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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?

In *The Word on the Street*, John McWhorter reveals our American English in all its variety, beauty, and expressiveness. Debunking the myth of a "pure" standard English, he considers the speech patterns and accents of many regions and ethnic groups in the U.S. and demonstrates how language evolves. He takes up the tricky question of gender-neutral pronouns. He dares to ask, "Should we translate Shakespeare?" Focusing on whether how our children speak determines how they learn, he presents the controversial Ebonics debate in light of his research on dialects and creoles.

The Word on the Street frees us to truly speak our minds. It is John McWhorter's answer to William Safire, transformed here into everybody's Aunt Lucy, who insists on correcting our grammar and making us feel slightly embarrassed about our everyday use of the language. ("To whom," she will insist, and "don't split your infinitives!") He reminds us that we'd better accept the fact that *language is always changing*—not only slang, but sound, syntax, and words' meanings—and get on with the business of communicating effectively with one another.

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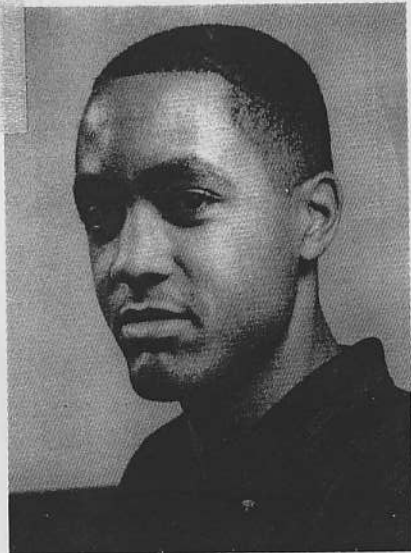


photo by Jane Scherr

The Word on the Street Fact and Fable about American English

John McWhorter

John H. McWhorter is Assistant Professor of Linguistics at the University of California at Berkeley. Born in Philadelphia, he earned a master's degree in American Studies at NYU and received his Ph.D. in linguistics from Stanford University. He taught at Cornell University before entering his current position at Berkeley. He specializes in pidgin and creole languages and is the author of *Toward a New Model of Creole Genesis*. One of the few accessible linguists, he has been interviewed widely by the media, including NBC's *Today*, *Dateline NBC*, National Public Radio, the *New York Times*, and *Newsweek*. He has also taught black musical theater history at Berkeley and is currently writing a biography of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.

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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

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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

of current events such as the changing of the guard in the former Zaire (the Oakland controversy itself had been a subject not long before my visit). In such classrooms, one senses that the children are indeed getting a more vital and useful education than most white children get in any setting, and most importantly, the sense of home sparks enthusiastic participation in classroom activities.

Such classrooms are a classic application of John Dewey's principle of starting students with what they know. Many bridging programs, such as those created by Mary Rhodes Hoover, include Afrocentric literature and history, and this aspect of these programs should be continued and expanded.

There is a caveat here, however. It is crucial that such curricula be designed to prepare black children for constructive membership in American society. Hopefully, school boards will resist pressure to incorporate pseudoscholarly propaganda from certain Afrocentric writers, such as that ancient Greece "stole" its philosophy and technology from a "Black" Egypt, that Jews dominated the slave trade, that world history is reducible to an eternal crusade against the black man, etc. A few books widely read by African Americans, such as George James' *Stolen Legacy*; Molefi Asante's *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge*; Cheikh Anta Diop's *Civilization or Barbarism: An Authentic Anthropology*; and the Nation of Islam's *The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews*, have misled a great many innocent people to believe that such ideas are based on facts, deliberately hidden from general view by a racist white establishment. The appearance in 1991 of *Black Athena*, a dense, omnivorous double volume by a white scholar, which was widely reviewed, has unfortunately reinforced the misconception that this "Afrocentric history" has a scholarly basis. In fact, however, the emperor has no more clothes here than when claiming that Black English is an African language.

