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RETHINKING **Multicultural** EDUCATION

Teaching for racial and cultural justice

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CHAPTER
TWELVE

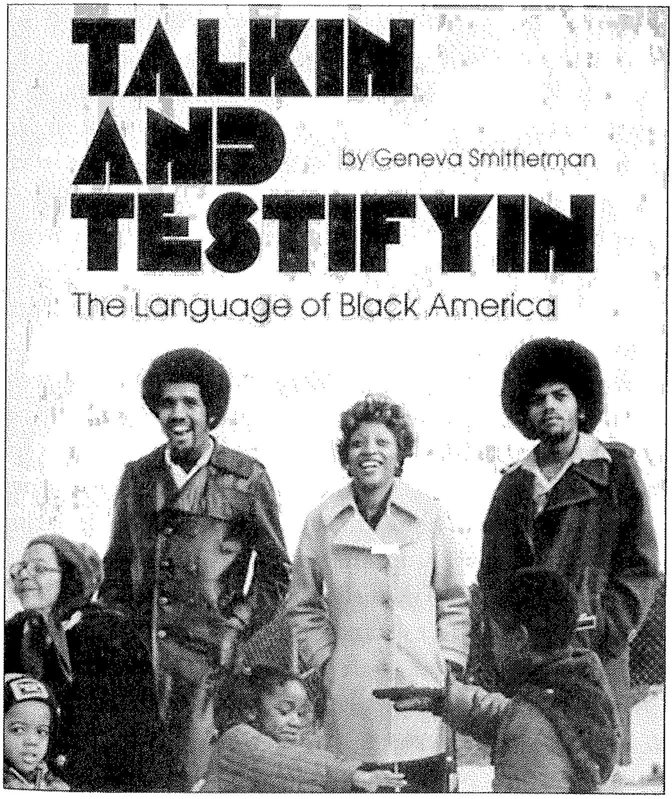
Black English/Ebonics

What it be like?

By Geneva Smitherman

> *I looked at my hands, they looked new/I looked at my feet, and they did too/I got a new way of walkin/and a new way of talkin.*
>
> —Traditional Black Gospel Song

The month after the Oakland School Board passed its resolution, the term "Ebonics" turned 24 years old. Yeah, dass right, the name is over two decades old. It was coined by a group of black scholars as a new way of talkin bout the language of African slave descendants. Like the message of that old Gospel tune, "Ebonics" was about transformation, about intellectuals among the Talented Tenth striking a blow for the linguistic liberation of our people. The guru in this group of scholars



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at that "Language and the Urban Child" conference, convened in St. Louis, Mo., in January 1973, was the brilliant clinical psychologist Dr. Robert L. Williams, now Professor Emeritus, Washington University. In the book of conference proceedings Williams published in 1975, he captures the thinking of that historical moment:

> A significant incident occurred at the conference. The black conferees were so critical of the work on the subject done by white researchers, many of whom also happened to be present, that they decided to caucus among themselves and define black language from a black perspective. It was in this caucus that the term *Ebonics* was created. [The term refers to] linguistic and paralinguistic features which on a concentric continuum represent the communicative competence of the West African, Caribbean, and United States slave descendant of African origin. It includes the various idioms, patois, argots, ideolects, and social dialects of black people, especially those who have been forced to adapt to colonial circumstances. (1975, Preface, Introduction)

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For this group of scholars, the conceptual framework of "Ebonics" represented an avenue for decolonization of the African American mind, a way to begin repairing the psycholinguistically maimed psyche of blacks in America. As Paulo Freire would put it 12 years later, "language variations (female language, ethnic language, dialects) are intimately interconnected with, coincide with, and express identity. They help defend one's sense of identity and they are absolutely necessary in the process of struggling for liberation" (1985, p. 186). Ebonics reaffirms the interrelatedness of language and culture and links Africans in America with Africans around the globe.

Ebonics: neither "broken" English, nor "sloppy" speech, nor merely "slang," nor some bizarre lingo spoken only by baggy-pants-wearing black kids. Rather, the variety of Ebonics spoken in the U.S. (hereafter USEB) is rooted in the Black American Oral Tradition and represents a synthesis of African (primarily West African) and European (primarily English) linguistic-cultural traditions. The linguistic shape of the words in USEB can readily be identified as standard English, i.e., the Language of Wider Communication here in the U.S. (hereafter LWC), but these words do not always have the same meaning in USEB as in LWC. Further, there are many words of direct African origin—e.g., *okay, gorilla, cola, jazz*—that are now part of LWC (often without props to us African slave descendants). However, what gives Black Language (un-huh, dat ain no typo, I meant "language") its distinctiveness is the nuanced meanings of these English words, the pronunciations, the ways in which the words are combined to form grammatical statements, and the communicative practices of the USEB-speaking community. In short, USEB may be thought of as the Africanization of American English.

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Patterns of Ebonics

In the next section, I discuss the following patterns of USEB: 1) aspectual be; 2) stressed been; 3) multiple negation; 4) adjacency/context in possessives; 5) post-vocalic /r/ deletion; 6) copula absence; 7) camouflaged and other unique lexical forms.

Consider this statement, which comes from some black women just kickin it in the beauty shop (gloss: conversational chit-chat at a hair salon): "The Brotha be lookin good; that's what got the Sista nose open!" In this statement, *Brotha* is USEB for an African American man, *lookin good* refers to his style, his attractive appearance (not necessarily the same thing as physical beauty in USEB), *Sista* is USEB for an African American woman, and her passionate love for the Brotha is conveyed by the phrase *nose open* (in USEB, the kind of passionate love that makes you vulnerable to exploitation). *Sista nose* is standard USEB grammar for denoting possession, indicated by adjacency/context (i.e., rather than the LWC /'s, s'/). The use of be means that the quality of *lookin good* is not limited to the present moment, but reflects the Brotha's past, present, and future essence.

As in the case of Efik and other Niger-Congo languages, USEB has an aspectual verb system, conveyed by the use of the English verb be to denote iterativity (i.e., a recurring or habitual state-of-affairs; contrast *He be lookin good* with *He lookin good*, which refers to the present moment only—not the kind of *lookin good* that opens the nose!). Note further that many black writers and rap artists employ the spellings "Brotha" and "Sista." Now, they ain just tryin to be cute. These orthographic representations are used to convey a phonological pattern derived from the influence of West African languages, many of which do not have an /r/ sound. Also in these language communities, kinship terms may be used when referring to African people, whether biologically related or not.

Of course there is overlap between USEB and colloquial, everyday American English—e.g., use of "ain't," ending sentences with prepositions, double negatives. However, there are critical distinctions that separate linguistically competent USEB speakers from the wanna-bes. For example, the colloquial speaker says *gonna* or *goin to* for the LWC form going to. But the USEB speaker uses the nasalized vowel form, producing a sound close to, but not identical with, LWC *gone*, thus: "What she go (n) do now?", i.e., in LWC, "What is she going to do now?" Another example is in negation patterns. While those obsessed with the "national mania for correctness" often rail against colloquial speakers' double negatives, USEB is distinctive not only for its negative inversion, but also for its *multiple* negatives, that is, three or more negatives formed from combinations of indefinite pronouns and/or adjectives. Check out this exclamation of complex negative inversion from a devout church-goer: "Don't nobody don't know God can't tell me nothin!" i.e., in LWC, "A person who doesn't believe in God and isn't saved has no credibility with me."

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As mentioned above, USEB words may look like mainstream American English, but the usage and meaning are different. This is the source of a good deal of miscommunication and misunderstanding between USEB and LWC speakers. In response to the question, "Is she married?" the USEB speaker may answer "She been married." If the speaker pronounces been without stress, it means the woman in question was once married but is now divorced. If the speaker pronounces *been* with stress, it means she married a long time ago and is still married.

Another example is the use of LWC words that are "camouflaged" (Spears, 1982). For example, in the USEB statement, "She come tellin me I'n [didn't] know what I was talkin bout," the verb *come* does not denote motion as in LWC. Rather the meaning of come in this context is one of indignation, i.e., in LWC, "She had the audacity to tell me that I didn't know what I was talking about. How dare she!" Yet another kind of cross-communication example comes from semantic inversion. Due to crossover and the popular appeal of Michael Jackson, most people are aware that *bad* in USEB translates to *good* in LWC; however, lexical items that haven't enjoyed such a high degree of crossover are problematic in these cross-cultural exchanges. For example, consider the following form of address common among many black males: "Yo, Dog!" *Dog* is a linguistic symbol of male bonding, most likely derived from the African American fraternity tradition of referring to pledges as *dogs*. *Yo, Dog!* was used by a Brotha on lock down (gloss: imprisoned) to address his European American male psychiatrist as an expression of camaraderie. Turns out, though, that this white psychiatrist was not yet down (gloss: hip, understanding of the Black Cultural framework). He misinterpreted the Brotha's greeting and made an issue of the "insult."

The above are only some of the patterns in the grammatical, phonological, and semantic systems of USEB. To explore the full 360 degrees of USEB, we need to move on to styles of speaking. In fact, it is the area of communicative practices—rhetorical strategies and modes of discourse—that cuts across gender, generation, and class in the African American community. USEB speech acts may be classified as follows: 1) Call-Response; 2) Tonal Semantics; 3) Narrativizing; 4) Proverb Use/Proverbializing; 5) Signification/Signifyin; 6) The Dozens/Snappin/Joanin. Space limitations will only permit discussion of two of these discourse modes.

Signification, *or more commonly,* signifyin, *is a form of ritualized insult in which a speaker puts down, talks about, needles—signifies on—other speakers.*

Signification, or more commonly, *signifyin*, which can be rendered with or without the phonological and morpho-syntactical patterns of USEB, is a form of ritualized insult in which a speaker puts down, talks about, needles—signifies on—other speakers. In this communicative practice, the speaker deploys exaggeration, irony, and indirection as a way of saying something on two different levels at once. It is often used to send a message of social critique, a bit of social commentary on the actions or statements of someone who is in need of a wake-up call. When signifyin is done with verbal dexterity, it avoids the creation of social distance between speaker and audience because the rich humor makes you laugh to keep from crying. Like Malcolm X, who once began a speech with these words: "Mr. Moderator, Brother Lomax, Brothas and Sistas, friends and enemies." Now, you don't usually begin a speech by addressing your enemies. Thus, Malcolm's signifyin statement let his audience know that he knew inimical forces were in their midst. Or like one of the deacons at this Traditional Black Church, where the preacher would never deal with the problems and issues folk were facing on a daily basis. Rather, he was always preachin bout the pearly gates and how great thangs was gon be at dat home up in the sky. So one day this deacon said to the preacher, "Reb, you know, I got a home in Heaven, but I ain't homesick!"

Signifyin is engaged in by all age groups and by both males and females in the black community. It has the following characteristics: 1) indirection, circumlocution; 2) metaphorical-imagistic (images rooted in the everyday real world); 3) humorous, ironic; 4) rhythmic fluency; 5) teachy, but not preachy;

6) directed at person(s) present in the speech situation (signifiers do not talk behind your back); 7) punning, play on words; 8) introduction of the semantically or logically unexpected.

Today, the two types of Signification are being conflated under a more general form of discourse, referred to as 'snappin.'

Types of Signification

There are two types of Signification. One type is leveled at a person's mother (and occasionally at other relatives). Traditionally, this first type was referred to as "The Dozens"/"playin The Dozens." The second type of signifyin is aimed at a person, action, or thing, either just for fun, or for corrective criticism. Today, the two types of Signification are being conflated under a more general form of discourse, referred to as "snappin."

To fully appreciate the skill and complexity of Signification, we shall analyze in some detail a conversational excerpt involving two Sistas in a group of several at a wedding shower:

> Linda: Girl, what up with that head? [Referring to her friend's hairstyle]
>
> Betty: Ask yo momma. [Laughter from all the Sistas on this conversational set.]
>
> Linda: Oh, so you going there, huh? Well, I *DID* ask my momma. And she said, "Cain't you see that Betty look like her momma spit her out?" [Laughter from all, including Betty.]

Betty and Linda signify on each other. Instead of answering Linda's question directly, Betty decides to inform Linda that the condition of her hairstyle is none of Linda's business by responding with "Ask yo momma." The usual expectation in a conversation is that a speaker's question will be answered honestly and sincerely; thus Betty's unexpected indirection produces laughter from the listeners.

Speech act theory indicates that communication succeeds or fails as a result of the illocutionary, i.e., intended, and perlocutionary, i.e., received, effects of a message. The surface meaning of "yo momma" for those outside the USEB speech community is simply "your mother/mom." However, within the black speech community, the utterance immediately signals that an insult has been hurled. The intended and received meaning of *yo momma* is invective; the game of ritual insult begins with participants creating the most appropriate, humorous, spontaneous, creative, exaggerated/untrue retorts that they can come up with.

The source of the retort "Ask yo momma" probably stems from family patterns in which mothers are consulted ("asked") about all kinds of things, great or small. Fathers may even respond to their children's questions or requests by saying "Ask your mother." In USEB, the speaker does not intend the direct meaning, "You should go and ask your mother about this situation." Rather, given the conversational context, the speaker is indirectly saying "Let the game of The Dozens begin." Linda clearly recognizes the entry into this game as indicated by her response, "Oh, so you going there, huh?" Unskilled players, lacking a spontaneous, apposite, humorous retort, would have let the conversation end at this point. However, Linda shows adeptness in playing the game. She regroups momentarily ("Oh, so you going there, huh?") and fires back skillfully. In fact, she "caps" (gloss: wins) this exchange with a more clever retort. Although Betty's use of the intragroup expression, *ask yo momma*, is humorous and sets up a challenge, it is formulaic, simplistic, and stylized. In this instance, it cannot, and does not, beat: "Well, I DID ask my momma and she said, cain't you see that Betty look like her momma spit her out" (Troutman-Robinson and Smitherman, 1997).

Although the Rev. Jesse Jackson and Sista Maya Angelou came out in the national news and dissed the Oakland School Board's resolution, they are well-versed in USEB. Twenty years ago, in my first major work on USEB, *Talkin and Testifyin*, I quoted both at length and lauded them as linguistic role models, who are adept at capitalizing on the forms of Black Language to convey profound political messages. Like Jesse who is down wit Signification: "Pimp, punk, prostitute, preacher, Ph.D.—all the P's, you still in slavery!" Thus he conveys the message that all members of the African American community, regardless of their social status, are marginalized and disempowered, by virtue of U.S. historically institutionalized racism and skin color bias. (Jesse also uses copula absence here—"you still in slavery"—which has not been found in any of the dialects of British English that came over on the Mayflower, but which is used widely in the languages of West Africa.)

The Dozens

As mentioned above, The Dozens is one of several significant speech acts in USEB. This ritualized game of insult has analogues in West African communicative practices (see Smitherman, 1995, and the several references cited there). Also referred to as "snappin" by many members of the Hip Hop Nation, The Dozens is like "Yo momma so dumb she thought a quarterback was a refund!"

Sista Maya Angelou is so bad she don't play The Dozens, she play The Thirteens! She uses this USEB discourse mode to critique the actions of blacks and whites. Here how she do it:

To speak Ebonics is to assume the cultural legacy of U.S. slave descendants of African origin.

(The Thirteens Black):
Your Momma took to shouting
Your Poppa's gone to war,
Your sister's in the streets
Your brother's in the bar,
The thirteens. Right On ...
And you, you make me sorry
You out here by yourself,
I'd call you something dirty,
But there just ain't nothing left,
cept
The thirteens. Right On ...
(The Thirteens White):
Your daughter wears a jock strap,
Your son he wears a bra
Your brother jonesed your cousin
in the back seat of the car.
The thirteens. Right On...
Your money thinks you're something
But if I'd learned to curse,
I'd tell you what your name is
But there just ain't nothing worse
than
The thirteens. Right On.
—Angelou, 1971)

African French psychiatrist Frantz Fanon taught that "every dialect, every language, is a way of thinking. To speak means to assume a culture." To speak Ebonics is to assume the cultural legacy of U.S. slave descendants of African origin. To speak Ebonics is to assert the power of this tradition in the quest to resolve the unfinished business of being African in America. While years of massive research (done in the 1960s and early '70s) on the language of this group (mostly by white scholars) did indeed debunk cognitive-linguistic deficiency theory, in its place arose social inadequacy theory.

Although the language was shown to be systematic and rule-governed, since it is not accepted by the white mainstream, difference became deficit all over again, and in the process, Africans in America suffered further dislocation. To speak (of/on/about) Ebonics, to consciously employ this terminology and conceptual framework, as those black scholars did back in 1973, and as the Oakland School Board has done a generation later, is to be bout the business of relocating African Americans to subject position. Large and in charge, as the Hip Hoppers say, Ebonics, then and now, symbolizes a new way of talkin the walk about language and liberatory education for African Americans.

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