

Linguistics from the Left:
The Truth About Black English That the Academy Doesn't Want You to Know

John McWhorter
Manhattan Institute for Policy Research

jhmcw5@yahoo.com

Draft: Please do not cite without permission from the author

Prepared for the American Enterprise Institute Conference, "Reforming the Politically Correct
University,"
November 14, 2007

Draft: Please do not cite without permission from the author.

The collected papers for this conference can be found at www.aei.org/event1595

Black English is “bad grammar,” right? Take that way that it doesn’t conjugate the verb “to be.” Well, here’s a pop quiz. Take this Black English sentence: *I be eatin’ candy every day*.

Now: what would be the negative version of the sentence?

I ain’t be eatin’ candy every day. Right? No!

If you listen to black people who use the dialect talking, you will never hear them saying *ain’t be*. The correct negative version of the sentence is *I don’t be eatin’ candy every day*.

Of course, no speaker who did not happen to be a linguist could tell you that, anymore than we, unless linguists, could explain why if we were planning a trip to the store, we would tell someone *I’m going to the store tomorrow* but not *I will go to the store tomorrow*. *Will* is, after all, a future marker, and yet you would never, in telling someone your plans, say *I will go to the store* – it would sound like you were a foreigner, and indeed that is a mistake foreigners make. Part of the miracle of human language, standard or nonstandard, is that so much of its complexity is mastered and wielded unconsciously.

So it is with Black English’s *be*. It is a piece of grammar, used in a systematic way that requires effort for outsiders to master just as English’s future marking does. In her book *Ghetto Nation*, Cora Daniels, a black author, writes generally in standard style but occasionally states “I be ghetto!” to signal an allegiance with street black culture. In fact, this usage of *be* is incorrect. *Be* in Black English has a particular, systematic function: marking regular, habitual action, such as eating candy every day. This means that one cannot say *I be a postal worker*, because being, when referring to embodiment, is not something one does on separate but regular occasions like bathing. Black English grammar is not a matter of lapses in standard English grammar; it is a system of its own. One can, therefore, use it incorrectly: *I be ghetto* is incorrect.

Yet it is entirely reasonable that the reader is unaware that Black English is much of anything except curses and lapses. In the media, what we hear about Black English is that it is one part hiphop slang and one part “bad grammar.” That was certainly the case during, for example, the controversy over the Oakland school board’s proposal to use Black English in the classroom in 1996. An informal coalition of academic linguists, education specialists and speech therapists, mostly black, have been devoted since the early seventies to the idea Oakland proposed, and they saw the 1996 controversy as a precious opportunity to teach the American public that the way black people often speak is not a conglomeration of bad habits, but an alternate system to standard English, just as regular and just as complex—and sometimes more.

They largely failed, and one of the main reasons was that the study of Black English has proceeded according to customs different from those that usually apply among linguists seeking to analyze a nonstandard dialect and demonstrate to the wider world that it has legitimacy. Namely, since the late sixties, the study of Black English in the academy has been so deeply colored by the narrow ideological obsession of policing the world for racism that the basic task of describing the dialect in a scientific fashion, separate from sentiments of identity, crusading, and therapy, has been all but forgotten.

For example, the Dutch dialect of the Limburger region in the Netherlands is so different from standard Dutch that it is, essentially, a different language. Limburgish is spoken with tones like Swedish; standard Dutch is not. Making the plural is often different in Limburgish: in standard Dutch, *brother* is *broer* and *brothers* is *broeren*; in Limburgish, *brother* is *broor* and *brothers* is *breer*. It is easy for a standard Dutch speaker to hear Limburgish as “mistakes,” but when one and a half million people have been making the same “mistakes” for several centuries,

Draft: Please do not cite without permission from the author.

speaking in a way that standard Dutch speakers can often barely comprehend at first, there is a case for designating a new language entirely.

As such, there are linguists currently spearheading a project to compile a full-length dictionary of Limburgish's words and a detailed description of its grammar. This will show that even if history happens not to have put Limburgish in the shop window, so to speak, it is a systematic variety of human language just as standard Dutch is. This is how countless nonstandard dialects have been demonstrated to be more than “mistakes” or “quaint” – with hard work done by people who are certainly moved to legitimize a dialect they likely speak, but are also moderately obsessed with the details and intricacies of how language works. Linguistics is, in fact, a science. We linguists are not etymologists (a subject not even taught), nor are we grammar police: we study and describe how grammar works (we could even tell you why you wouldn't say *I will go to the store!*).