An overwhelming amount of research, particularly amidst the extremely critical reception of *Black Athena* in the 1990s, has shown that any unbiased person comparing Afrocentric history with the actual evidence is forced to conclude that many of these books are one part shoddy research and one part outright fabrication. There is no evidence whatsoever that Cleopatra or Socrates were black. There is no evidence that Greek thought was an importation of Egyptian thought—Greek and Egyptian writings match no more closely than the writings of Thoreau and Confucius. It has never been documented that Aristotle traveled to Egypt, and, more importantly, he could not have raided a

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library at Alexandria that was not even built until twenty-five years after his death (and even then was stocked mostly with Greek, not Egyptian, books). If by some chance white scholars have been hiding documents that would show otherwise, authors like James, Asante, and Diop do not reveal any, and therefore they cannot have based their ideas on having seen them. Finally, I personally can attest from years of study of the Atlantic slave trade that the idea of Jews as leaders in the enslavement of African-Americans' ancestors is, at best, a laugh.

We can only respect these authors' desire to lend black people a sense of noble heritage, and we must acknowledge that the extended study, expert mentoring, and obscure sources that would have shown these authors the flaws in their arguments may not have been available to them (especially James, who wrote in the 1940s). Nevertheless, the simple fact remains that the core of this Afrocentric history simply is not true.

The danger here is clear and present: We need not worry that these falsehoods might be fed to black youngsters, because they already have been. The Portland Baseline Essays is an Afrocentric teaching curriculum incorporating these notions that has, alas, already been used in Atlanta, Pittsburgh, Indianapolis, and Washington, D.C. This noble packet includes not only the types of things already mentioned, but also that the Egyptians had invented flying machines and built the pyramids by telekinesis.

Not all schools have included such blatant fantasy in Afrocentric curricula, but for better or for worse, it is the extremes that attract the most attention. Not only does this element turn taxpayers and legislatures against funding Afrocentric curricula, but it perverts the very aim of the strategy as a whole. There could be few crimes greater than to teach black children that wild-eyed whitey is out to get them at every turn, watch them retreat even further from the only society in which they can succeed, and then stand screaming that nothing has changed for blacks in America.

ALL THAT GLITTERS: HARD FACTS ABOUT TEACHING THROUGH BLACK ENGLISH

At this point, however, some readers might be asking: If it makes sense to institute Afrocentric curricula in English and history, then why not an Afrocentric approach to language arts as well? If we are to heed

John Dewey, why not start black students from the dialect that they know best?

The reason for not doing so is that the relationship between schooling and language skill is a special one, for black and white children alike. When it comes to lending children a historical perspective, Harriet Tubman and George Washington Carver will be as useful as Patrick Henry or Carlton E. Morse. When it comes to teaching children to engage narratives, literature of any stamp, black, white or plaid, will serve the purpose. However, when it comes to language skills themselves, the particular linguistic mission of schooling does not offer us this kind of choice. If that mission were simply to give children the gift of "language," then we could indeed use either black or standard English. But this is not the goal. Although children often come to school knowing nothing of history and having never read a book, they come to school fully equipped with the gift of Language itself, whatever dialect they speak. When it comes to language skills, schooling has a more specific mission: to teach children how to express themselves in the particular fashion required of all functioning adults in society. This means giving children as strong a command as possible of the standard English dialect.

The idea of using Black English as a bridge toward just such command could seem innocent enough. However, this would do more harm than good. This is because of a very simple fact about learning languages:

People learn speech varieties best by immersion.

For our purposes, it will help to take a look at language immersion first from the speaking angle, and then the reading angle.

First, speaking. Many of us have spent years learning a second language in the classroom, only to find that when we get off the plane in the country where the language is spoken, we cannot understand a word and can barely manage to ask our way out of the airport. While we can manage things like "My uncle is a lawyer but my aunt has a spoon," "The young boy walks," "If I had a book, I could write with a pencil" and other faceless sentences learned in the drills and vocabulary lists we spent so much time on, the sad fact is that it is a rare person who has much interest in talking slowly about silverware or walking boys. Time and again, people say that they never really learned the language until they were immersed in it, required to speak it and nothing else for months on end.

For adults, some initial drilling and memorization is helpful before this immersion period. However, it is often observed that children have astonishing capacities for learning languages. Young children of immigrant parents are often fluent in accent-free English after six months of school. They do this with no deliberate effort, and certainly without doing translation drills in the new language.

It is true that currently many immigrant students are taught in bilingual education programs, in which their native language is used alongside the new one. However, contrary to popular belief, these programs are not designed to teach children to speak the new language itself. Immigrant children learn the new language much less at the blackboard than through social interaction—in other words, immersion. The purpose of bilingual education is to allow children to acquire basic scholastic skills like reading and mathematics in the language they know well already. The benefits of such programs are clear, and I in no way mean to speak against them. However, where children are not provided with such programs, they learn to speak the new language just as quickly, as those who remember their Old World immigrant ancestors having to sink or swim in American schools so often attest. What suffers is the children's acquisition of other skills. These ancestors' descendants tend to miss that part of the issue, but the point stands that bilingual education programs are not a model for explicitly instructing black children in standard English because this is not the intention of such programs.

Today in Canada, for example, Anglophone children successfully learn French in immersion programs with no explicit instruction. Moreover, it is by no means middle-class white children and eager white immigrants who learn languages under such circumstances. The Ethiopians who speak the Gurage dialects (shown in Chapter 7) are confronted with Amharic, the national language of Ethiopia, when they go to school. Amharic is as different from the Gurage dialects as German is from English. This is not the best educational policy—students indeed spend the first couple of years confused about their lessons—but when it comes to speaking (we'll get to reading shortly), they do learn sterling Amharic. The Ethiopian running the restaurant you eat at or driving your taxicab speaks Amharic and may have learned it in this very way. Millions of East Africans pick up Swahili in school similarly.

Again, my point is not to denigrate bilingual education programs but simply to make clear that they are not designed to teach children how to speak the new language itself, and that within them or without

them, children have awesome capacities for picking up speech varieties. If immersion works this well for children learning different languages, then it can certainly work for children who need merely to reinforce their ability in a dialect they have heard around them since they were born. Children adopt new dialects as effortlessly and unconsciously as new languages. For example, many people born in Great Britain who emigrated to the United States as children still speak British English with their parents while speaking perfect American English everywhere else, even switching between the dialects when both their parents and Americans are present.

When it comes to learning to read, as opposed to speak, standard English, the bilingual education model seems more plausibly applicable to Black English, in that the purpose of bilingual education programs is to allow children to learn to read first in the language they know best. Here, however, the old issue of degree raises its head. It is obvious that a Chinese child must make a stretch to learn to read in English before they speak it. However, it is difficult to see the black child as laboring under the same burden; more realistically, the black child learns to read in a dialect that is a minor variation on their home one, which they hear around them regularly. Never has bilingual education been suggested for speech varieties that are so very close. Advocates of bridging have guessed that this dialect gap is a problem nevertheless, but what children accomplish elsewhere, the presence of standard English in most African Americans' speech, and the failure of bridging techniques to improve black test scores in no fewer than nine studies, all suggest otherwise. This being so, we can assume that an immersion approach will teach black children to read as well as speak standard English—and millions of African Americans today attest to this.

Let's zoom in on the nature of immersion. Immersion in a speech variety, by definition, requires a setting in which the native language temporarily has no place, forcing the speaker to use and experience the new language over long periods of time, expressing every shade of thought. Many young adults experience this kind of immersion while spending a year living with a family in a European country, and there is a noticeable difference in how well people who do this learn a foreign language in comparison with those who travel overseas and spend much of their time utilizing the "escape valve" of speaking English with Americans.

