

The Ebonics Controversy: A Case Study in the Use and Abuse of Language in Public Relations and Political Commentary

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Abstract

The word “Ebonics” was thrust into the American public’s consciousness in 1996 when California’s Oakland Unified School District declared that the English spoken by its Black students was a separate language from Standard English and should be treated as a second language. The district’s stated goal was to lay the foundation for educational programs designed to improve their students’ performance on measures of Standard English. This paper explores how the language of the resolution announcing the district’s plan, along with commentary by politically conservative media outlets, resulted in a controversy based on the misperception that the African American children of the Oakland School District were going to be taught *in* Ebonics. The paper also notes how some of the political strategies used during the Ebonics controversy are being used currently in the controversy surrounding Critical Race Theory.

In the United States, decisions concerning public school educational policies are made at the local level by school boards. The members of these boards usually belong to and are elected by the local citizenry, and, in principle, have as their mission the goal of improving the education and prospects of the students attending the schools over which they preside (*School Board Governance*, n.d.). Among other responsibilities, school boards often approve textbooks and determine the nature and goals of their district’s curriculum. Decisions made by the over 13,000 U.S. schoolboards (de Brey et al., 2021, p. 128) are usually accepted and implemented without hesitation by parents, students, and teachers, and perceived as clearly and beneficially furthering the interests of the students attending schools in their districts. A disturbing trend, however, has been developing over the course of recent years as groups of individuals have begun attending the usually peaceful and mundane proceedings of school board meetings and engaging in aggressively disruptive behaviors. Using often patently false claims about some issue in a way that is meant to enflame public opinion (Rodriguez, 2021), these groups attempt to exert pressure on school boards to adopt or reject educational policies that conform to

their political ideologies.

A current example of this phenomenon is the controversy surrounding the “teaching” of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in American public schools. CRT is not a “subject” that is taught anywhere to young students. It is a framework usually used by graduate students and lawyers to analyze the existence and effects of systemic racism (Graham et al., 2011). CRT has been widely misrepresented, however, by right-wing media and pundits as an effort to teach young, impressionable students that “whites are — everywhere and forever — the permanent oppressors of Black people” (Murdock, 2021). CRT was conceived in an academic environment and “emerged out of a framework for legal analysis in the late 1970s and early 1980s created by legal scholars Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado, among others” (Sawchuk, 2021). The analytical framework provided by CRT was never meant to be, nor is there any evidence that it has ever been, taught as an educational topic to elementary school children.

Nevertheless, right-wing pundits and politicians persist in mischaracterizing CRT as a clear and present danger to students. Republican Congresswoman Karen Hartzler, for example, has introduced the “No CRT for Our Military Kids Act,” saying that “children of our service members should never be taught that the country their mom or dad is fighting for is inherently bad” (*Hartzler Fights*, 2021). Fox News, a right-wing media organization, has perpetuated and amplified these types of misrepresentations by incessant repetition. For example, the media outlet mentioned “critical race theory’ 1,300 times in less than four months” (Gibbons & Ray, 2021). Additionally, many Republican-led state legislatures have introduced or passed laws which ostensibly prohibit the teaching of CRT by banning “the discussion, training, and/or orientation that the U.S. is inherently racist as well as any discussions about conscious and unconscious bias, privilege, discrimination, and oppression” (Gibbons & Ray, 2021). Again, Critical Race Theory was never intended to be, nor has it ever been, used in the way its right-wing objectors claim it is used. In this effort to disseminate a clearly false narrative, despite easy access to accurate information about the intent of the issue, right-wing commentators seem to be following a playbook that has been honed and perfected over the years. Some elements of a nascent form of this strategy seem to have been developing 25 years ago when the “Ebonics” issue, on which this paper will focus, was thrust into the public consciousness.

On December 18, 1996, the Oakland Unified School Board (OUSB) released a resolution detailing a plan to recognize ‘Ebonics’ as the native language of its African American students (*Ebonics Resolution*, 1996). Claiming Ebonics as a language separate

from English was a move by the Board to take advantage of the insights gained by linguists and teachers in teaching second languages and use those to help to increase the performance of Black speakers of the variety known as African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in Standard American English (SAE). By acknowledging Ebonics as a language, the OUSB intended to improve the performance of the Oakland School District's 28,000 Black students (Baugh, 2005) on reading and writing measures of Standard American English. While linguists usually use the term African American Vernacular English to refer to the language spoken by about 80% of the African American community (Dillard, 1972), this new name, Ebonics (the origin of which will be discussed later), was unknown to most of the general population. On its appearance in the OUSB resolution, Ebonics, and the attendant claim that it was a language separate and unrelated "genetically" to English, immediately unleashed a firestorm of controversy, some of which was justified. The Board's often inartful language used to present the original resolution opened them up to deliberate misrepresentations of their expressed goal, which was:

Devis[ing] and implement[ing] the best possible academic program for imparting instruction to African-American students in their primary language for the combined purposes of maintaining the legitimacy and richness of such language whether it is known as 'Ebonics,' 'African Language Systems,' 'Pan-African Communication Behaviors' or other description, and to facilitate their acquisition and mastery of English language skills. (*Ebonics Resolution*, 1996)

A barrage of misinformation, "rumor mill" reporting, and "expert" analysis obfuscated and maligned the original intent of the Oakland School Board and drowned out many of the voices attempting in good will to support its recommendations.

In the following review, discussion, and analysis of the Ebonics issue, it is important to note that many, including the Clinton administration, mistakenly believed that the OUSB was claiming that Ebonics was an independent language for the purpose of gaining access to federal funds. Under this assumption, the presumed purpose of the Board's action was to claim that the Black students of the Oakland School District arrived to school as native speakers of Ebonics and would then be taught English as a second language, in the same way that Spanish, Vietnamese, and other immigrant children would be taught English, and would thus be eligible for the same types of funding available to help minority language speakers acquire English. However, according to Darolyn Davis, a spokeswoman for the OUSB, "The school district has never, and did not intend to, go after Federal funds, bilingual funding" (Bennet, 1996).

Despite the Board's clear intent to distinguish Ebonics as a language unto itself, usage of the term during and after the controversy has muddied this distinction, and Ebonics was (and is) often used as a synonym for AAVE or Black English.

A Brief Synopsis of “Ebonics”

The terminology referring to the speech patterns of the descendants of Caribbean Islanders and Africans who were originally brought to the United States as slaves has changed over time, and the dialect itself has become the object of linguistic research. Where once it may have been acceptable to disparage the speech of African Americans as an “uncouth dialect” or “crude jargon” (Dillard, 1972, p. 265), later terms coined by sociolinguists mirrored the way African Americans themselves were commonly referred to. Terms such as “Black English,” “Black English Vernacular,” and the most common, “African American Vernacular English” were in use at the time the Oakland Unified Board published its resolution using the term “Ebonics,” but these terms were not used in the Resolution since the Board was attempting to convey its argument that Black students spoke a different language from English.

The word “Ebonics” is a combination of the words “ebony” and “phonics,” and was originally coined by the linguist Robert Williams, whose expressed intent was to empower Black Americans to take pride in their African language heritage (Fields, 1997, p. 24). Williams first used the phrase at a conference convened specifically in response to his frustration with the notion, advanced by White scholars, of Black speech as a deficient dialect of English (Yancy, 2011). Before the 1960s, pride in the language of their community was unthinkable for young African American students in the United States' public school system. The language these students brought to school was viewed by the public as a degraded variant of Standard American English, and the African American students who spoke it were derided as lazy and unintelligible (Ramirez et al., 2005, p. 163) when speaking their natural language. As Jae Nichelle recounts, “... I grew up thinking that AAVE was an inferior English. I remember being told repeatedly that no adult would take me seriously if I spoke it, and the infamous day that my Black English teacher told my class that “ain't ain't a word” (Nichelle, 2018).

While the derision of AAVE was entirely misplaced, concern by parents and teachers about the educational performance of Black students was well-founded. African American students at that time were performing “substantially below state and national norms” (*Ebonics Resolution*, 1996) on SAE reading and writing measures compared to their Caucasian counterparts. Responding to this disparity, the federal government

enlisted educational psychologists to determine the cause and develop interventions to rectify the issues preventing these students from performing at the level of their White peers (Labov, 1972). These government psychologists “follow[ed] the pattern designed for animal experiments where motivation is controlled by simple methods as withholding food” (Labov, 1972, p. 221). The unfortunate result of the government’s efforts, then, was that Black children were categorized in the psychologists’ report as victims of “a cultural deficit as a result of an impoverished environment in their early years” (Labov, 1972, p. 201). This “deficit hypothesis” (Labov, 1972, p. 286) implicitly assumes and perpetuates the idea that the assimilation of White culture underlies the essence of what it means to be “American.” Put another way, the educational psychologists’ assessment essentially claimed that Black children were not being raised as White children, and therefore did not assimilate White culture as part of their upbringing and, consequently, they suffered severe social and educational disadvantages. Part and parcel with this belief of a cultural deficit went the equally disturbing concept of verbal deprivation.

Verbal Deprivation was the name given to the theory advanced by the government-hired psychologists which hypothesized that “Black children from the ghetto area are said to receive little verbal stimulation, to hear very little well-formed language, and as a result are impoverished in their means of verbal expression” (Labov, 1972). As implausible as this seems in hindsight, educational programs in the United States were founded on these “notions . . . based upon the work of educational psychologists who [knew] very little about language and even less about black children” (Labov, 1972, p. 201).

Fortunately, however, at about the same time, sociolinguists were adopting a more scientific approach to the study of language variation. These linguists focused not on the capacity of African Americans to learn Standard English, or of Black parents to provide their children an environment conducive to developing language skills, but on the very real cultural and linguistic differences between African American Vernacular English and Standard American English. William Stewart, J.L. Dillard, and William Labov, to name a few, began to publish studies which provided evidence that the lower reading and writing scores of African American students on SAE measures could be directly linked to the fact that they “speak a well ordered, highly structured, highly developed language system which in many aspects is different from standard English” (Baratz & Shuy, 1969, p. 94). In other words, the performance discrepancies between Black and White student scores were more likely an indicator of a bias (Hoover et al., 1987) in favor of the Standard American English used to construct the testing instruments rather than

any of the more insidious possible conclusions pointing to linguistic or social deprivation.

Despite this progress, the general population of the United States, for the most part, was unaware or simply did not accept that the language spoken at some time or another by approximately eighty percent of the Black community (Ramirez et al., 2005, p. 156) was recognized scientifically as a robust and thriving linguistic variety deserving of all the respect given to any other human language. It is precisely this prevalent notion that African American Vernacular English was inferior to Standard American English that prompted the Oakland Unified School Board to convene the African-American Task Force to explore ways to advance the educational prospects of their students while maintaining respect for the language and culture they brought from home.

The Resolution

The resolution that was unanimously adopted by the Oakland Unified School Board in December 1996 was based on the final report of a six-month long investigation by the specially appointed African-American Task Force (*Synopsis of the Policy*, 1997). The task force was charged with making “recommendations regarding effective practices that would enhance the opportunity for all students to successfully achieve the standards of the core curriculum” (OUSD 1997a: 1). Some of the data that prompted the formation of this task force is quite compelling and bears repeating. These statistics were published in an article by the OUSD entitled, “Synopsis of the Adopted Policy on Standard American English Language Development:”

- 53% of the total OUSD’s enrollment is African American.
- 71% of the students enrolled in Special Education were African American.
- 19% of the 12th grade African American students did not graduate.
- 80% of all suspended students were African American.

(*Synopsis of the Policy*, 1997)

Additionally, the GPA of the district’s African American students, at 1.8, represented the lowest GPA in the district (*Ebonics*, 1997). Regardless of how subsequent actions of the Board are analyzed, the above statistics indicate that the OUSB was responding to a legitimate educational crisis; these statistics paint a picture of a district that was in critical condition regarding the performance of their Black students. With over one half of the Black student population performing at below a ‘C’ grade level, the OUSB recognized that their stated curricular goals were not being realized for a large segment

of their students. An imbalance in African American student suspensions as well points to an environment where Black students were more likely to receive disciplinary action, possibly as the result of racial bias, a phenomenon that continues today (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). Recognition of the fact that students attending schools in the Oakland School District were not achieving the levels of Standard American English that had been elucidated as goals in the district's core curriculum moved the task force to recommend an approach which would recognize and reinforce the "direct connection of English language proficiency to student achievement" (OUSD1997a: 1). This clear, concise, and well-intentioned directive, however, was not so clearly expressed in the document the task force eventually produced and which the school board unanimously approved, as evidenced by the public uproar it subsequently triggered.

The document that was ultimately approved for public distribution was titled, *Resolution of the Board of Education Adopting the Report and Recommendations of the African American Task Force; and Directing the Superintendent of Schools to Devise a Program to Improve the English Language Acquisition and Application Skills of African-American Students*. The second part of the title focuses attention on the clear link between the recognized performance discrepancies between Black and White students on measures of their SAE. However, introduction of the term 'language acquisition' opened the door to the interpretation that Black students had not acquired English, an ambiguity that was used in subsequent criticism of the resolution. Had the resolution clearly articulated the elements of a "program to improve the English . . . of African-American students," at this point, however, much of the controversy that followed publication of the resolution may have been avoided.

In successive paragraphs as well, however, the resolution seemed to provide further fodder for critics, and the language of the document at times appeared overly academic and legalistic to the point of being obfuscatory. While not necessarily written for a general or popular audience, the ease with which some of the clauses were misinterpreted – either purposely or genuinely – reflected poorly on the judgement of both its drafters and the board members who unanimously approved it. Some examples of this tendency are included here from the original resolution:

- . . . African Language Systems [Ebonics] are genetically based and not a dialect of English.
- . . . legislation [recognizing the unique stature of the language of slaves] being prejudicially and unconstitutionally vetoed repeatedly. . .
- . . . the Board of Education . . . recognizes . . . West and Niger-Congo African

Language Systems (Ebonics) . . . as the predominantly primary language of African American students.

- . . . the Superintendent . . . shall immediately devise and implement the best possible academic program for imparting instruction to African American students in their primary language . . . and to facilitate their acquisition and mastery of English language skills. (*Ebonics Resolution*, 1996)

The resolution goes on to say that, based on their unique and distinct history as descendants of slaves, and the diverse linguistic backgrounds from which Ebonics developed, English is not the native language, nor is it the home language of African Americans. The terminology employed in this, and other parts of the document, presents a wide range of linguistic and social generalizations that did not serve to reinforce or substantiate the spirit of the pragmatic issues at stake for the children of the Oakland School District. In other words, the intended message, while clearly conveyed in the second part of the resolution's title, was, based on the subsequent response to it, somewhat obscured as it appeared in the body of the resolution itself. The above excerpts show that some of the initial criticism received by the OUSB was deserved, and not merely the twisting of a story by the media to conform to a narrative and to accentuate the provocative aspects, although this did happen later, as will be discussed.

The Response to the Resolution

As noted previously, immediately upon its release, the OUSB resolution generated a nationwide controversy. Initial public responses were resoundingly negative and, as Salim Muwakkil observed, contained a great deal of “cross-racial consensus on Ebonics: it was bad” (Muwakkil, 1997, p. 29). The Rev. Jesse Jackson, for example, called the resolution “an unacceptable surrender, borderlining on disgrace, it’s teaching down to our children . . . and must never happen” (L.A. Time Archives, 1996). Maya Angelou denounced the resolution, saying that “The very idea that African-American language is a language separate and apart can be very threatening, because it can encourage young men and women not to learn standard English” (CNN, 1996). The president of the NAACP, Kweisi Mfume, proclaimed it “a cruel joke” against Black students (Bock, 1997), and Richard Riley, the Secretary of Education at the time, said that “elevating black English to the status of a language is not the way to raise standards of achievement in our schools” (Muwakkil, 1997, p. 29).

The consensus, then, appeared to be that the OUSB, in arguing for recognition of Ebonics as an independent language, was pursuing an unwise course of action. Florence

King, in the conservative-leaning *National Review*, questioned why so many African American leaders came out so forcefully against a resolution that confirmed, in a positive way, many of the heritage issues these leaders supported. King surmised that “telling [African Americans] that English is their second language makes them feel like the one thing they never had to worry about being: foreigners. Throughout our history, whenever nativists and immigrants have squared off, blacks could savor the satisfactions of being on the entrenched side for a change” (F. King, 1997, p. 64). The OUSB resolution may thus have been perceived initially by the Black community as a threat meant to endanger a critical element of Black culture: their strong identity as Americans. This view, though, was not supported by the document itself, nor by the Board. In response to the seemingly universal public misunderstanding generated by its resolution, the OUSB quickly initiated an ameliorative public relations effort to clarify the meaning and intent of the resolution and correct the misinterpretations that had arisen.

Exactly one week after publication of the resolution, in an effort to correct the impression that the Oakland School District was planning to implement a program based on teaching its pupils Ebonics as a language, OUSB spokesperson Darolyn Davis reiterated that “The goal and the intent of the district’s policy are to insure that every child in Oakland speaks, writes and comprehends standard American English. It would be a crime, it really would be a crime, to not teach students standard American English” (Bennet, 1996).

The OUSB’s Response to the Response to the Resolution

In response to the outpouring of criticism, and the overwhelmingly negative reaction to its efforts, the OUSB first produced a synopsis of the resolution meant to clarify the original, and when that effort did not quell the controversy, they redrafted the original resolution and issued the *Amended Resolution* (1997), which clarified or removed much of the language that had obscured the Board’s original intent. In the original resolution, the Board pointed to studies which had found that “African Language Systems are genetically-based and not a dialect of English” (*Ebonics Resolution*, 1996). The term “genetically-based” proved particularly volatile. In linguistics, according to Dr. Joseph Malone, a member of Barnard College’s linguistics department at the time, the word “genetic” *can* be used “to mean ‘transmitted historically’ from one generation to another,” but, as he went on to say, “you can push the metaphor too far” (Kolb, n.d.), which seems to be the result in this case. Readers seemed to assume the term implied a link between genetics and “poor” language performance, necessitating an immediate clarification from

the Board.

This response by the OUSD, titled *Synopsis of the Adopted Policy on Standard American English Language Development*, was written in everyday English rather than the formal and legalistic language of the resolution and was issued under the header “Clarification.” It recapitulated the main points that had caused “misconceptions in the resulting press stories” and attempted to show that “the actions of the Board of Education have been publicly misunderstood” (*Synopsis of the Policy*, 1997). Most of the clarifications were straightforward and easily accessible, such as the explanation that “one of the programs recommended is the Standard English Proficiency Program (S.E.P.), a State of California model program, which promotes English-language development for African American students” (*Synopsis of the Policy*, 1997). The Board attempted as well to provide a rationale for their decision to use the emotionally and politically charged term “genetically-based,” which reads in part:

The term ‘genetically based’ is synonymous with genesis. In the clause, ‘African Language Systems are genetically based and not a dialect of English,’ the term ‘genetically based’ is used according to the standard dictionary definition of ‘has origins in.’ It is not used to refer to human biology (*Synopsis of the Policy*, 1997).

From a linguistic standpoint, this rationale does not seem to serve the Board’s purpose, and possibly creates further confusion, as there was nothing in the original clause that pointed to the “origin.”

In other words, in the proposal that X has its origins in Y, there are two necessary elements: X, the current iteration, and Y, the source from which the current iteration is derived. Each supplies critical information to the meaning of “genetically based,” or “has its origins in” (according to the *Synopsis*). However, in both the original phrase, “genetically based,” and the explanatory phrase, “has its origins in,” the meaning intended by the Board, we are missing the Y, the “thing”, that African Language Systems originate “in” or “from.” It is thus unclear what “African Language Systems” have their “origins,” or “genetic basis,” in, leaving the meaning of this clause, on which much of the Board’s motivation for action is based, unclear at best. The OUSB seems to have unintentionally muddied their statement when they decided to use a secondary meaning of a word whose primary meaning is so volatile, especially in the often heated racial environment of the United States.

In the subsequently released amended resolution, the sentence previously containing “genetically based,” was replaced with, “African Language Systems have

origins in West and Niger-Congo languages and are not merely dialects of English” (*Amended Resolution*, 1997). This change resulted in a much less controversial statement which served to fortify the resolution but no longer detracted from its intent. Additionally, the sentences referring to teaching children in a “primary language,” which had been established in the resolution as Ebonics, were supplemented with further language clarifying the concepts that the OUSB had intended from the outset, namely, the “application of bilingual or second language learner principles for others whose primary languages are other than English. Primary languages are the language patterns children bring to school” (*Amended Resolution*, 1997). Any programs implemented as a result of the district’s effort were also, “to move students from the language patterns they bring to school to English proficiency” (*Amended Resolution*, 1997).

The amended resolution prompted many of its former detractors, if not to wholly embrace its tenets, at least to accept its design and recommendations as sound. In this sense the new resolution served its purpose and seemed to be the most realistic way for the OUSD to reverse the flood of misunderstanding it had created. The synopsis had been an initial attempt to soften the negative feedback caused by some of the unclear clauses contained in the original, but the process of having to “explain what they really meant” produced the “reworked” *Amended Resolution*, which was a well-articulated set of principles, and a solid plan of action for the Oakland School District. Even so, the misperception that the African American children of Oakland were to be taught Ebonics was the “issue” that captured the public’s attention and became a news topic across the country.

It is the failure to respond to the efforts by the Board to rectify the false interpretations and to clarify the intent of the original Resolution, the Synopsis, and the Amended Resolution that provides a lens through which to view the current controversy swirling around Critical Race Theory. The reaction to the Board’s efforts to clarify their “goal and intent,” as will be shown, can be most accurately categorized based on political affiliation, with those on the political left accepting the intent of the amended Resolution as earnest, and those aligned with the political right adopting a cynical view of the motives of the OUSB and perpetuating a narrative wholly unsupported by the content of the Amended Resolution.

The Political, Media, and Linguistic Response to the Resolution

John and Russel Rickford conducted an analysis of “over a thousand websites dealing with Ebonics,” and described a finding no less true today about CRT (and a

host of other issues) than it was then in the post-Ebonics era, concluding that “given a national school system and an American public more and more dependent on cyber-airways for information, we must assume that misinformation and misleading viewpoints about Ebonics have tainted the perceptions of the majority of web users” (Rickford & Rickford, 2001). Wayne O’Neil captured a journalistic truism, writing that, “it is often the early coverage that counts. Once the story is gotten wrong, there is little that can be done” (O’Neil, 1998). Ebonics was certainly “gotten wrong.”

Conservative publications and commentators followed an editorial strategy that selectively ignored or cynically speculated on the actual motivation of some of the clearly stated elements of the resolution, opting rather to denigrate the OUSB and the speakers of Ebonics in what seemed at the time an unleashing of racist sentiments that many had hoped had begun to diminish in the age of political correctness. Some well-respected newspaper columnists and Op/Ed writers showed at best a lack of empathy and at worst displayed an intentionally obtuse misrepresentation of the Ebonics resolution and its expressed intent. These responses displayed a callous disrespect for the Black community and could not be construed as anything but racist. Tucker Carlson, for example, who is currently a popular host on Fox News, callously referred to Ebonics as “a language where nobody knows how to conjugate the verbs” (Nast, 2017). The late Mike Royko, an influential Chicago Tribune humor/satire columnist, wrote an entire article sarcastically presented in his own distorted version of Ebonics (Royko, 1997). As culturally insensitive as it was, he also misinterpreted the Resolution and falsely and cynically claimed that the Oakland School District was attempting to gain Federal funding when he wrote:

Now these teachers who be in Oakand [*sic*] and Los Angeles, they no fools.
They wanna ax the gov’mnt for bread so’s they can learn how to talk Ebonics.
Then when they learns to talk Ebonics, they gonna teach the bro from the hood
to talk like the anchor dudes on the TV. (Royko, 1997)

Beyond the gross linguistic inaccuracies committed in his faux Ebonics, Royko suggested that other speakers of dialects would, “if they smart, they ax the government for some bread to have their own onics” (Royko, 1997), bluntly insinuating that the OUSB resolution is a cynical money grab. Royko, in his weak attempt at humor, insults everyone he mentions, but worse, even for a satirist, is his purposeful misrepresentation and ridicule of the culture and speech of the African American community. This was exactly the attitude that the OUSB was determined to eradicate through the educational reforms recommended in the resolution. For Royko to make light of it to an audience

who may have (mistakenly) used his column to formulate their own views on the issue validates the Rickfords' claim above and was a true disservice to the people who read the column and distinctly harmful to the African American community.

In tandem with the type of media coverage detailed above, right-wing politicians were also instrumental in perpetuating the false narrative that the Oakland School District was planning to teach Ebonics and use it as a “money grab” to receive federal funds. Just over one month after the OUSB released its original resolution, and nearly a week after the amended resolution was released and widely covered, U.S. Representative Peter King, a Republican from New York, introduced House Resolution 28, stating that “no Federal funds should be used to pay for or support any program that is based upon the premise that ‘Ebonics’ is a legitimate language” (P. T. King, 1997). As stated above, the OUSB clearly stated they were not using Ebonics to gain Federal funds, yet despite this, Representative King introduced his bill. Right-wing politicians are currently following this same playbook in the Critical Race Theory controversy: introducing bills based on a purposely false or misleading premises.

Conclusion

AAVE (and the African American community by implication), was (and continues to be) subjected to online racist insults despite more than fifty years of research confirming its systematic and rule-based linguistic attributes, and its acceptance as a viable, legitimate, and robust form of communication (i.e., dialect/language). Researchers Ronkin and Karn have produced research detailing an “anti-Ebonics ideology” they call “Mock Ebonics,” which perpetuates racist stereotypes against African Americans by “associat[ing] the presumed linguistic deviance of Ebonics with flagrant and racialized non-linguistic deviance” (Ronkin & Karn, 2002, p. 374). The premise of Mock Ebonics is that, “one can ‘speak’ Ebonics by simply pejorating standard English” (Ronkin & Karn, 2002, p. 374). As if to drive this message home, under the misleading category of “Education,” an article was printed in *American Survey* with the pejorative title, *The Ebonics Virus*, in which Black children’s language was described as “the slang these children use ... at home” and AAVE’s distinctive attributes were reduced to the derogatory and linguistically incorrect, “[they] play fast and loose with the verb ‘to be’” (Education 1997:26). The Ebonics issue seems to have provided a vehicle for the expression of racist tropes to emerge under the guise of “language commentary.” The question that arises, then, in light of this conclusion is, “if linguists had been studying AAVE/Ebonics for over thirty years, and had compiled data confirming its validity and

legitimacy as a rule-based and systematic dialect of English, why is it that the general population was (and continues) expressing views that were thirty years out of date?”

Arnold Zwicky, past president of the Linguistic Society of America, says that although research into AAVE is well established, linguists themselves have not conveyed this information to the public, “resulting in the most recent outbreak of publicity and uproar” (Poe 1997). In early January 1997, at the annual meeting of the Linguistic Society of America (LSA), an executive resolution was passed which affirmed the consensus among those professionals that,

all human linguistic systems—spoken, signed, and written—are fundamentally regular . . . [and] . . . characterizations of Ebonics as slang, mutant, lazy, defective, ungrammatical, or broken English are incorrect and demeaning (*LSA Resolution*, 1997).

In reference to the above conference, Janita Poe, a reporter for the Chicago Tribune, noted that the linguists who produced the response were specifically trying to avoid politics (Poe, 1997), and hence were for all intents and purposes ignored. Responses from linguists (and other scientists, for that matter), when they enter the public consciousness at all, seem relatively colorless, uncontroversial, and generally dull in comparison with the volatile and racially tinged commentary found on the internet and in editorials. Nevertheless, linguists, and other experts, have an ethical imperative and a responsibility to disseminate in an accessible way the results of research they complete that touch directly on social issues such as Ebonics.

In a sense, everyone is a language expert. There are virtually no aspects of our lives where language is not a factor in determining some element of inter-personal, inter-group, or intercultural relations. Yet despite the robust findings of linguists that all language systems and varieties in natural use are legitimate and deserve equal standing with each other, people maintain opinions about language that are bound inextricably to their belief systems. When linguists offer data and conclusions that do not align with these systems, it may (sometimes willfully) be ignored as the personal and biased opinion of the linguist. Part of the resistance to accepting “new” ideas from linguists may also hinge on the way people expect a “language expert” to respond to issues. For many, the canonical “language expert” is an English teacher, or language maven, who points out to students what is “wrong” with their language from a prescriptive grammatical standpoint. A modern linguist explaining, then, as a matter of course, that all languages, and varieties thereof, are equally complex and none is inherently more “correct” or of higher value than another, is presenting information that is in direct

conflict with strongly held beliefs of the general populace. In the case of Ebonics then, the scientifically-based reasoning of the linguists seems to have been lost in the wash of prescriptive grammar-based speculative opinion disseminated by columnists and media “experts.” As with many of the “soft” or social sciences, in issues concerning language, people may be inclined to maintain long-held opinions in the face of countervailing evidence rather than change or adapt their world views based on new information. Given their limited influence on the Ebonics controversy, the problem may be that, as John Rickman of Stanford has noted in the following comment implying the lack of credibility given to linguists, “[People] will trust a mechanic. They will trust a doctor . . .” (Poe 1997:3).

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