In the wake of the Black Power movement in the late sixties, assorted scholars embarked on a quest to show Black English as a legitimate variety. Ideally, this would have entailed at the outset the careful compilation of a full-length grammatical description of the dialect. However, the tenor of the times, focused on asserting blacks' legitimacy as people, got in the way of science.

Specifically, there was great romance seen in the idea that Black English is not even English at all. Rather, the idea has been that Black English is an African language in disguise, with African sound and sentence structure with English words plugged in. There are black schoolteachers and administrators who remain convinced of this to this day, cherishing the idea that Black English is a cultural link to Mother Africa.

Draft: Please do not cite without permission from the author.

This led to some bizarre claims about the decidedly English-sounding dialect we hear around us. Smitherman had it that Black English does not have final consonants, such that *hood* is pronounced *hoo'* and *bed* pronounced *beh*.¹ However, there are no black Americans telling their children to put on their *hoos* or to go to *beh*. The attractiveness of this notion was that African languages often do not use final consonants, like Japanese. Most familiar to Americans are Swahili words and expressions like *hakuna matata* “no worries,” *jambo* “hello,” and *Kwanzaa*. Of course, black English often allows a final consonant to drop when there is another one right behind it: *bes'* for *best*. But there is a long way from that to *hakuna matata*.

Overall, Black English does not parallel African languages in any significant way in terms of sound or structure. There actually are languages that plug English into African structure, but they are nothing like Black English. In the Ewe language of Togo and Benin, the way to say *Dogs are walking under the house* is *Avu le tsa yi xo te*. Meanwhile, when African slaves were brought to New World plantations and learned English quickly, they created creole versions of English which are often completely distinct languages, combining African grammar with English words.

On plantations in Surinam, for example, the creole language of this kind is called Sranan, and it indeed has a very African way of putting things:

| | | | | | | | |
|--------|------|----|------|----|----|-----|-------|
| Ewe | Avu | le | tsa | yi | xo | te | |
| Sranan | Dagu | e | waka | go | na | oso | ondro |

| | | | | | | | |
|---------|-----|----|------|----|----|-------|-------|
| English | dog | is | walk | go | at | house | under |
|---------|-----|----|------|----|----|-------|-------|

Obviously, however, black Americans are not given to saying *Dog is walk go house under, yo!* Black English is a dialect of English, not Yoruba or Wolof. All ink spilled on the idea otherwise has distracted people from doing the real work of describing how this thoroughly English dialect patterns, along the lines of the complexity of the usage of *be*.

Draft: Please do not cite without permission from the author.

Nowhere was this elevation of Black is Beautiful ideology over empiricism more damaging to perceptions of Black English than during the Ebonics controversy. The Oakland school board, misled by a charismatic black medical school teacher (!?) with little formal linguistics training who has long had legions of black schoolteachers in his thrall, incorporated the African idea into its manifesto, describing Black English as one of several “West and Niger-Congo African Language Systems” and as “not a dialect of English.” Black linguists backed up Oakland to a man (with the exception of the man writing this), and sat in front of television cameras saying “Black English looks like English but it isn’t,” a case so plainly absurd that it only reinforced the general idea that Black English is indeed nothing but slang and mistakes.

Because I happened to be the black linguist working closest to Oakland at the time, the media sought me out for my opinion on whether black students’ problems with learning to read were based on problems negotiating the difference between Black English and standard English. I said that Black English was a systematic grammar, but not different enough from standard English to impede learning to read, and in no way African. Much to my surprise—this was my first experience with the P.C. police in university culture—I was condemned roundly for this by Black English specialists. One of them refused to write a letter recommending me for tenure, out of disgust with my breaking ranks.

Yet the ranks in question are composed of people lying to the public in the name of a crusade to legitimize Black English which, in the very act of lying, they sabotage. In the years afterward, I learned that most of the linguists amidst such ranks are well aware that Black English is not an African language; the notion lives on mostly among educators and others who do not have linguistics degrees. However, the linguists saw it as an imperative to wink and let the African notion pass in public.

This also happens at conferences attended by both linguists and the educators, where those working according to the African idea are never told that the idea is hopeless. Biologists do not politely allow creationists to present papers in their midst without directly and relentlessly criticizing the flaws in the creationists' argumentation. Among Black English specialists, however, the tacit sense is that the identity politics of linking the dialect to Mother Africa are more important than engaging with the empirical reality of what Black English is. To actually get down to cases at one of these conferences and specify in what ways the African idea does not hold up would be considered highly improper—the behavior of some persnickety martinet not with the program.