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For this reason and this reason alone, it is not advisable to bring Black English into America's classrooms. The job of the American school is to give black children a firm command of speaking, reading, and writing standard English. Because the best way for children to acquire a new speech variety, especially one so close to their home dialect, is through immersion, this means that there is no place for dialect readers and contrastive drills. This is not because Black English is wrong—it isn't—or because standard English is better—it isn't—but because Black English would be, by definition, an impediment to immersion in standard English, just as Italian or Turkish would be. Every hour spent listening to tapes of someone talking like their big sister on the phone with friends last night, every hour spent engaging Black English on the page instead of standard English, every hour spent giggling about whether you say "Michael Jackson be dancing" with friends or with the school principal, is one less hour spent immersed in the standard English dialect that needed to succeed in the world. Dialect readers and contrastive analysis drills are no more appropriate to such a schoolroom than tennis rackets would be at a ping-pong lesson. Bridging techniques would be antithetical to the crucial aspect of immersion.

Indeed, drills and exercises in Black English work against the very goal of creating comfortably bidialectal people. There are two reasons for this. One is that bridging techniques address standard English at the *conscious* level, when languages and dialects can only be truly learned at the *unconscious* level. It is a noble goal to want to make black students feel that school is for them by making substantial room for African-American culture. This is laudable for literature and history, which develop conscious skills. But acquiring true command of a language or dialect reaches to the subconscious. Conscious training only takes us as far as "the young boy walks," and if children do not even need this initial leg up to learn foreign languages, they certainly do not need it to learn a minor variation of their home dialect.

The second reason is that translation exercises and dialect readers ultimately present standard English as a party trick, highlighting it as something external to black identity, something "other." As we have seen, many bridging advocates concede that there is no significant dialect gap at stake, but they support the technique as a way of making black students feel that standard English is for them, juxtaposing the

dialects in egalitarian fashion. However, the very act of juxtaposition also automatically renders standard English as "else," distant, "not them." We are not seeking to teach black children standard English as a code to be grudgingly called on when "out there" in stiff, itchy clothes. A person who conceives of standard English this way—as a tool to be manipulated in a conscious way—will never be any more at home in it than we are at home in French when saying things like *le jeune garçon marche*. A person is truly fluent in a language or dialect only when feeling it as a part of themselves, as an expression of their soul. We can see this in terms of foreign languages in how often people with stunning command of a second language acquire this degree of comfort within the unparalleled intimacy of a romantic relationship with a native speaker of the language. We also see it in how people describe reaching a stage in learning a language where they can "be themselves." This stage and "My uncle is a lawyer but my aunt has a spoon" are light-years apart. Highlighting Black English as "black" and standard English as "something else" would encourage a conscious engagement with the standard rather than a subconscious one.

Some might argue that the sociocultural context here requires that we intercede on the conscious level because children are reluctant to engage with standard English on the subconscious level. However, the fact will always remain that a solid command of standard English (or any dialect) requires subconscious engagement. For this reason, rather than bringing black students by the hand into a half-hearted command of standard English by using a conscious process, we should accommodate surrounding conditions in such a way that black children open up to allowing standard English to penetrate their subconscious.

More specifically, we must stimulate black children to connect with the school setting as a whole to make it a part of their souls, for them. Teacher training in the legitimacy of Black English would work toward this goal by leading teachers away from the mistaken impression that black students' casual speech is a symptom of stupidity or sloth. Afrocentric curricula would make school seem less remote and more relevant to the lives of most black children. If students connect with this setting, and this setting is one where business is conducted in standard English, then black children will add standard English to their verbal repertoire as part of an overall acceptance of school as being for them. In other words, if school is a major aspect of "what I do" to these

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children, and if standard English is as integral to the school setting as the paint on the walls, then standard English becomes part of "what I do." This is how languages and dialects are learned all over the world; this is how African-American children will acquire standard English.

As we have seen, it is not true that this is too much to ask of children in general (Stuttgart), and black children have a massive head start at it anyway because standard English is spoken in their homes as well as Black English. African Americans who have a true command of standard English are proof that schools can accomplish this without translation exercises. None of the millions of successful, bidialectal black adults in America today acquired their standard English using contrastive analysis techniques. They acquired standard English because membership in mainstream society, where affairs are conducted in standard English, was vital to them. More properly, because they were committed to membership in mainstream society, they learned standard English as a matter of course—few such people at any point consciously thought of themselves as "acquiring standard English" or even of making any special effort to be able to "speak well." Their bidialectal competence is, in other words, subconscious, not conscious—as we see in the ambivalence many fluently bidialectal African Americans feel about being told that they speak Black English at all.

My friend who acquired Black English at thirteen is an ironically useful embodiment of the how and why of young people acquiring new dialects. Instead of adding standard English to Black English, he added Black English to his standard. He did it simply by imitating the neighborhood kids and his relatives, and surely needed no translation drills to do so. He learned Black English successfully because of his new identification with black culture—in other words, because it was "for him." We sense that immersion did a much better job of this than a "Black English in 40 Lessons" cassette program would have.

Thus our goal should be for all black children to be as fundamentally open to schooling as the "One Hundred Most Powerful Blacks" in each month's issue of *Ebony* were as children, thereby becoming effortlessly, subconsciously fluent speakers of standard as well as Black English. In order to do this, we must acknowledge that sociocultural conditions have changed in many black communities. It also means we must make accommodations, such as teacher training in Black English

and Afrocentric curricula. How human beings learn languages, however, will not change.

TAKING BLACK ENGLISH INTO ACCOUNT IN THE CLASSROOM: CONSTRUCTIVE SUGGESTIONS

How, then, might the education of black children proceed along these lines on the level of daily instruction? The issue plays on three levels: speaking, reading, and writing, which I have only occasionally distinguished until now.

Taking each level in turn, consider my third suggestion:

Allow young African-American students to speak in their home dialect in class.

Traditionally, teachers have treated black children like foreign learners and corrected their departures from standard English. However, there is a crucial difference that this practice neglects. When a Russian university professor I once had a class with refrained from shaking hands with a visitor after class saying, "My hands are of chalk" instead of "My hands are covered with chalk," the sentence was wrong, period. No native English speaker anywhere would utter such a sentence; it is based on no spoken system. However, when the African-American child says, *When you gone, he be gettin up on yo des'*, she is precisely following the rules of an established dialect spoken by millions of other people. She is not speaking incorrect standard English—she is speaking another kind of English, and speaking it well.

Some might suppose that even if Black English is legitimate on its own, that the way to teach black children the new dialect is to correct them into it. However, all evidence indicates that this simply will not work:

1. Research on how all children learn to speak has repeatedly shown that they tend simply not to heed correction, insisting on saying "feets" or, as I did when I was little, "I gots," until they eventually match their speech with what they hear around them on their own.
2. When it comes to "correcting" African-American children into standard English, one often makes demands the children can

barely meet yet. Small black children can barely manage some consonant clusters or a perfect *th* (see page 131). They will only be able to produce such sounds after constant exposure—after all, we didn't learn to produce the sound *th* by watching someone stick their tongue between their teeth (imagine trying to learn *anything* while having to watch someone stick their tongue between their teeth!). In the meantime, they will not be able to produce the correction to teachers' complete satisfaction, which will only contribute to general demoralization.

3. The Piestrup study (page 219) explicitly documented that, indeed, constant correction of this kind depresses Black students' reading scores.

The way African-American students will learn to speak standard English is by being immersed in it day after day, week after week, year after year in school. As we have seen, children are miraculous language sponges. To be sure, it will take black children time to begin speaking standard English fluently, especially because in most cases the teacher will be one of the only people in a classroom speaking it. What this means is that in early years, African-American children should not be corrected for reading out a standard English passage in Black English. Reading standard English with the Black English sound system shows the same successful linkage between written symbol and speech as a white child reading out the passage in standard English would. The study showing that black teenagers could hear *-ed's* that they did not always pronounce shows that a black child who sees *desk* and says *des'* has not somehow missed the fact that the teacher, and often many black people they know, say *desk*. When they become comfortable in standard English, their recitation will mirror standard English more precisely.

More generally, when called on to comment on a story or a lesson or to answer questions, young African-American students should be allowed to speak in their home dialect freely. The important thing in literature, history, and math lessons is the content. If we know that Black English is a legitimate dialect that we hope these people will possess all of their lives, then an answer delivered in eloquent Black English is obviously as valuable as the same point made in standard English.

It should be nothing less than ordinary for African-American schoolchildren to begin by being allowed to jingle along joyously in their home dialect, acquiring a basic confidence in self-expression and

engagement with new material that is vital to their later functioning in school and beyond. The goal should be for them to gradually begin speaking standard English in the classroom over time, having learned it the best and only way, through immersion, willing imitation based on listening to the teacher, and language arts lessons in standard English. This is exactly what happens in Stuttgart and Switzerland: Younger kids speak dialect in school with no stigma attached and no correction and acquire standard German over time through constant exposure and good old-fashioned grammar lessons in the standard dialect.

The fact that schoolteachers will be most black students' only source of live, uninterrupted standard English makes it particularly clear, however, that the language of schoolroom teaching and lessons must be standard English exclusively. Television helps to reinforce standard English, but it can never have the powerful impact of a real person in the same room communicating vital information, issuing commands, making requests, and encouraging exchange. In the classroom, African-American students will already be surrounded by Black English speakers. As tempting as it might seem to add translation exercises, dialect readers, and tapes of Black English to this setting for purposes of validation, these methods only cut into the already rationed exposure the children get to standard English. Validation is an important issue, but in the crucial setting of the schoolroom, it is better left to subjects other than language, via Afrocentric curriculum materials.

One additional issue here: When we say we want black children to speak "standard English," what exactly do we mean? The goal should not be to teach all African-American children to speak like Dan Rather. In fact, very few black people who speak standard English talk like Dan Rather—they speak an identifiably African-American standard English.

The Black English sound system is the near-universal linguistic unifier of the African-American community. It has the effect that even when using the sentence structure of standard English, most African Americans have what is often called a black sound. Experiments have shown that whites and blacks alike can tell a person's color even on the telephone (blacks being slightly better at it than whites), even when the person is using no Black English sentence structures. I remember observing to my mother as a child that one can often hear that an announcer on the radio is African American even when they are reading quite formally from sterile standard English news reports. This is be-

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cause most African Americans are capable of using at least the Black English sound system to some degree, and almost all African Americans use it to at least a very light, but perceptible, extent. Most scripts for *The Cosby Show* contained very little Black English sentence structure, if any, and yet one could listen to an episode without the picture and tell that the actors were black without having ever seen the show or heard of the actors elsewhere. (This show loses much of its heart, therefore, when dubbed into French or German in Europe, where the voice actors' speech is identical to mainstream white speech.) Of course, there are occasional exceptions—on *Cosby*, for example, Lisa Bonet had no perceptible black sound in her speech. However, all of the other actors did; in general, cases such as Bonet are few and far between (for example, all of the black actors on *The Jeffersons*, *227*, and *Family Matters* would be identifiably African American on the telephone, especially to other African Americans).

There is no reason that standard English should not be allowed to come in a range of flavors when it comes to sound system. It already does: Bill Clinton speaks standard English with a noticeable Southern inflection, while characters in the film *Fargo* speak it with a Minnesota inflection, etc. Standard dialects elsewhere are similar: For example, most Stuttgarters speak standard German with an easily perceptible Stuttgart accent. There is nothing remotely slovenly or degraded about the sound system of Black English—it is simply different from standard English. Therefore, the standard English of black people (or, as linguist Arthur Spears has called it, Standard African-American English) will have an African-American flavor, reflecting the identity of African Americans as a group, despite the variety among them.

