

## **Language, Learning, and Literacy: Understanding the Social Linguistic Context of African-American Students as a Value in Library Services to Diverse Children in the United States**

### **Abstract**

This paper considers the impact of language on literacy and learning within the contexts of linguistic theory, language acquisition theory, and social cognition as having a causal relationship with low achievement in reading, writing, and speaking Standard American English. In expanding the concept of literacy, this paper is premised on the notion that African-Americans, who exhibit difficulty learning to read, write, and speak Standard American English, qualify as English Language Learners in the United States. As such, these individuals are entitled to the same considerations as other English Language Learners. Drawing on the 1996 Oakland Resolution on Ebonics and tracing the events that followed its passing, this research aims to provide librarians and library and information science (LIS) educators a contextual framework of African-American students that will be useful in building the unique skills, knowledge, and abilities that today's librarians need – if they are to effectively provide the cutting-edge library services this country's growing number of distinctly urban environments require.

## **Language, Learning, and Literacy: Understanding the Social Linguistic Context of African-American Students as a Value in Library Services to Diverse Children in the United States**

*“Wants I get order, I can be sucksexful”  
(11th grade African-American Student)*

In an opinion piece for the Washington Post, Colbert King (2016) levied the following postmortem: “The final page has been turned on D.C. Public Schools’ 2015 calendar. But 2016 begins with the same uncompromising problem: the school system’s huge racial achievement gap” (para.1). His commentary was in response to the latest Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) test results, which revealed that only 25% of third through eighth graders in the District of Columbia met or exceeded the new benchmarks set for English. At 24%, the number was even lower for math. “Were it not for white [sic] test-takers in this majority-minority school system, the results would have been even worse” (King, 2016, para.5).

King (2016) notes that Black students, who comprise 67% of the school population, had achieved a proficiency rate of only 17% in both math and English. More significantly, these students lagged behind Hispanics, who at 21%

of the student population showed proficiency rates of 22% and 21% in Math and English respectively. He concludes that the results were somewhat worse for D.C.'s high school students and offers the following interpretation of the dismal results: "Translation: Beginning at least in the third grade, an overwhelming majority of black students are on a track that leads in the wrong direction — away from college-level work or a career after high school graduation" (King, 2016, para.7).

What King (2016) describes has been an issue throughout the United States for decades. Today, in the barely visible shadow of No Child Left Behind, its countless predecessors, and early childhood intervention programs, African-American students continue to score lower on standardized tests compared to their White counterparts. Although the gap has fluctuated, even narrowing in the late 70s to early 80s (Barton & Coley, 2010); the fact is, African-American students consistently score approximately one standard deviation below White students on standardized tests (Fryer & Levitt, 2004; NAEP, 2012; Miksic, 2014). While the jury is still out on the nationwide impact of the 2010 Common Core State Standards Initiative, the D.C. PARCC test results are discouraging. Simply put, the gap persists (Crotty, 2014).

Even after controlling for covariates, Fryer and Levitt (2004) find that a considerable gap in test scores persists. Justifications for this gap, they report, have ranged from differences in genetic make-up (Jensen, 1969,1998) to differences in culture, socialization, and behavior (Fryer, 2003). However, several others have been posited as causal factors at one time or another, these include: income/poverty (Reardon, 2011), school readiness (Sandowski, 2006), school quality (Cook & Evans, 2000; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2006) differences in family structure (Armor, 1992; Mayer, 1997), as well as test and teacher bias (Ferguson, 1998; Rodgers & Spriggs, 1996).

### **Purpose and Scope**

Although some of the above cited justifications may be true for some African-American children some of the time, this paper explores the notion that there is a causal relationship between the language they speak and underachievement in school, which is more likely to be true for most of these children, most of the time. The effect of language on literacy and learning, and the implications for libraries, will be considered within the contexts of linguistic theory, language acquisition theory, and social cognition as having a causal relationship with low achievement in reading, writing, and speaking Standard American English (SAE).

Drawing on the 1996 Oakland Resolution on Ebonics and tracing the events that followed its passing, this research aims to provide librarians and

library and information science (LIS) educators a contextual framework of African-American students that will be useful in building the unique skills, knowledge, and abilities that today's librarians need – if they are to effectively provide the cutting edge library services this country's growing number of distinctly urban environments require. The idea is that these “urban librarians” should possess a specific type of cultural understanding in order to effectively serve diverse communities (Wayne State University, 2008). Unfortunately, these culturally fluent librarians are in short supply (Lee et al., 2015).

### **Libraries, Learning, and Literacy**

Libraries have supported the development of traditional literacy and learning skills for more than a century, and while reading and comprehension are still fundamentally important for today's youth, 21st Century literacy requires more. According to the American Library Association (ALA), 21st Century Literacy is the ability to use a range of technological, interpersonal, and communication tools and skills to effectively participate in the workforce. These “literacies” include print, visual, media, multimodal, and scientific among other modes (*Libraries, Literacy*, 2009, 21st Century Literacy section, para.1).

In the same vein, the National Literacy Act of 1991 specifies that it is not only the ability to “compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and one's knowledge and potential,” that deems one literate, but also the ability to read, write and speak *English* [emphasis added] (sec.3).

According to Clara Chu (1999), this definition is exclusionary as it recognizes literacy only in the official language. She further points out the diversity in these definitions reflects varied attitudes toward literacy and emphasizes the fact that literacy can mean (and has meant) different things at different times. As a result, Chu (1999) believes that libraries have been influenced by these definitions, which have tended to focus on functionality, in their planning and delivery of literacy services to linguistic minorities. “In order for librarians to provide appropriate literacy services to linguistic minorities, they need to expand their concept of literacy to take into account the language and cultural knowledge of linguistic minorities,” (Chu, 1999, p.344).

In furthering this concept of literacy, this paper is premised on the notion that African-Americans, who experience difficulty learning to read, write, and speak Standard American English (SAE) also qualify as a linguistic minority in the United States. As such, they are entitled to the same considerations as the other English Language Learners (ELL). It is therefore imperative that librarians take into account the social linguistic context of this particular user group in creating programs and providing services that align with their specific needs.

### **Background: The Sociolinguistic History of African-Americans**

In the early 1900s linguists had already begun to study what was then called Negro Dialect, but it wasn't until the desegregation of schools that the disproportionately high numbers of African-American students with low reading and writing skills attracted any attention. Recognizing that this was a language issue, concerned educators and dialectologists began collaborating and sharing information in hopes of finding a solution to the problem (Hoffman, 1998).

One of the most significant events to come out of these collaborative efforts was the Bloomington Indiana Conference in August of 1964, where the phrase "functional bidialectalism," a diglossia of Standard American English and "Black English" was first used (Hoffman, 1998, p.78). Attendees at this conference urged the National Council of Teachers of English and the Center for Applied Linguistics to sponsor a national commission to address the "English language learning problems of the culturally underprivileged" (Hoffmann, 1998, p.78).

The following year, these organizations each appointed a task force specifically charged with identifying methods that would be effective in teaching SAE to these students. Research on the topic abounded. Citing several studies, Hoffman (1998) notes that as early as 1964 several scholars had argued for second language teaching for these students, and that some had even explored the African roots of Black English. Researchers overwhelmingly recommended Standard English Proficiency programs, and though many actually made it to the classrooms, these innovative programs could not survive the Johnson administration's War on Poverty.

The ensuing hostility that permeated the country made it increasingly difficult for schools to address the racial, financial, and legal issues with which they were confronted. Consequently, the language problem that faced many African-American students was eventually interpreted as just another deficit or disadvantage, which was then added to the growing pile of justifications for African-American students' poor performance in school (Hoffman, 1998).

Sadly, this deficient language approach, as described by Ruiz (1984), was treated as terminal, which securely "anchored the thinking and explanations for the poor school performance of African American schoolchildren" (Croghan, 2000, p.75). To borrow from McDermott and Varenne (1995), who say that built into every culture is the idea that some are always better than others, a crude version of this "culture as disability approach" would have it that: We have language and you don't.

### **Language, Learning, and Non-Standard Speech in the US**

In the United States (US), Whites and African-Americans do not generally sound the same when they speak. The language patterns and speech of the latter can sometimes be distinctly different from SAE, and have often been referred to as “defective,” “lazy,” and even “mutant” (Siegel, 2010), inferring that this is not just a dialect or slang, but that it is caused by some sort of shared deficiency. Consequently, when the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) resolved that this language pattern and speech, it identified as Ebonics, was a “genetically-based” African “language system” and the “primary language” of the African-American students in that district, the country was outraged and unending debates ensued. Charles J. Fillmore (1997) recounts a conversation that offers some insight on the controversy:

The word “language” is a bear of a problem. Shortly after the ebonics [sic] story hit the newspapers I was talking to a professor of education (from another university) who asked me what I thought the Oakland school board had in mind. I started to answer the question by saying that the board believes that the language many of their African American students bring to school from home...and this colleague said “Stop right there. You just used the word ‘language’. You’re presupposing that they have a language. I can’t let you get away with that, that’s the whole issue...” (para.2)

As the above conversation shows, the debate focused primarily on whether or not Ebonics should have been granted language status. It seems that the focus should have been on the large percentage of African-American students who were reportedly having difficulty in school – and mastering the standard language (Martin Luther, 1980). Given that numerous studies had previously shown a relationship between students’ home language, literacy patterns, and school performance (e.g., Au, 1980; Michaels, 1981; Heath, 1983; Jordan, 1985), the OUSD decision was not without merit.

### **Why the Resolution?**

It was generally ignored by the media that the OUSD resolution was developed in response to the report issued by an OUSD appointed Task Force on the Education of African-American Students. The 37-member task force of highly credentialed and renowned scholars, including John Ogbu, was charged with tackling the dismal educational situation of its African-American students. The task force found that the situation was, indeed, grim.

African-American students, who comprised 53% of the student population, represented 71% of the special education classes, but only 37% of gifted and talented classes (Ogbu, 1997). In the 1995-96 school year, the grade

point average of African-American students was 1.80, the district average was 2.40; 64% of the students repeating grades were African-American; 19% of African-American twelfth graders failed to meet the requirements for graduation; 67% of truant cases were African-American; and 80% of suspended students were African-American.

The task force also found that of the eight major language groups in the OUSD, African-American students had the lowest scores on standardized language tests. Additionally, because of low language assessment test scores, these children were being disproportionately placed in special education classes (Ogbu, 1997). In addressing these issues, the task force made numerous recommendations in its 24-page report. Among several, the recommendations included improving school relationship with families and the community, career and college counseling, improved nutrition as well as recruiting African-American teachers; nevertheless, “the one issue that occupied the School Board as it discussed the report on December 18, the issue that resulted in a School Board Resolution that day, was the recognition of Ebonics as an independent language,” (Baron, 2000, p.7). During her January 1997 senate hearings, Oakland School Superintendent, Carolyn Gettridge, explained that the decision was based primarily on task force findings, which demonstrated that SAE proficiency was integral to student overall academic success and essential for mastering advanced coursework in math and science, and therefore, future college admission (Rickford, 2000).

### **The Resolution: What it Said vs What it Intended**

The controversial OUSD Resolution debuted to intense nationwide denigration. On January 16, 1997, less than one month after it was approved, the school board was forced to amend the document. The offending references were clarified; however, the revised version maintained the intent of the original; to train teachers to recognize Ebonics, and to use it as a tool in teaching Standard American English. Scrutiny of the original text (see *a* below), illustrates that the term “genetically-based” refers to African Language Systems as being genetically based (a term linguists use in discussing languages that are related to each other) as opposed to being an English dialect. This could be simplified as: African Language Systems are related to each other and not to English, as was clarified in the amended version (see *b* below). The OUSD resolution did, however, recognize Ebonics as the primary language of the African-American Students in that district. This was revised in the amended document to read “the language patterns that these children bring to school,” (Amended Resolution, 1997).

- a) Whereas, these studies have also demonstrated that African Language Systems are *genetically-based* [emphasis added] and not a dialect of English: and (Resolution 1996)
- b) WHEREAS, these studies have also demonstrated that African Language Systems *have origins in West and Niger-Congo languages* and *are not merely* [emphasis added] dialects of English: and (Amended Resolution, 1997)

### **Ebonics: History and Perceptions of a Speech Pattern**

From the very beginning, the terminology was problematic (Hoffman, 1998, p.77). The politically correct terms Negro Dialect, Black English, Black English Vernacular (BEV), African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) and more recently African-American Language (AAL) have all been used to *describe* this speech pattern at one time or another. Ebonics is the only non-pejorative *name* that it was ever given. Now synonymous with, but certainly less esteemed than, these descriptive terms, Ebonics still conjures up images of poverty, crime, unemployment, substandard housing and the cycle of urban poverty that ensnares a larger proportion of African-Americans than any other racial group (Fox, 1997, p.239). Those who speak Ebonics exclusively (i.e., those who lack SAE proficiency) are perceived as uneducated and lacking intelligence. Whether Ebonics is classified as a language or not, these perceptions will not easily disappear or make it an acceptable language (Baron, 2000, p.5; Messier, 2012, p.9).

African-Americans are not the only members of this society who speak a language pattern that is different from the standard. In a time when we speak of World Englishes, many varieties of American Englishes are recognized and accepted throughout the United States.

Such differences are not altogether a matter of education, either. I know a couple from Texas, both with doctorates and professorships in English literature, one of whom said, when analyzing a bridge hand after it had been played, 'I might should have led the spade.' (Fox 1997, p.238)

Here we see an example of a regional language pattern (or dialect) that while grammatically incorrect, is accepted in that region. That is the way some Texans speak, and it does not change, even when the speaker is an English professor. Those outside the region might turn their noses up at this pattern of speech, they would not automatically form a negative opinion of the speaker. Some might even find it charming.

“The speaking of Ebonics,” on the other hand, is considered “to be a sign of ignorance and bad linguistic habits” (Fox, 1997, p.239). This is significant because, as Fox (1997) keenly observes, Ebonics is the only dialect in the United States that is indigenous to a race of people, rather than a region. Therefore, one cannot discuss the issue of Ebonics, without commenting on racism and the role it plays in how those who speak this vernacular are perceived.

### **Ebonics: Definition and History**

A combination of the words ebony and phonics, Ebonics was designed to define the language patterns and speech of African-Americans. The term was coined by psychologist Robert Williams at a 1973 conference sponsored by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) on the Cognitive and Language Development of the Black Child. During the conference a small group of African-American social scientists found the term Black English problematic in describing the language of the children they were discussing and chose to explore alternatives. They agreed on the term Ebonics, literally black sounds, which Williams (1975) defines as the “linguistic and paralinguistic features which on a concentric continuum represent the communicative competence of the West and Niger-Congo African, Caribbean, and United States slave descendants of Niger-Congo African origin” (p.100).

Smith (1997) explains that because Ebonics comprises both verbal and para-linguistic communications, it also represents a fundamental thought process; therefore, nonverbal sounds, cues and gestures that are systematically used in the process of communication by African-Americans are also included in the definition. This is the original and only intended meaning of the term Ebonics, contends Smith (1998), further emphasizing that it was not meant to be a surrogate for the term Black English. Nonetheless, that was precisely how Ebonics was contextualized after the Oakland resolution.

### **The OUSD Resolution on Ebonics: The Backlash**

#### **The Ebonic Plague: The Media Weigh In**

It is now widely accepted that most of the flack the OUSD received was due primarily to inaccurate or misleading media interpretation; however, it should be noted that *The San Francisco Chronicle*, which broke the Ebonics story, provided an accurate account. In addition to the issues already raised, it was also largely believed that the resolution implied that students would actually be *taught* Ebonics and *taught* using Ebonics. Although the board averred that this was not

their intention, and that their strategy was to use Ebonics as a tool in teaching SAE, no one seemed to be listening.

Newspapers across the country weighed in on Ebonics (O’Neil, 1997). A synopsis of the editorials that appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The San Francisco Chronicle* for example, cited Ebonics as a “disservice” to African-American children, which would stigmatize and “bar them from the cultural mainstream and decent jobs” (Baron, 2000, p.7). The editorials further professed that it was a mistake to give “black slang a place of honor in the classroom” and “quoted Africans who said that Ebonics didn’t sound like any African language they knew” (Baron, 2000, p.7). And then there was this comment from *The New York Times*’ Frank Rich, in a piece entitled *The Ebonic Plague: A Great Non-Debate*: “There isn’t a public personage of stature in the land, White or Black, left or right, Democrat or Republican, who doesn’t say that the Oakland, Calif., school board was wrong,” (1997, p.15).

After the dust from the media frenzy settled, many well investigated and balanced stories that represented the facts in this controversial issue were published, but says Oneil (1998), these came too late; the public had already made up its mind. Comedians, cartoonists, and satirists also weighed in as Ebonics became the focus of comedic productions such as “Ebonics for Travelers,” crafted by Hannaham of the Village Voice, Mad Magazine’s “Hooked on Ebonics,” and “The Ebonics Translator,” a website that was so offensive it had to be taken down (Baron, 2000). As Baron (2000) further observes:

It had been some time since race could safely be the butt of network television and mainstream print humor, and the enthusiasm with which Ebonics jokes and parodies circulated suggested the release of much pent-up racial hostility in the United States. (p.7)

### **Topic Du jour: African-Americans Weigh In**

Once the Oakland resolution became the topic du jour, prominent African-Americans took the opportunity to express their views on the issue. During an interview on NBC’s Meet the Press, Jesse Jackson scolded Oakland for becoming a laughing stock, noting that he understood “their attempt to reach out to those children, but this is an unacceptable surrender borderlining [sic] on disgrace” and that African-American students have the ability to acquire SAE if challenged to do so (Page, 1996, p.1). Maya Angelou informed the Wichita Eagle that she was “threatened” and “incensed” by the idea, while then president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Kweisi Mfume, denounced the OUSD move (Rickford & Rickford, 2000). To echo the questions posed by Perry and Delpit (1998):

How is it that long-time civil rights organizations and activists ended up on the same side of the barricade with their traditional and current adversaries? How did it happen that Jesse Jackson, Kwesi Mfume, and Maya Angelou joined with William Bennett, George Will, Rush Limbaugh, and Pete Wilson to take aim at the Oakland decision? (p.3)

Mfume and Jackson quickly changed their anti-Ebonics stances, once the OUSD resolution was amended; but many other noted African-Americans stood their ground. Among these was Pulitzer Prize winning columnist William Raspberry, who said that just as earlier educational innovations that “Ebonicized” Dick and Jane had failed, so too would Ebonics (Raspberry, 1997).

For the average African-American citizen, most of the controversy surrounding the decision focused on references made to the language in question as “genetically-based” and the “primary language” of African-American students. Many believed, based on media coverage, but also to the unfortunate phrasing, that the term “genetically-based” referred to African-Americans being genetically predisposed to speaking Ebonics, which was the criterion that earned it primary language status.

### **To Be or not To Be: Linguists Weigh In**

In an analysis of “disciplinary-inclusive” electronic bulletin boards, and their tendency towards “othering,” or isolating non-experts to maintain the intellectual status quo of groups of experts, Pandey (2000) examined 76 postings on the bulletin board The Linguist List (<http://linguistlist.org>). The topic of these anonymous postings was Ebonics. Two of these, which represent the major moot points with which linguists struggled, appear below. In the first the author states:

Did Toni Cook (Oakland school board pres.) really say that Ebonics is genetic?? Somehow part of the genetic heritage of the grandchildren of African slaves? With features typical of West African language? Any linguist should definitely scoff at this! Such ideas are being used as a basis for formulating educational policy? Linguists may not be able to do much about the great masses’ knowledge of how language works, but we should definitely be ‘interfacing’ more with our educational establishment so that nonsense like this doesn’t spill from a school board’s president’s lips!! (p.33)

The second post focuses on another point of contention for linguists as well as the general public – was Ebonics a dialect or language?

This is a LINGUIST list, and if linguists won’t understand the term ‘dialect,’ then who will? A dialect IS a language...Whether it is RECOGNIZED as a language is not a matter of linguistics, but of politics. This is where the violence comes from, and would it were merely verbal! What of Hindu/Urdu, Serbo-

Croatian or, for that matter the dialects/languages of the former Rwanda/Burundi, where people who speak in exactly the same manner kill each other? As Sapir says, ‘...to linguists there is no real difference between a “dialect” and a “language”...’ Or if you don’t like Sapir, just go back to the Boas collection of papers entitled, ‘Race, Language and Culture’! But please let us stop talking about the differences between ‘slang’ and ‘respectable’ speech and recognize the Ebonics debate as primarily another opportunity for racial prejudice to be exhibited. Black English (AAVE?) is a language, even as is my Boston dialect, let’s face it. Okay, I’ll take up no moah [sic] space. (p.34)

According to Pandey (2000), it is significant to note that the word *genetic* caused as much confusion for linguists as it did for the general public, “not all of whom could see the use as linked to the genetic classification of languages.” She continues that using words such as *scoff*, *nonsense*, and others of that nature, it was evident the linguists were no different from the rest of the social commentators in regard to the Ebonics issue (p.33).

### **Taking Action: Politicians Weigh In**

California Senator Ray Haynes introduced bill S.B. 205 in 1997. The bill prohibited state-derived funds or resources from being used to teach Ebonics as either a foreign language, or as part of a bilingual program in California, but it provided financial incentives to low-income area districts where students’ English language skills were deficient. Richard Riley, then U.S. Secretary of Education, ruled that Ebonics was not a language and was therefore not eligible for federal bilingual education funding (Bennet, 1996), while Pennsylvania Senator Arlen Specter called for hearings on Ebonics for his sub-committee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education.

It mattered little that the courts had already ruled in favor of a group of African-American parents in Ann Arbor Michigan who, when faced with challenges similar to those of the OUSD, sought to level the educational playing field in court. The parents asserted that as economically disadvantaged African-Americans, their children lived the social isolation of a housing project and as a result spoke a vernacular of English, or “Black English,” which was so different from SAE that it posed a language barrier.

This, the parents claimed, hindered their children’s equal participation in Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School’s instructional programs. The issue raised in the 1979 case was whether or not “Black English” could present a “language barrier” similar to foreign languages (Martin Luther, 1980). Nor did it matter that, in the earlier 1974 *Lau v Nichols* battle, the Supreme Court found that children had the right to be taught in a language they understood (414 US 563). Or *Brown v The Board of Education* (1954) before that.

Specter's hearings convened on January 23, 1997 with North Carolina Senator Faircloth "decrying the politics of race and their Ebonic surrogates as one of the most 'absurd' examples of extreme 'political correctness' that he had ever encountered" (Baugh, 2005a, p.1). To the committee's satisfaction, the OUSD representatives testified that their only goal was to teach SAE. Their revised resolution appeased the critics but put the OUSD on the defensive. What they were actually advocating, said the OUSD, was a Standard English Proficiency program, similar to those of the mid sixties and seventies (Baron, 2000).

Noted sociolinguist William Labov testified that Oakland's plan to use foreign language methodology programs to improve school performance in African-American students certainly deserved consideration, since previous methods had failed (Baron, 2000). The Senate hearings drew to a close with Senator Specter warning that he would be holding future hearings with witnesses who had not yet testified. In the end, no future hearings were convened (Baugh, 2005a). By May 1997, five months after the original resolution's furor, the OUSD had forsaken their plan. "The general public in the U.S. believes that the hue and cry of public outrage has silenced this nonsense, and certainly other boards with similar notions have been intimidated by the furor" (Hoffman, 1998, p.84).

### **The Derivation of Ebonics**

To further understand the seemingly separatist stance of the OUSD, an understanding of the three linguistic theories concerning the derivation of this language is useful. A brief overview of three theories will be provided, however, the Afrocentric or Ethnolinguistic theory will be discussed in more detail, as it is the one on which the OUSD based its resolution.

#### ***Pidgin/Creole Theory***

This first view is the oldest, most well researched, and accepted. The Creole/Pidgin theory posits that when European and West African languages converged in trade colonies on the West Coast of Africa, and later on plantations, a hybrid contact language or pidgin developed. A pidgin is a language that has no native speakers. It exists only as a lingua franca, a language that facilitates communication, usually for trade, between people who do not speak each other's native language (Rickford, 1997). Although the pidgin uses rudiments of the native language, it has a simplified grammatical structure and a smaller vocabulary than the original language. As the pidgin language is passed on to children, it acquires native speakers. It is this acquisition of native speakers that elevates a pidgin to a Creole. Although the vocabulary and grammar are expanded in the process, the Creole still remains simpler than the original languages. According to this theory, it is this mixing of the West African Languages and

English that eventually developed into the African-American language the OUSD defined as Ebonics (Rickford, 1997).

### ***Eurocentric or Dialectologist Theory***

The Eurocentric or Dialectologist view is that slaves learned to speak English from White settlers, who spoke to them in simplified English, or what some have referred to as “baby talk” (Smith, 1998). Slaves learned this English with relative ease and with very little continuing influence from their African languages. Based on this theory, the African-American language (defined as Ebonics) is an English dialect with very little African influence (Baugh, 2005b).

### ***Afrocentric or Ethnolinguistic Theory***

The third theory, and the one on which the OUSD based its resolution, is better known as the African Retention Theory. In this view Ebonics is the linguistic continuation of Niger-Congo African languages in America. Theorists posit that the majority of the distinguishing pronunciation and grammatical features of Ebonics are continuities from slaves acquiring English vocabulary, and restructuring it according to the patterns of these African languages (Rickford, 1997). Smith (1998) points to several scholars who have posited and maintained that during the process of hybridization the grammatical structure of the African language remained dominant, and that it is still dominant in the speech of African-Americans today.

These researchers assert that although African-American speech has adopted the majority of its vocabulary from the English language, it is not an English dialect. They argue that even though the words are English, the grammar has remained African. Since languages are considered related based on the resemblance of their grammatical structures, regardless of the origin of the vocabulary (Palmer, 1980), Ebonics is therefore related to the African language system, not the English language system.

Smith (1998) further contends that when Standard English grammar is applied to Ebonics, the absence of final consonant clusters are described as “lost,” “reduced,” “deleted,” or “weakened.” However, when Ebonics is viewed as an African Language System, in which homogenous consonant clusters tend not to occur, it is by relexification that English words such as west, last, and fast become wes, las, and fas (Smith, 1998, p. 113).

Because consonant clusters such as [th], [sk], [st] tend not to occur in African Language Systems, Smith says they are not omitted in Ebonics; these phonemes simply do not exist in that language. In addition, because of the strong consonant vowel (CV) vocalic pattern of African languages, entire sentences will

take on the CV, CV vocalic pattern. For example, the sentence, “did you eat yet?” will by relexification become /j u w i j E t/ (Smith, 1998).

Where the Afrocentric theorists fall short, says Rickford (1997), is that they fail to specifically identify which West African languages support which argument, as there are a large number of languages in the Niger-Congo family, and that some of the most historically significant ones do not support this theory. The Afrocentric theory is further weakened, he continues, by the fact that other English languages, which had little or no West African influences, also exhibit elements like consonant cluster deletion. In any event, the researcher concludes that many linguists do agree that there are continuing African influences in some Ebonics as well as American English words. For example, the words *hip*, *tote*, and *cut-eye* (a scornful but fleeting look) are all of West African origin. However, in reference to pronunciation and grammar, Afrocentrics need more precise evidence (Rickford, 1997).

### **Language Acquisition: Not a Cultural Legacy**

We now turn our focus to the mechanics language acquisition. According to Kuhl (2010), language is not simply a cultural legacy, but is acquired through a biological process that occurs in the brain. She notes that there have been rapid advances in research in the last ten years, which confirm that by simply listening to ambient speech, infants acquire language early and instinctively without any special effort. Although many kinds of learning continue, and even improve, throughout adulthood, the ability to acquire new phonemes (speech sounds) fades in a very short time, usually within the first year.

### **The Brain and Hebbian Learning**

Thus, there is “critical period” in which a person can acquire new phonemes, and why children learn languages more “efficiently and naturally” than adults (Doupe & Kuhl 1999; McClelland, 2001, 2002; Kuhl, 2010). The question is why? For answers, McClelland (2001) looks at Hebb’s Postulate, which states:

When an axon of cell A is near enough to excite a cell B and repeatedly or persistently takes part in firing it, some growth process or metabolic change takes place in one or both cells such that A's efficiency, as one of the cells firing B, is increased. (Hebb, 1949 p.62)

Neuroscientists state this simply as, *cells that fire together, wire together*. This effect can actually be observed in lab experiments where cell A is given some type of input that induces it to fire. Cell A will excite cell B (if it’s close enough)

and cause it to fire as well. During this process the cells connect forming a kind of circuit where A will always make B fire; once this occurs both cells are now committed (wired) to the same input that initially induced A to fire.

As experiences (or input) from the outside world flow into the brain, some cells are induced to fire and wire together; whatever pattern the input elicits will become hardwired in the brain. Once a cell is committed to a sound, it will no longer respond to stimulus from other cells or circuits. It will fail to learn. This is how information gets stamped into the brain in a process called Hebbian learning (McClelland, 2001).

In the Hebbian model infants' brain cells are not heavily wired; one could picture the speech sound space in a baby's brain as a blank slate waiting to be imprinted (or wired) (McClelland, 2001). Kuhl (2010) suggests that infants literally have the ability to map sound from any language, or multiple languages with very little difficulty, but that this ability fades during a baby's first year. Her theory is that sounds are *stamped in* well before the infant has the ability to speak, because the infant needs these phonemes on which to build the foundation for language comprehension and speech.

Kuhl (2010) says that other disciplines are also contributing to this area of research. In cultural anthropology research indicates that adult speech behavior towards infants and children (referred to as motherese) is universal across cultures and is changing the view of the role adults play in language acquisition. Children also acquire language through visual cues and responded more attentively to humans. This way of speaking to children and infants is crucial to the process of language acquisition and cannot be replicated by machines.

***Applicable to All:*** According to McClelland (2001), the model of Hebbian learning can be applied to the phonemes of all human languages. When the sounds of a language come pouring into the brain, each phoneme induces a number of cells to wire-up and become dedicated to that specific sound. Many of these sounds or phonemes are unique to their specific language and are difficult for non-native speakers to articulate. These include, for example, the Spanish [d], the English [th], Japanese [r], and the French [y]. McClelland (2001) goes on to explain that hearing the unfamiliar language actually reinforces the phonemes of the native language. For example, when a native Japanese speaker hears either an English [l] or English [r], their single Japanese phoneme [r] fires or is activated. This happens because the English [l] does not occur in Japanese, so the brain will select the closest imprinted phoneme; which is Japanese phoneme [r]. However, instead of becoming more flexible with increasing exposure to these English phonemes, the ability to articulate the English [l] and [r] actually diminishes.

***Can't Hear it, Can't Say it:*** This is why most individuals, who are past the critical period, find it difficult to learn to speak a second language without an accent. These second language learner cannot easily supplant the imprinted native

phonemes with the phonemes of the new (i.e., second) language or acquire new phonemes. Basically, this means that when s/he tries to articulate a non-native sound, it is a difficult (sometimes impossible) task because s/he cannot hear the sound as natives hear it. Without that speech sound (or phoneme) imprinted in the brain, the brain does not recognize the sound; consequently, it substitutes the closest, already imprinted, phoneme. That is what the individual actually hears. That is what the individual articulates. Simply put, the challenge for non-native speakers of a language also lies in what they hear – if they can't hear it, they can't say it.

### **Social Cognition: Information Access and Deduction**

The main focus of social cognition is to understand human social behavior by studying the mental processes that occur when people interact with each other (Martin and Clark, 1990). Because psychologists have always operated under the assumption that individuals do not really react to the world, but to the world as they see it, understanding how people “make sense of their social environment” is key to understanding this behavior (Schwarz, 1995). Therefore, social cognition research is also concerned with how humans access and make use of information. Norbert Schwarz asks:

When we interpret new information, or form a judgment about some person or social situation, what knowledge do we draw on? For example, when we find out that someone we have just met enjoys skydiving and whitewater rafting, do we identify these hobbies as adventurous or reckless? And when asked how life is going these days, what aspects of our lives do we review? Do we review the many facets of life, or do we simply rely on whatever happens to come to mind? In more general terms, when a variety of information may potentially be relevant to a judgment, which information are we most likely to use? (Schwarz, 1995, p.345).

In other words, what knowledge do we draw on when we are faced with making a decision? Schwarz (1995) finds that it is the “subset of potentially relevant knowledge that is most accessible at the time of judgment” (p.345). Simply stated, we use the most accessible information or concepts when faced with making a decision or judgment. This is usually the most recently used information, and/or the most easily recalled information. In fact, individuals seldom retrieve all the relevant information required to form an impression of a person, or to make a judgment about some social issue. Instead they truncate the search as soon as enough relevant information is accessed to form a judgment that they are comfortable with. However, they may take more time to search their memories if the impending judgment is of great importance, or if a mistake would

have devastating effects. Even when faced with interpreting new or ambiguous concepts, Schwarz (1995) finds that humans use the most easily accessible information without considering alternatives that might be more relevant but less accessible.

Individuals also tend to give priority, or “inferential weight” to information based on vividness, or the emotional interest of the information. This means that vivid information, or information that stands out in some way, will always be remembered and therefore more easily accessible for influencing deductions and making judgments in the future. The problem with this is that useful, but boring or uninteresting, information may be ignored for less useful, but vivid information (Nisbett & Ross, 1980).

Another interesting fact concerning individuals and memory, what Ross et al. (1975) call “belief perseverance,” is that individuals often refuse to believe evidence that opposes some theory they hold; even if the new evidence is irrefutable, it is basically ignored. Ross and his team find that once a theory or opinion is formed, people have a hard time letting go, even in the face of new evidence.

Although the researchers were not able to pinpoint the exact cause of this behavior, the results show that “perseverance phenomena,” or a person’s response to challenges of the evidence that initially led to a belief, dictate that people persist in their initial belief to an unjustifiable degree. Even after total discrediting, or debriefing, subjects still exhibit “post-debriefing perseverance,” or an unwillingness to let go of the prior false information. Therefore, the order in which information is received can also affect inference and/or judgment (Ross et al., 1975).

### **Making a Judgment on Ebonics**

This begs the question: how was the public’s perception of Ebonics shaped by the media? Perry and Delpit (1985) provide this observation:

First of all, it is important to point out that it is often the early coverage that counts. Once the story is gotten wrong, there is little that can be done; for after the wrong story, quickly follow the talk show and op-ed-page artists, whose role appears to be to drive spikes into graves. Informed, balanced stories then generally come too far after the fact, and letters of clarification to the editor — always balanced by contrary letters — are not given the credibility lavished on real, live newsmen. Such was the course more or less followed by the print media on the Oakland resolution. (p.34)

The history of Ebonics and the country’s reaction to the Oakland resolution demonstrate a pejorative view of this language and its native speakers that

persists. As Messier (2012) observes, “the ultimate issue of the stigmatization of nonstandard dialects that continues to be problematic today reflects wider social issues and cannot be resolved by linguists and pedagogues alone (p.9).

This negative view is always present and perseveres even when disconfirming evidence is presented. For African-American students that receive continuous negative feedback regarding the language they bring from home to school, a negative view of their home language will likely be internalized. References to that language as Black English, African-American Vernacular English, or Ebonics will likely cause the most recent and most vivid information regarding these to be the most easily recalled. It is unlikely that this will change, even in the presence of opposing information. This could also negatively affect self-perception and self-esteem, which would also persevere in the presence of disconfirming evidence. It seems to follow that this could contribute to low achievement in reading, writing and speaking Standard American English. Croghan (2000) comments:

To acquire a second language effectively, the learner must feel a sense of confidence and belonging. Put another way, mastery of language is frequently impeded when the learner is feeling rejected, devalued, or excluded. Underlying this thinking is the assumption that language is an integral part of self. To put a positive spin on the point, the student who feels that her language is being recognized and validated is likely to feel that she is being valued and recognized. (p.78)

### **Discussion**

McDermott and Varenne (1995) make the argument that disability is a socially relevant state. They say that an individual can only be classified as disabled based on the specific criteria of a culture, and once that individual is labeled disabled, a whole host of other issues arise which can increase the challenges for that individual. It could be argued that this is the case for African-Americans who speak Ebonics exclusively. They do not speak the standard language, so by refusing to acknowledge the vernacular they speak as an official language, the country has classified these native Ebonics speakers as language deficient. In addition, because mastery of the standard language is also perceived as a sign of intelligence and necessary for success, those who lack standard language proficiency face problems that transcend low academic achievement. They are *language deficient*, not simply *standard language deficient*.

In a society that deems standard language proficiency a criterion for success, these individuals are seen as less viable and unable to compete in the mainstream job market. Without a language, they are essentially disabled. As Croghan (2000) observes:

Nowhere in today's world does a language community live in total isolation. The degree of difference between AAL and SAE is in direct proportion to the historic and current forced isolation and exclusion of African Americans and their language from America's mainstream. (p.83)

From this cross-disciplinary perspective, we see that language is acquired within the first twelve months of life, and that during this "critical period" phonemes (speech sounds) are biologically imprinted in the brain. Phonemes that are not imprinted on the brain are difficult to hear and thus are difficult, or impossible to, articulate. This means that when native speakers attempt to articulate a non-native phoneme it results in relexification, the imposition of the native language onto the non-native language.

If these circuits are formed as early as the research indicates, it provides some insight on why, in spite of extensive exposure to SAE, many African-American children still find it difficult to make the transition from their native language to reading, writing, and speaking SAE. This is especially significant since continued exposure to the new (unfamiliar) language actually reinforces the phonemes of the native language. It could be deduced that this phenomenon also occurs in African-Americans, who hear one particular speech pattern exclusively during the "critical period." Children learn language based on visual cues and what they hear as infants, so if an infant is exposed to only one speech pattern exclusively during the critical period, that is the language pattern, structure, and syntax that is imprinted. This speech pattern becomes the native language. For some African-American children, this language is Ebonics.

By the time these children reach school age, and SAE is introduced, the brain cannot recognize many of the new sounds. This means that these children cannot *articulate* certain non-native phonemes because they cannot *hear* them. Research indicates that this will only become more challenging as they transition into adolescence toward adulthood. Of course, this does not mean that native Ebonics speakers are unable to learn SAE. People have been learning languages and getting rid of accents through sheer determination and hard work for ages. What it does mean is that the native language *must* be taken into account for the process to be successful. Success also requires an understanding of, and respect for, their cultural and linguistic history.

This presents a challenge, as the history of Ebonics and the public reaction to the Oakland resolution demonstrate, a pejorative view of this speech pattern and its native speakers is pervasive. This can negatively affect self-perception and self-esteem, which can also persevere in the presence of disconfirming evidence. Thus, it could negatively impact academic achievement. "It is crucial that academics, scholars, teachers, students, parents, and members of our community

groups have the opportunity to learn to respect these experiences,” (DeFrantz, 1995, p.4). Of course, this includes librarians.

### **Conclusion**

The American Library Association (ALA) supports and encourages the provision of services to diverse populations, acknowledging that those that may experience language or literacy-related barriers, cultural or social isolation, and discrimination need specific attention (ALA,B3). However, their recommendations place the responsibility for accomplishing this solely on libraries. In other words, these recommendations would only have an impact on *librarians* already working in the field. While there is value in this approach, it would be far more effective if LIS students acquired the cultural experiences necessary to support the 21st Century information needs of the country’s culturally diverse youth, while enrolled in school.

In accomplishing this goal, LIS educators would do well to take a page from The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). In its Unit Standards that went effect in the fall of 2008, NCATE calls for educators with the ability to “reflect multicultural and global perspectives that draw on the histories, experiences, and representations of students and families from diverse populations” (sec.4d) and advocates for the provision of training opportunities that will support this goal. NCATE specifically requires that “candidates learn about exceptionalities and inclusion, English language learners and language acquisition, ethnic/racial cultural and linguistic differences” (sec.4d). The Common Core has similar requirements regarding speaking, listening, and language for teacher training. Librarians, and more importantly, African-American children who qualify as English Language Learners, would benefit from a similar approach. This would result in LIS graduates that had the skills necessary to work in this country’s distinctly urban environments and the knowledge and abilities to work with the inhabitants.

The more librarians understand about the diverse children in their communities; the better they will be able to serve them. As Virginia Walter (2001) advises, children and teens are vital participants of our communities, and to better serve them we need to understand their lived experiences. This should be the goal; so that *once they get older they can be successful*.

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