An example was John Baugh, now of Washington University, who in a book published years later that is not widely read and was not intended to be, quietly but firmly stated “Any suggestion that American slave descendants speak a language other than English is overstated, linguistically uninformed, and—frankly—wrong.”² Yet in 1996, he was the “pro” to my “con” on an early episode of the Fox News show *Hannity and Colmes*, grimly insisting that Black English is a barrier to learning to read the standard. One senses that Baugh saw letting the “African” idea squeak by was a tolerable bit of collateral damage amidst a general imperative of seeing to it that black students have what was at the time often phrased as their “linguistics needs” attended to.

However, one does not need to be a linguist to see that the difference between *She isn't at her desk* and *She ain't at her des'* is, first, not African, and second, has nothing to do with why a young black child may not be able to make out what either written sentence says at all. In fact, perhaps only if one is a linguist can one even begin to fashion a delicate mental equipoise within which the whole idea makes any kind of sense at all. In the wake of the Ebonics controversy, few in America knew much more about Black English than they had before—today just as before, the

Draft: Please do not cite without permission from the author.

typical response when the topic comes up is the cute scene in *Airplane* when a white woman offers herself as speaking “jive” in order to translate for two black passengers.

Then there has been a corollary effort, to demonstrate that Black English grammar is a development from a creole language spoken in the United States, Gullah, the “Geechee Talk” of the Sea Islands and Charleston in South Carolina. Presumably, Gullah was once the language of slaves throughout the south and even up the east coast, but after Emancipation, black people had more contact with whites and their Gullah “bleached” into Black English, closer to whites’ English but still carrying the Gullah “legacy.”

This, again, was attractive in linking Black English to a historical process in which Africans “retained their identity” by creating creoles, making do with European words for pragmatic reasons but using them amidst the African grammars they had been born to.

The problem with this hypothesis, however, is that for forty years, neither linguistic nor historical evidence has borne it out. Just a look at Gullah alone shows how fragile the idea has always been. Here is a Gullah sentence:

Ah bin uh tawk nawmo. “I was only talking.”

The grammar in this thoroughly ordinary sentence is clearly quite un-English in ways. The *uh* is a shortened form of a word *duh* which in turn began as *does*: *I does talk* meant “I am talking.”

The *bin* places the sentence in the past; there is no *-ed* past marker in Gullah. *Nawmo* is from *no more*, in a case where *no more* has developed a related meaning “only,” as in *I want two chickens, no more*—i.e. only two.

The proposition is that the Black English rendition of the same sentence, *I was jus' talkin'*, is somehow derived from *Ah bin uh tawk nawmo*. Of course, one might draw a hypothetical step-by-step pathway wherein *I was jus' talkin'* “morphs” out of *Ah bin uh tawk nawmo*, and things of that kind have, predictably, been proposed.³ However, there is no evidence of this morphing from Gullah to Black English in documents of black people talking over the past two hundred years. One examines quotations from the days of yore and finds black people talking more or less the way they do now: an 1829 quote of a black woman, for example, is *Soon he want to know how old you be first*. This sentence would be perfectly plausible from a black people in St. Louis or Cleveland today.

The hypothesis is, in the scientific sense, unnecessary. There is no reason to suppose that the roots of *I was jus' talkin'* are in, well, I was just talking. Yet massive amounts of ink have been devoted to the pretense that this idea is a worthy one on some level, often occasioning acrid scholarly set-tos. Because before Emancipation, slaves on various occasions were transplanted from the United States to other places, it has been hoped that the descendants of these slaves today might speak Gullah, or at least Gullah Lite, since they have not had as much exposure to whites as black Americans have since the Civil War. Yet again and again, scholars find that descendants of these transplanted slaves sound a lot like black people here in the U.S. In Liberia, one mines sentences like *I done forgot it*. In Nova Scotia, *I never run from nothing else no more*. In the Dominican Republic, *English ain't so easy to learn like Spanish is*.

The simple truth is that despite the sociological line between whites and blacks in America, Black English is largely an offshoot of the regional British dialects that slaves heard working alongside the indentured servants we learn about in middle school history classes. Black Americans' accent has moved far from the way rural Brits speak, but the grammar is often

Draft: Please do not cite without permission from the author.

almost uncannily similar. *Even when I be round there with friends, I be scared* sounds like a black teenager in Atlanta, but it was in fact uttered by an Irishman. Those familiar with the black expression *My baby mama* for *My baby's mama* would find Yorkshire English familiar as well, in which one can also not use possessive 's: *My sister husband*, for example. As for double negatives, they are native not just to Black English, but to all known dialects of the English language (including Old and Middle English) except the modern standard one. Therefore, outside of Manchester one catches sentences like *I am not never going to do naught no more for thee*.

Thus Black English is a mixture of several regional British dialects, seasoned very lightly with an African sound pattern or two, and festooned with a rich slang reflecting the experience of slaves' descendants in the United States.⁴ This, one would think, is an interesting enough story, a tale of a people making the best of the worst in taking on a new language, by wresting from it a new and vibrant dialect. However, in not being an African or Caribbean story, Black English specialists cannot embrace it—even though it is true.

Rather, most work on Black English proceeds with an almost studiously perfunctory attention to the English of Great Britain, as if musicologists tracing the roots of bebop jazz devoted 95% of their attention to the use of drums in African music while giving only gennuine acknowledgment to the fact that bebop is primarily distinct in its innovative approach to Western harmony. It is clear that to most of these Black English specialists, the speech of white proletarians in England is simply not terribly interesting in the visceral sense, given their commitment to wielding Black English as a tool in an eternal battle against discrimination, oppression, and the like. However, this is like a paleoanthropologist paying only lip service to the close similarities between humans and apes, in a quest to propose that humans

Draft: Please do not cite without permission from the author.

instead developed from birds, justified on the basis of the fact that both humans and birds have femurs and intestines, and a gut-level dislike of apes.

There has, in fact, arisen a cadre of white Canadian linguists making the case for the roots of Black English in, well, English.⁵ Predictably, they are received by the old guard, as well as the new guard they have trained, as unsavory nuisances, despite the fact that their argumentation, historical research, and statistical analysis is more thorough than that of all but a few of the scholars who have worked on Black English. One even detects an unspoken speculation that the Canadians' research paradigm has a racist motivation, or at least that it is somehow unsavory in not stressing the roots of the dialect in the African, the Caribbean, the Struggle, survival, etc.

The hold that political correctness has on the study of Black English has had repercussions beyond the public perception of the dialect and its scholarly documentation. To this day, a student in a school of education interested in teaching disadvantaged students will quite likely be fed the idea that black students' reading problems could be constructively addressed by teaching them first with Black English materials, and then transitioning them gradually to standard English. Naturally, addressing this idea is an attractive topic for graduate students. Every few years, a small pilot project in which students read slightly better after a short spell of using "Ebonics" materials is celebrated as a precious demonstration that Black English truly is a barrier for such children.

Yet amidst all of this earnest hand-wringing, there is not a word about the fact that we learned what the effective method is for teaching poor, nonwhite children how to read forty years ago. In 1966, Project Follow Through led by Siegfried Englemann conclusively showed, with long-term studies covering children in various places of various ages, classes, and colors, that phonics-based teaching methods imparted via systematic drilling was the most effective way of

Draft: Please do not cite without permission from the author.

teaching poor students how to read. Since then, poorer school districts adopting methods of this kind, called Direct Instruction, quite regularly see reading scores improve.

The “Ebonics” notion lives on as if this work had never been done, when in fact, any graduate student interested in teaching poor and/or black kids should be presented with Project Follow Through and its methods just as students of classics read Homer and Virgil. It is, quite simply, a method that has been shown to work, to an extent far beyond anything any “Ebonics” pilot project has shown, and no work has ever disproven this, despite scattered quibbles about this or that. Yet I am aware of no argument that Black English is a barrier to reading for black kids that even addresses Project Follow Through.

Rather, the “Ebonics” idea marches on in a bubble, in which the terminological custom is that standard English is a “gatekeeping” oppressor variety that must make room for Black English. The rhetorical power of that terminology is allowed to stand in the place of sustained argumentation. No one in this school of thought considers to examine whether there are cases where black students learn to read thoroughly well without Black English getting a place at the table in the classroom—despite that this would hardly require academic examination: there are constant announcements in newspapers of the successes of charter schools teaching disadvantaged black students well, without anything like the “Ebonics” methods.

The reason Project Follow Through is ignored is because it cannot be fashioned as part of a larger crusade against racism and injustice. Sadly, its neglect reveals a certain self-medical aspect of the idea that black students need “Ebonics” instruction: these people are only interested in black kids learning if they do so amidst a victory wrested from the oppressor who had been denying the students their rights as black bilinguals. Because this would be unnecessary and shows no signs of ever happening, this means that the academics studying Black English, despite

Draft: Please do not cite without permission from the author.

considering themselves fighting the good fight, are disconnected from what actually helps black students learn to read.

In 2002, there at last appeared a book-length grammatical description of Black English.⁶ However, the bone-deep assumption among academics studying the dialect that all addresses of it must spring from an oppositional, protective impulse make this book less than it could be. