech and increased their metalinguistic awareness of language more than the traditional standard-based teaching methods did.

### Summary and conclusion

I could go on to cite other studies, but my time and space are up. To summarize briefly, the fact which led Oakland to its Ebonics resolution, and which has led many linguists (like myself) to get involved in this issue, is the depressingly poor record of American schools in helping African American students to read and write well and to succeed in school more generally. While other factors (like teacher expectations and school facilities) are involved in this failure, the distinctive, systematic vernacular which many African American students speak [AAVE or Ebonics] is certainly relevant, especially teachers' negative and prejudicial attitudes toward the vernacular, and their failure to take it into account in helping students master the area of reading and writing in the standard variety. One way of "taking the vernacular into account" is to be more linguistically informed about the kinds of errors AAVE speakers make and the reasons for them, which opens up the possibilities for developing better strategies for helping students avoid or overcome these errors. A related approach, closer to what Oakland proposed, is to provide contrastive analysis between the vernacular and the standard to help AAVE speakers understand and bridge the differences, as has been tried successfully in Chicago, DeKalb County, Georgia and elsewhere. A third approach is to begin with reading materials and instruction in the vernacular and then transition to the standard, as has been tried successfully with the Bridge program in over two dozen classrooms in the United States and similar programs with dialect speakers in Europe. Most people would be surprised to learn of the successes of methods of teaching the standard via the vernacular, the kind of approach the Oakland school board advocated; but this is partly because of their conditioned prejudices and because of the insidious manufacturing of consent and dissemination of misinformation and ignorance which the media effected on this issue, as on others.

In closing, I would like to turn on its head a comment which the Rev. Jesse Jackson made in his initial comment on the Ebonics issue, before he learned more about what Oakland was proposing and changed his mind. He was quoted in the *New York Times* of December 23, 1996 as saying that the kind of approach that Oakland was advocating represented "an unconditional surrender, borderlining on disgrace." I would argue that to continue with traditional approaches in the light of their dramatic failure rates, and to ignore innovative methods of taking the vernacular into account despite their success and promise, represents an unconditional surrender, bordering on disgrace.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>This is a revised version (March 25, 1998 and June 22, 1998) of remarks delivered at the California State University Long Beach Conference on Ebonics held on April 29, 1997. I am grateful to the organizers, including Robert Berdan and Gerda de Klerk, for inviting me to take part.

<sup>2</sup>Fortunately, the bill was defeated in committee on April 2, 1997, although there have been subsequent attempts to resuscitate it in a significantly revised form. For further information on this and other California State or Assembly bills cited here, see <http://www.sen.ca.gov/www/leginfo/SearchText.html>, and consult Richardson (1998) for information on other legislative responses to the Ebonics controversy of 1996-97 at the state and federal levels.

<sup>3</sup>More recently, Proposition 227, the Ron Unz "English for the Children" initiative, which essentially dismantles bilingual education in California, was approved in California's June 1998 primary election. Interestingly enough, only two ethnic groups voted (predominantly) against it: Latinos and African Americans. The percentage of "yes" votes for the four major ethnic groups in California reveals how divided they are on educational and political issues: Whites: 67%, Asians 57%, African Americans 48%, Latinos 37%.

<sup>4</sup>The notion of standard or mainstream English is, of course, more complex and the subject of greater controversy than

can be indicated here, involving considerations of social class and power which go beyond linguistic features. For more discussion, see Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1998:8-16), who distinguish between formal or prescriptive standard English, based more on writing and codified prescriptive grammars; and informal standard English, based more on spoken usage, sensitive to regional and social differences, and involving a continuum between standard and nonstandard usage. See also Lippi-Green (1997:53-62) who assails the notion of standard language or English as an abstraction or myth in the light of the considerable variation in usage and judgment which can be found both regionally and socially and even among "educated" speakers. For various reasons, she prefers (building on Heath 1983:391-2) the term *mainstream* language. See also Bex and Watts (in press), which includes papers focusing more heavily on the notion of standard English in the UK, although some of them do consider US varieties too. The notion of "vernacular" is less often discussed, but it is subject to ambiguity, too (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes *ibid.*). An entire conference on the subject is planned for 1999. Entitled "Vernacularity: The Politics of Language and Style," the conference will be held March 4 - 7, 1999 at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario, Canada. For further information, e-mail Nicolas Watson or Fiona Somerset at [nwatson@julian.uwo.ca](mailto:nwatson@julian.uwo.ca) or [fsomers@julian.uwo.ca](mailto:fsomers@julian.uwo.ca) or consult: <http://www.english.upenn.edu/CFP/>

<sup>5</sup>These schools were deliberately picked to provide a comparison with data from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* of July 25, 1976 which were cited in Labov (1995).

<sup>6</sup>One interesting aspect of the Philadelphia data for 1995-96 and 1996-97 is that the reading data from Cooke Middle School actually show an improvement over those from Birney Elementary School in terms of percentage reading at or above the basic level both years (47.5% and 40.1% respectively) although not in overall reading scores (53.1 and 51.2 respectively). This is somewhat encouraging since the 1976 data on reading and math combined which Labov (1995) cited show a steady and precipitous decline from the elementary level (31% of Birney students scored below the 16th percentile) through the middle school (50% of Cooke students scored below the 16th percentile) to the high school (75% of Franklin students scored below the 16th percentile).

<sup>7</sup>As Freccia and Lau (1996) note:

In 1995, for the first time ever, California spent as much money on its prison system as it did on its universities. Since 1983, the California Department of Corrections has increased its staff by a huge 169%....By contrast, California has decreased its higher education staff by 8.7%. The California Assembly Ways and Means Initial Review of the 1994/95 Budget states, "Corrections spending has grown more than twice as fast as total state spending ... this explosive growth has come at the expense of spending for other programs, primarily higher education."

Given that African Americans are significantly over-represented in the jail and prison population — "in 1991, African Americans constituted only 12.3% of the population nationwide, but 43.4% of the inmates in local jails, and 45.6% of the inmates in state prisons" (Rickford, 1997a, p. 173) — they are undoubtedly the primary "beneficiaries" of the state's increased spending on prisons. But since spending on prisons comes at the expense of spending on schools, they are also the primary "losers" in this process.

<sup>8</sup>By contrast, I recently visited Los Angeles schools participating in the Language Development Program for African American Students, run by Noma LeMoine, and I was impressed by the ready availability of books in each classroom, many of them about African Americans.

<sup>9</sup>Unfortunately, we don't have good class-based studies of African American communities beyond the 1960s; it is an area in urgent need of empirical research. I keep encouraging graduate students to do it, but they tend to be daunted by the time, effort, and resources which a randomized study of class in an urban African American speech community would require.

<sup>10</sup>The gap in Ebonics use between the working and middle class helps to explain the tremendous denial and condemnation evidenced by African Americans in 1996 and 1997 in relation to Ebonics. By and large, the people that the media interviewed were not from the African American working and under-classes. Kweisi Mfume, Maya Angelou, Bill Cosby, et al., were very much upper middle class "representatives of the race," and what they had to say about Ebonics was decidedly influenced by their backgrounds.



<sup>11</sup>On this point, see most recently, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1998:297-322, and Wolfram, Christian and Adger, in press.

<sup>12</sup>The handbook of the standard English Proficiency [SEP] program for speakers of African American language, in use in California since the 1980s, and now used in varying forms in 300 plus schools, contains numerous examples of instructional strategies and drills for contrasting AAVE and standard English. See also Feigenbaum (1970) and Rickford (1997d). Unfortunately, the SEP program has never been systematically evaluated on a statewide level (Yarborough and Flores 1997), although plans are now afoot to implement such evaluation.

<sup>13</sup>Note that this is NOT the approach that the Oakland School Board advocated in 1996.

"McWhorter (1997) has pointed to a series of studies done in the early 1970s in which "dialect readers were shown to have no effect whatsoever on African American students' reading scores." I think it is important to re-examine and even replicate those studies, but it should be noted that they all differ from the "Bridge" study insofar as they lacked any time depth. The studies cited by McWhorter were one-time studies of the effects of using vernacular or standard English stimuli on decoding or reading comprehension in the relatively brief (e.g. 30 minute) session or sessions needed to conduct the experiment, rather than studies of the effects of teaching children in the vernacular or in standard English over an extended period of time, as was the case with the "Bridge" study. This crucial difference may account for the success of the latter study and the failures of the earlier studies. This much is suggested by the authors of one of the most comprehensive earlier studies, Simons and Johnson (1974), who note (p. 355), "Another limitation of the present study concerns the length of the experiment and the number of reading texts employed. It may be the case that the treatment may have been too brief to show a difference in reading."

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