Dialect readers would be antithetical to the goal of giving black children active competence in the standard English dialect. Because so very much evidence suggests that Black English is not necessary as a bridge to standard English, reading materials should be in standard English (although there is of course nothing exceptionable about occasional passages in Black English in African-American literature). My fourth suggestion then is:

Teach African-American children to read in standard English.

Some might argue that dialect readers will give black children a sense of inclusion, but this must be viewed against the fact that seeing only standard English on the page will be another facet of the immer-

sion necessary for black children to achieve complete comfort in the dialect. There is no value judgment against Black English implied in this. Black children acquire Black English through an immersion that comes naturally from their home environment. Immersing them in standard English requires a more deliberate approach because most of their classmates will be speaking Black English around them in school. The teacher will be one source of this immersion; another source will be the printed page. Furthermore, these two sources will reinforce one another. There is a strong correlation between reading and speaking skills in learning languages: One achieves speaking fluency much faster if one has already achieved reading fluency.

Dialect readers, in themselves, are hardly evil. Such sources might be made available to interested parents to supplement their children's education at home. Along these lines, Patricia Nolen, author of one of the studies showing that bridging is unnecessary, suggested that dialect readers would be more appropriate after children have passed from the stage of acquiring reading as a skill to the stage where they are capable of reading for reflection. To be sure, many African-American parents, especially disadvantaged ones, would be unlikely to make use of this resource. However, for all black children to acquire standard English skills, each must be assured at least a grade one-to-twelve education's worth of immersion in that dialect. Materials in Black English, in the strict sense, are only incidental to this.

This brings me to my fifth suggestion:

Only older students should be taught to "translate" into standard English in writing, as a remedial approach.

The various kinds of evidence we have seen suggests that black students will learn to write in standard English by using with standard English materials from the outset. Black English and standard English are simply not different enough for this to be characterizable as arduous, confusing translation. Black children are capable of internalizing a basic sense that certain forms in their in-group speech are not for writing; they have done so for a long, long time.

It is well known that African-American students often include Black English features in their writing, especially when young. This is no more a cause for alarm than the use of Black English sound features in reading aloud at early stages. What is important is that

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the child has made the crucial link between speech and the written symbol. Ideally, as such children get older, through immersion—hearing the teacher, digesting printed materials—they will acquire a sense of what is written and what is not, and such features will gradually disappear.

On the other hand, in the present tense, there are a great many African-American students who have not progressed to this stage even by their late teens. It is difficult to attribute this to the gap between Black and standard English, given that such students typically suffer from the wide range of sociocultural burdens that would depress the school performance of a standard English-speaking white child from Scarsdale. It is clear that education has not worked for them.

Such children are past the stage where they can easily learn a speech variety by simple immersion, and their participation in compulsory education will soon end in any case. Thus the time is past when standard English could reach them in the most effective way, through their subconscious. As such, at this stage, it is appropriate to resort to teaching processes that appeal to the conscious mind. In the case of writing, this means that it will be useful to train older black students out of using Black English patterns in writing by using the contrastive analysis approach. This approach is particularly appropriate in writing because writing is basically a conscious process even when done fluently, as opposed to speaking and reading, which are automatic, effortless processes when done fluently.

The Taylor study (page 219) has shown that this approach is effective with older African-American students; its results will surely be confirmed in future experiments.

The goal of these recommendations is to create classroom settings in which Black English and African-American culture are accepted as legitimate, while preserving the conditions for optimum acquisition of standard English skills. This model is similar to that used in many bidialectal settings worldwide. This approach has several advantages over the bridging approach.

1. It does not put the intelligence of African-American children into question.
2. It allows for the acquisition of a new dialect in the most effective way possible—willing imitation amidst regular immersion—