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# the word on the street

fact and fable about  
american english

John McWhorter

When we talk to each other, what do we really say? What makes speech correct? What is language anyway, and how does it define us?

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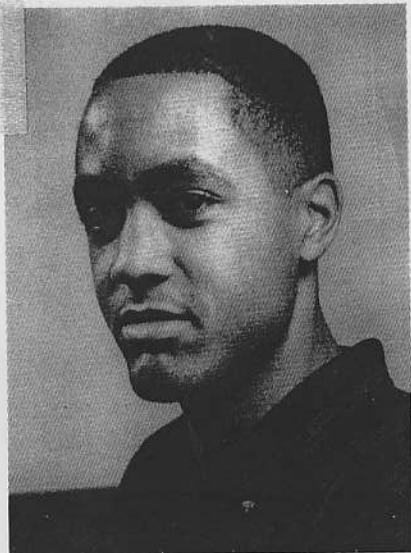


photo by Jane Scherr

## The Word on the Street Fact and Fable about American English

John McWhorter

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subjects, *he*, *she* and *it*. The fact that they also hear third person singular -s used around them all the time by black people would only make this less of a mental strain. Similarly, even if they would not usually say "the," this word would not appear to them as a cryptic glyph on the page—seeing a form so similar to their *da*, used before nouns in the exact same way as they use *da*, would teach them quickly that *the* is *da*—especially when the corner grocer, Mrs. Williams, and their mother and older sisters have surely said "the" a lot more than once within their earshot. And finally, in the long view, most of the sentence—specifically *way he walk*—is identical in both dialects. Many of the scholars who did the nine studies came to similar conclusions. Melmed, for example, noted that although *pass* and *past* are pronounced identically in Black English, black children would highly unlikely to be confused by a sentence like *His perfect pass to the man in the end zone made him famous*, since *past* would obviously be rather surreal in such a sentence.

If children in Stuttgart can perceive the relationship between *sagst* and *saisch*, *koi* and *kein*, if children in Switzerland can link *nicht* and *nüd*, *gewesen* and *gsy*, if a Finnish child can spontaneously relate *sinaa* and *saa*, *puhutko* and *puhut*, then African-American children can manage *desk* and *des'*, *she's my sister* and *she my sister*. I shudder to think what is implied by supposing otherwise.

All standard English requires of the black child is to learn that certain slight variations on their home speech are "school talk." What makes standard English even less new to these children is that, unlike their peers in Stuttgart or Switzerland, black children come to school having heard standard language forms around them all their lives.

## WHY DO BLACK CHILDREN FAIL IN SCHOOL?

### America's Educational System

The proposition that the poor performance of African Americans in school is due to the gap between Black and standard English is plausible at first glance. The efforts of linguists, educators, administrators, and schoolteachers to institute bridging programs are neither ridiculous nor a cynical grab at bilingual education funds. However, what is plausible

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is not always true, and the evidence strongly indicates that the causes lie elsewhere.

Even the dean of Black English specialists, William Labov, after painstaking and socially committed study of the dialect, concluded as far back as 1967 that

the number of structures unique to BEV [Black English vernacular] are small, and it seems unlikely that they could be responsible for the disastrous record of reading failure in the inner city schools.

Labov was not alone; not only the authors of the nine studies concurred, but many linguists and education specialists have made similar statements over the years.

If Black English is not the reason African-American students so often fail in school, then what is, and how might basic facts about linguistics point the way to a solution? Our first task is to identify what the problems are. After extensive exchanges with teachers, administrators, and educators, combined with observations from a life (albeit a brief one) as an African American, I suggest that there are three main causes.

One cause is the quality of America's schools, which truly should be considered a national emergency. Washington devotes money to building weapons for wars never to be fought, and paying for votes from the wealthy with coffer-draining tax entitlements, meanwhile attacking welfare programs accounting for but a pittance of government expenditure and letting its public school system become the mockery of the world.

Conditions in many public school systems in America today are beyond belief and make it a wonder that any child is inspired to learn in such settings. Even the infrastructure is a crime: In many Oakland schools, for instance, chipping paint, bathrooms out of order, and school chairs down for the count are not extraordinary but routine. More to the point, the claim that black students are not acquiring standard English misses the point that, as dozens of East Bay teachers have informed me, a great many students are barely being taught at all. Overcrowded classrooms and insufficient teacher salaries combine to create chronic teacher shortages, leading to ever-mounting resentment and disaffection among all concerned. As a result, in one typical recent curriculum, elementary school students were given exactly six brief writing assignments per school year, which were only passingly corrected, and they

received a minimum of individual attention. Similar conditions have been reported from innumerable school districts in the country.

A sterling example of how easily teaching conditions can turn a small dialect gap from an innocent bystander into a felon is a "study" that purportedly showed that Black English barred students not from reading standard English but from mathematical competence. It was not in the 1880s but the 1980s when a teacher traced the low performance of her African-American students in math to the supposed absence of certain prepositional and adverbial concepts in Black English, claiming in all seriousness that these gaps rendered order, direction, and causality virtually alien concepts to them at least as represented in word problems. She reported that the students were not only incapable of solving word problems in algebra, but also that they lacked the linguistic resources to even have the methods for solving such problems explained to them! It should be said that this teacher fully respected the legitimacy of Black English. However, she had nevertheless—albeit with constructive intention—come to the conclusion that Standard English encoded logic better than Black English.

But as we have seen, there are no dialects which hinder logical thought. Anyone who thinks fine-grained logic is impossible in Black English is advised to either (1) Rent *Eddie Murphy Raw* and identify precisely where in the 93 minutes Murphy lapses into faulty logic; or (2) read *The Color Purple* and tell the legions of literary critics and scholars who have made this book a Pulitzer Prize-winning landmark of American fiction that Celie's thoughts have a tendency to stray from the line of basic logic.

Getting down to the nitty-gritty, Black English is as chockablock with prepositions and adverbs as standard English: I have yet to encounter an African American over the age of three who would have to wrestle with the words *at, to, by, with, for, from, behind, under, on top of, next to, in front of, after, before, without, fast, slow(ly), never, very, bad(ly), well, worse, better*, or ... well, you get the point. One could find every last one of these words used on any five rap CDs, or overhear them all in about a half hour's walk down a street in a black neighborhood. To be sure, expressions such as "if and only if" are not used in Black English because it is a home dialect—rural Southerners do not use such expressions either when jawing after dark. However, these students were not locked into their home dialect exclusively. As we have seen, African

Americans code-switch. Because standard English is also available to them, they can easily be taught the meaning of mathematical terminology. More to the point, for whatever it's worth, they could even have been taught the same concepts in Black English—with standard English terminology inserted where necessary.

What's more, this study was conducted in an experimental private school where the black students were doing well in English and the humanities! Surely if a child can read *The Catcher in the Rye* and history textbooks, they are capable of comprehending the language necessary to explain how to figure out when two trains traveling toward each other will meet.

The author presented various misinterpretations of prepositions, adverbs and clause connectors in black students' mathematic assignments, but the problem is that none of these reflect any actual trait of Black English. For example, there is no particular use of *after* in Black English to explain the students' problems solving word problems hinging on this word. The author also assumes a tight linkage between language structure and logical capabilities which, as we saw in Chapter Three, is extremely dicey. For example, neither Black English nor any colloquial speech form (including colloquial standard English) dwells in the intricately layered sorts of sentence sandwiches that word problems entail, but this does not hinder black people from processing sophisticated logical concepts. One might note that where English has *more than three people*, French has *plus de trois personnes*, literally "more of three people." Certainly this wrinkle does not hinder French children from perceiving differences in quantity.

The missed connections were just as attributable to the students' lack of experience with the particularly close and specific engagement with phraseology that word problems require. This would in turn be due to cultural and socioeconomic factors. These define black Americans as crucially as language, which would once again appear to have been misidentified as the culprit.

The experimenter indeed "drilled" the black students in the meanings of these elusive prepositions and adverbs, and lo and behold the students did better in math. However, we have all the reason to suppose that these students did better simply because of concentrated attention in general. Surely no African American student floated out of one of these remedial sessions elated in their new-found knowledge of the

meaning of the word *of*. Here is a paradigm case of how Black English can be seen as the cause of things that are actually traceable to simple teaching methods themselves. In a supreme coincidence, the school where this study was conducted was called The Hawthorne School.

### The Inner-City Underclass

However, the decline in American education can only be part of the problem; it does not explain why African American children perform so much worse in the classroom than other groups. The condition of the schools affects everyone, as seen in the ever-declining preparation for college that freshmen of all ethnic groups at public universities demonstrate. There are two other factors that account for the especially alarming failure rates among black children.

One is, of course, the socioeconomic disparity between blacks and whites, especially in inner-city communities, America's greatest shame. As a result of the urban sinkholes left behind by white flight and the movement of industry to faraway suburbs, many black schoolchildren come from neighborhoods where drugs and welfare have taken the place of work, gangs rule the streets, fathers barely exist, and children are raised by adolescent women who are products of the same subculture. Such parents do not typically read to their children and often have only elementary reading skills themselves; the inner city is a fundamentally oral culture where the printed page is of marginal concern.

Areas like this often bring nothing less than the aftermath of a bombing to mind, and naturally, education becomes a distant matter for children from such settings. Growing up in the despair of poverty, without gainfully employed role models, such children often have a chilling lack of any sense of a meaningful future. Products of this life are often virtually undisciplinable, have a minimal and often antagonistic relationship to classroom lessons, and tend to attend school erratically and eventually drop out before graduation, in statistical proportions distressingly familiar to all of us. Even black children in lower grades manifest symptoms of this malaise. Legions of teachers have told me of the difficulty of even maintaining many young black schoolchildren's attention in class. Cultural patterns are ingrained at a very early age, and with only their siblings, parents, and other neighborhood denizens

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as models, many disadvantaged African-American students mentally start on the path toward life in the streets as early as toddlerhood.

Once again, amidst the focus on language issues, it has been easy to lose sight of the role of socioeconomic factors in the depressing black students' test statistics. Most of the children who make up these statistics do not have the fundamental, bushy-tailed commitment to school that the typical white child has. As I write this, it has recently come to attention that test scores have plummeted in the Sausalito, California, school district over the past seven years as black children have risen from 44 percent to 78 percent of public school enrollment. Reading about the festering housing projects most of these black children come from, with the usual litany of drug addiction, crime, unemployment, and neglectful parenting, it is extremely difficult to imagine that putting "Michael Jackson be dancing" on the blackboard would even begin to turn these students around.

Nothing could illustrate this better than a reminiscence by Robert Reich, former secretary of labor, who encountered a group of underclass black teenage girls in Memphis, one of whom was proud of a good report card. Here is one of their exchanges:

"Alicia's smart. She say she gonna be *rich*," Tiffany tells me in a mocking tone. "She gonna take that report card and turn into a b-i-g job. That's what *she* think."

"No way," says Sheela.

"Way too!" Alicia shoots back.

"No one gonna be rich from *here*, 'less they deal drugs," Sheela tells Alicia. "No one gonna be a *nothin'* from *here*. Girl, you don' know whatchyou talkin' 'bout."

"Yes I *do*," says Alicia defiantly.

"Rich, my *ass*."

"Yo' mom's on welfare. Yo' dad's a bum."

"No jobs *here*."

"You out of you' *mind*, girl."

"Rich? *Stupid* more like it."

"Honey, you can take that report card and shove it up where you can' see it, 'cause it don' mean *nothin'* here."

After a while Alicia stops defending herself, and the other girls turn their backs on her and walk off together, laughing.

If Alicia didn't eventually turn away from school and walk off laughing with her peers, she was an exception. To be sure, bridging advocates

often acknowledge that dialect is only one of many possible causes. However, the pathology of the inner city is so frightfully, exponentially pervasive that assigning the structure of Black English even a minimal role in the poor grades of its victims is rather like venturing that a one-legged marathon runner came in last because of the cut of their running shorts.

### The Psychology of Disinclusion

These factors are related to a final and more general problem. It is not only African-American children from the foulest inner cities who are failing disproportionately in America's schools. Much of the failure is among black children from healthier circumstances.

This problem is a manifestation of a phenomenon impossible to parse with statistics or frame in a formal study but pervasive all the same. It is well known among all educators, although rarely discussed at length in public because of how easily the "racist" charge is leveled in our culture today. It can be described as a less fundamental orientation toward education among many African-American students than among typical white, Asian, or other schoolchildren. Most importantly, it manifests itself in all socioeconomic strata, not just among inner-city children.

I have observed this phenomenon at work throughout my life. Growing up in Philadelphia in the 1970s, I was fortunate enough to attend a private Montessori school through sixth grade, in which there were generally about eight black students in my class of about twenty-five. Discussing problems with schools in the inner city, educators have often observed that black children visibly turn away from school in about the fifth grade. At the school I attended, the quality of education was excellent, the teachers attentive and gentle, the neighborhood middle class and quiet. Yet even there, it was exactly in the fifth grade that a group of the black students began to isolate themselves socially from the rest of the class, and most importantly, they became "problem students" inattentive to schoolwork. These students were from working-class circumstances rather than the middle-class ones of most of the rest, but they were by no means products of the inner city—their parents worked, many came from two-parent families, and they were well fed and clothed. Furthermore, they received careful, individual attention

from the teachers—one of the teachers was even the mother of one of these students. Yet one could see that these kids had tuned out, that they had a basic sense that school was not for them. They were not just having trouble with the work—they didn't care about it, which was unusual among students in the class. These problems did not abate and not much came of these kids later.

The coalescence of this group was part of a peaceful but distinct division of the class along ethnic lines that occurred that year, and some of the other black students in the class gradually allied themselves with them. Soon, their grades began falling too. The ethnic allegiance itself was healthy, but the intimate association between this and poor school performance was sad to see.

From middle school on, I attended another private school where there were usually about ten black students in my class of about sixty-five, many of whom had attended the school since kindergarten. This number had long remained a near constant one. As of the ninth grade, there was a significant increase in the amount and caliber of homework expected: Longer papers, more reading, more advanced math. When we returned for tenth grade, no fewer than four of the black students, all of whom had entered the school in kindergarten or shortly thereafter, had quietly not returned and were attending neighborhood public schools instead. These students were all from middle-class backgrounds and had been steeped for years in the best education Philadelphia had to offer. Yet the main reason all four of them left was problems with schoolwork. The important thing was that it was hard to miss a certain dismissive attitude toward schoolwork among most of them. I recall one of them, early in ninth grade, making it quite clear to me that she had no intention of putting forth the extra effort now required—once again, school was just not part of the program, not for her. To be sure, now and then there were white kids who left the school for similar reasons, but never in such large proportions at such an indicative juncture. In addition, two of the black students who stayed through graduation became pregnant shortly thereafter and did not go on to college (at least not right away), while almost all of the white students did.

This phenomenon continues through college and beyond. In graduate school, a white teaching assistant in engineering once reluctantly told me that he could not help noticing that there was a tendency for the

black undergraduates in his classes to simply not try as hard as the white and Asian students and to just give up after a certain point. As a professor myself now I have had to reluctantly acknowledge a similar tendency among black students. Early in my doctoral studies, I immensely enjoyed working on a project on the verb *to be* under John Rickford. I will never forget when a fellow black graduate student told me that before meeting me, my dedication to the subject simply for its own sake in a report I gave made her wonder whether I was "a brother" or not. The implication here of a dissonance between having an African-American identity and delving into an academic issue just for the fun of learning about something is sad, and yet so typical that the comment barely threw me at the time.

The last thing I mean to do here is to disparage these students. Just as I did then, I see their attitudes as symptomatic of a general phenomenon difficult to escape. These students were not stupid, nor were they willfully lazy—they were simply victims of a fundamental association of school with an oppressive culture sensed as "other." There are plenty of exceptions, and some students fall under the sway of this attitude more than others, but the tendency is unmistakable. The way this tells on even black students with the exact same opportunities as white ones testifies as eloquently as the reaction to the O. J. Simpson verdict to the continuing racial rift in our society.

The sentiment runs wide and deep, and calling it "resistance to mainstream culture" omits a vital component, which is fury. In Atlanta in the 1940s, my mother was conclusively ostracized by neighborhood children for being a "walking encyclopedia." One of my earliest memories twenty-five years later in Philadelphia is black children asking me to spell a word and jeering at gleeful length when I did so—I quickly learned that to be accepted by the black kids in the neighborhood one did not spell in public. This was Mount Airy, famous as one of America's first integrated neighborhoods, and it is important that I never had any such encounters with the white children, nor did they play such a game with any white child. We later moved to an all-black middle-class neighborhood in New Jersey. By then, I knew that books were something one only did behind closed doors with a flashlight, but a friend of mine had yet to learn this lesson. At the time we moved there, it was a current neighborhood sport to ask him how high a building was, or how many miles Florida was from New Jersey, hear him give the answer, and

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then derisively roar in laughter at agonizing length, throwing insults, popping him on the back of his head, and calling others to come join the fun. And these kids lived in big, expensive houses on clean, wide streets in a new suburban development.

Many African Americans who liked school have similar tales to tell, and we can be sure that a bookish black kid is suffering the same treatment at this very moment. The smart kid is second only to the "faggot" as a target of scorn among many black children. Of course, black communities are hardly the only ones where it is uncool among children to be smart and like school—after all, the nerd stereotype is a white invention, and many whites report having been teased and beaten up for being "smart." However, after talking about this with many whites, I venture that there is a particularly pointed, hostile tenor to the scenes I have described—trapping a child in a tight circle of fingers pointing in joyous, cackling rage because he likes school—that is much more typical of black communities. The kids I am describing didn't think my friend was merely weird. They considered him an arrant jackass sleeping with the enemy, deserving of the sharpest possible condemnation.

The unique element of rage, rather than simply dismissal, here stems from a sentiment that one is kowtowing not just to a culture that is different, but ultimately better. No one could deny the pride which African Americans have in their culture, and black people hardly consider white America paradise. However, this self-esteem coexists with a societally induced sense of inferiority—an underlying suspicion that white people, with their money and cars and universities, are inherently cut of better cloth. Classic experiments like the old one in which black children preferred white dolls over black ones point this up brilliantly. Among middle class blacks, this attitude manifests itself in a tendency Shelby Steele has identified as a reluctance to strive wholeheartedly for the top for fear of failing and proving racism correct. African Americans are not unique in this—no oppressed group escapes this burden. Nevertheless, this internalized oppression is currently an albatross on the African-American soul, and civil rights victories could only begin to change it. It will only disappear when there is true socioeconomic equality between whites and blacks, and in our lifetimes this, of course, is inconceivable. In the meantime, this means that black children who ally themselves with books and learning are seen not only as odd, but as

implying that they are *better* than other black children. Unsurprisingly, many black children do not choose to risk alienation by appearing to make such a statement.

Thus it does not take being born to a crack-addicted mother to fall behind in school despite all assistance. The typical white student brings to school a fundamental assumption that fulfilling the requirements of an education is an inextricable part of being a legitimate member of society. They may not be class A students, they may not love books, they may cut some classes, they may even have disciplinary problems—but fundamentally, school, for better or worse, is as basic to a life pathway as buying a car or getting married, getting expelled or dropping out is an embarrassment, and despite superficial tokens of rebellion, school performance is processed as one of many indexes of a person's worth. This is not the frame of mind many African-American students bring to the classroom. For the ones from the saddest sociological circumstances, life at home and on the streets makes school all but an irrelevance. Even for many of the more fortunate ones, however, commitment to school is continually leavened by a fundamental sense that it is the province of a mainstream to which they do not belong. This is partly an echo of the mindset of the teenage girls in Memphis, partly due to a fear that school invites a failure that would confirm their deepest fears, and partly due simply to the persistent line between black and white in America.

Once again, these are not new conclusions. For example, it is instructive to note another observation by William Labov (page 223): "The conclusion from our research was that the major cause of reading failure is cultural and political conflict in the classroom."

From a wide-lens perspective, these facts point up a major general flaw in the argument that Black English holds black children back in school. Since the late 1960s, the discrepancy between white and black children's test scores has continually gotten worse. Bridging advocates often point this out as making the adoption of bridging programs particularly urgent. However, these scores also pose a question or two: Presumably, if the statistical gap has increased, then so has its cause. Has Black English gotten deeper over the past thirty years? No—not even those smitten by the "divergence" data would claim that a smidgen more habitual *be* here and a little less of something else there would be more than a drop in the bucket with regard to test score learning

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problems. Some people are under the impression that the slang in Black English is richer today than ever, but this conclusion would surprise Clarence Major, who wrote a thick dictionary of Black English slang in 1971. No African American would say that a Black English speaker of 1970, transported in time to 1998, would find today's Black English further from standard English and more like a separate language.

On the other hand, have the conditions of our schools and the horror of the inner city gotten worse over the past thirty years? The answer is a resounding yes. Which, then, is more likely to be the source of black children's worsening reading scores, Black English or socio-economics? Given the capabilities of other children worldwide, the extended acquaintance black children already have with standard English forms, and the failure of the bridging approach in experiments, what exactly would lead us to conclude that Black English had anything at all to do with the problem?

#### WHAT SHOULD WE DO NOW? LINGUISTICS AND BLACK CHILDREN'S CLASSROOM SUCCESS

We are now in a position to return to an earlier question: Does linguistics have anything to offer regarding the true needs of African-American students?

I believe that the answer is yes, but that any such suggestions from linguistics will address not the bridging approach as we have seen it defended, but a variation on this approach that has become popular among some linguists and educators. Many such thinkers acknowledge that children elsewhere have no trouble with dialect gaps, and that standard English is already a vital part of the black speech repertoire. They remain in favor of the bridging approach, however, out of a conviction that African-American children remain a special case nonetheless.

Specifically, they observe that unlike Stuttgart German, Swiss German, Brooklyn English, or rural Southern English, Black English is a denigrated dialect, spoken by a dispossessed group. For them, the issue is not so much that black children are incapable of negotiating the small gap between their dialect and standard English. Instead, they observe



that black children are discouraged from making the transition because of the stigma that teachers attach to their speech and the alienation these students feel from mainstream society. Eventually they end up resisting the dialect out of disaffection and resentment.

This position, a variation on the more linguistically focused basic position, can be summarized as follows: The poor scholastic performance of African-American children is due in considerable degree to an alienation from standard English caused by the stigma attached to speaking Black English, and the wariness of mainstream society which many African-American children feel.

Many people taking this position see the bridging approach as a useful way to present Black students with standard English as an addition to their home dialect rather than as a replacement, respecting and utilizing Black English as a friendly bridge to the standard dialect.

In general, unlike the dialect gap, the issues of stigma and alienation are real ones. As one friend of mine put it, "whether you talk the way a certain group talks is a matter of whether you want to be at their party, and whether you feel like you were invited."

It is clear that this problem must be addressed, as it is integral to the very sociocultural issues that are the true cause of black children's performance in school. However, the fact remains that there is a logical disjunction between these rightful concerns and the conclusions drawn from them. Again, the line of reasoning is (A) Black English is devalued. (B) Many black children's lives make school a low priority for them. (C) Therefore, black children need translation to acquire standard English. The problem here is that if we stand back for a minute, we can see that translation exercises are not exactly the most natural solution to problems A and B. In fact, if we had addressed the issues of stigma and alienation in an alternate universe in which the bridging approach had never been devised, we can be sure that translation exercises would have been one of the last solutions to be ventured.

This is because this variant advocacy of the bridging approach is less an independent conclusion than one accommodating to a pre-established frame of reference. C is seen as a natural solution to A and B only because C has already been so prominently on the table, in the same way as we swat a fly with the newspaper close at hand even though the flyswatter hanging in the closet would do a better job. In fact, there are a great many more possible solutions to A and B than C,

and in this light, it must be reiterated that studies have clearly shown that C is false. It will be more useful to approach the problem without assuming C as a preordained conclusion, asking, "What else might we do about A and B?" rather than "How might we justify C?"

Therefore, our goal is to address the legitimate issues of stigma and sociology without resorting to an approach that is unnecessary and does not work. In my view, there are five recommendations that linguists might make to help turn the tide for African-American students, which we will discuss in sections following.

### "THE LANGUAGE OF THE STREETS": ADDRESSING THE STIGMA

The issue of the stigma connected to Black English is crucial. This factor is what separates this dialect from other nonstandard ones we have seen; few people are looked down on for speaking Swiss German or colloquial Finnish. These dialects are seen not as sloppy speech but simply as different. Although the standard dialect indeed conveys the most prestige, the nonstandard ones are thought of as innocent variations, not as degradations. But Black English is widely viewed as a willfully slovenly plague. Employers often openly admit disqualifying applicants who sound black on the telephone, associating Black English with unreliability and low intelligence. Studies have shown that teachers, after being played tapes of children's voices, spontaneously rate black voices as less confident and less eager. Most tragically, teachers have very often classified black students as learning-disabled on the basis of their speech patterns, convinced that Black English sound patterns and structures are evidence of cognitive deficiencies.

How does this affect classroom performance? When teachers, under the impression that Black English is merely bad grammar rather than alternate grammar, correct black children's speech relentlessly, the children eventually clam up in fear and shame, turned off forever from the joy of learning and achievement. Here is a transcription of one classroom session of this sadly typical practice in action:

Teacher: This one. Come on, you're right here. Hurry up.

Child 1: (reads) Dey ...

Teacher: Get your finger out of your mouth.

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Child 1: (continues without hesitation) ... call  
 Teacher: Start again.  
 Child 1: Dey call, 'What is it? What is it?'  
 Teacher: What's this word? (pointing out the word *they*)  
 Child 2: Dey.  
 Child 1: Dat.  
 Teacher: *What* is it?  
 Child 3: Dat.  
 Child 2: Dey.  
 Child 1: Dey.  
 Teacher: Look at my tongue. *They*.  
 Child 1: *They*.  
 Teacher: *They*. Look at my tongue.  
 Child 1: Dhey (approaching "they" but more like "dey").  
 Teacher: That's right. Say it again.  
 Child 1: Dhey.  
 Teacher: *They*. O.K. Pretty good. O.K.

It doesn't take much to see that these kids are not on their way to liking books. The children are accomplishing the crucial task of associating a written word with one in the spoken language, but instead of being praised for this, they are impatiently, repeatedly corrected by the teacher, who is under the impression that *dey* is a faulty pronunciation rather than an alternate one. Even if this teacher had no problem with Black English per se but were simply trying to ensure that these children acquired standard English, the tone of voice ("Hurry up." "Start again." "What is it?" "Pretty good.") conveys a dismissive, belittling attitude toward their performance, and the length of time attempting to elicit a perfect "th" is what will stick in the children's minds, while their sense of victory in reading itself is doused. This teacher's performance is obviously a seed for the sense plaguing black students that school is not for them.

Indeed, it is tales of suffering this kind of treatment, including consignment to speech therapy, that prominent African-American bridging advocates like Geneva Smitherman, Noma LeMoine, and Robert Williams eloquently tell, not of having had trouble decoding standard English on the page.

For these reasons, it is urgent that the first of our five suggestions be adopted:

*Train schoolteachers in the systematicity of Black English.*

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Any schoolteacher who is to be within a ten-mile radius of an African-American child must be fully aware that sentences like *Don't nobody know my name* are neither bad grammar, lazy thinking, or a sign of inability to do math, but simply an alternate dialect to the standard. America's teachers must approach Black English as something to be added to standard English not eradicated by it. They must be taught the basic rules of Black English in order that they see that it is a coherent and nuanced system. Not only does common sense suggest that this would help to free young African Americans to learn, but the Piestrup study (see page 219) demonstrated that black children perform better in school when their dialect is respected rather than scorned.

To the extent that programs like California's Standard English Proficiency program already do this, they should be expanded, and it should be de rigueur in any district with a substantial representation of African-American students. The goal would be to make teachers aware that Black English is not something students should be corrected out of, but simply something standard English is to be added to. This is exactly the attitude of teachers in places like Stuttgart, and with this change in attitude, America would catch up with the rest of the world in treating nonstandard dialects as variations rather than degradations.

It would be best if teachers were taught about Black English through more than just lists of words and constructs showing how it differs from standard English. "Been Dere, Done Dat!" one journalist titled a contribution to a special issue of *The Black Scholar* on the Oakland controversy. This title tapped into a sentiment common among bridging advocates and sympathetic spectators that the legitimacy of Black English has long been conclusively demonstrated for anyone who cared to listen, and that the Oakland dust-up reflected the persistence of racism and willful ignorance. But as I have argued, a thoroughly reasonable person white or black, can be fully aware that Black English has rules and still consider it to be a collection of bad habits—systematic bad habits (after all, viruses are marvelously complex organisms). Teachers should be made aware of the general nature of languages as bundles of equally complex and nuanced dialects, and they should be shown the ways in which Black English is complex as well as the ways in which it is simple. This battle will never be won by crowing that "Black English is short, sweet, and to the point," as one advocate has proclaimed—the

next thing you know, someone earnestly writes a book claiming that Black English speakers cannot understand math.

### GENTLE TRANSITION: AFROCENTRIC CURRICULA FOR BLACK STUDENTS

Teacher awareness, however, will only be but one part of the picture. In Los Angeles schools where the Standard English Proficiency program has been in place since 1981, informing teachers of the value of Black English, black students' test scores have not risen but have in fact gotten worse. (It is important to keep in mind that these programs include not only the teacher training but also bridging exercises.) This development suggests that stigma from teachers is only one part of the problem. As I suggested earlier, in my opinion, the shockingly poor performance of black students is primarily traceable to an alienation from education that is prevalent in the African American population.

Language attitudes are definitely one facet of this alienation. Teachers have noted that many black students associate standard English with whites, distance, and falsehood, while cherishing their in-group dialect as a badge of solidarity (recall Richard Pryor's nasal, milgue toast voice when imitating whites, in roughly the voice of the character Smithers on *The Simpsons*). However, this is part and parcel of a rejection of school in general, not just the dialect it is taught in. Moreover, to defang this sentiment by describing it in academes as "resistance," which implies a passive pout, is a mistake. A pout would be more easily remedied than the reality, which is that "So why you talkin' white?" is less a question than a sharply confrontational charge of treason. Its speaker might just as well be saying "So why you readin' anyway?," "So why you wanna learn dat geometry?," "So what you wanna know about all dem white people anyway?" and finally, "So why you got to be goin' to school?"

Overcorrection from teachers may well contribute somewhat to this alienation, but is by no means a necessary element. I can testify that neither the black students in Philadelphia who tuned out at Newpath Montessori nor the four who left Friends' Select after ninth grade had ever been ridden by teachers for their "bad grammar," despite the fact that all of these students were at home in Black English. These students

had opportunities to excel that even most white American children lack, including committed, enlightened teachers (Friends' Select was a Quaker school). Yet it was clear that they sensed the same barrier between themselves and "the school thing" that children from lesser circumstances do. For them, books, math, history, and even art and music class were okay here and there but in the end, well, for *white* people. While my New Jersey friend who was teased for liking books retreated into social isolation, his brother, in response to similar pressures, became a virtual poster boy for the "resistance to standard English" idea at thirteen, adopting a colorful Black English quite abruptly, when he had used virtually none before. Not only had he never been chided for using a dialect he had barely spoken, but this striking dialectal transformation was part and parcel of a general rejection of whites; he became the most stridently "black-identified" of our group.

In order to help black students feel the natural identification with school that students of other races generally feel, nothing could be more sensible than this second suggestion:

*Institute Afrocentric curricula at predominantly African American schools.*

Black students can be taught basic skills of comprehension and analysis using literature on African-American themes (but in standard English as much as possible) and focusing on African-American historical and social issues as well as the mainstream ones. Utilized as extensively as possible without denying black students the exposure to mainstream materials vital to their functioning as American citizens, the Afrocentric curriculum will bring classroom education closer to the African-American student, and leave them more open to mainstream information as well.

In one exemplary Afrocentric elementary school classroom I have visited, for example, the walls were festooned with colorful collages, clippings, student drawings, and posters on not only African and African-American themes, but also Mexican, Native American and even Cambodian themes, generating an appreciation of cultural differences as well as of African-American culture specifically. Children are called to order with the Yoruba summons "a-GO," spontaneously respond with the acknowledgment "a-MEH," and then proceed to alternate between mainstream subjects, such as mathematics, and subjects taught from an Afrocentric perspective, such as history through the lens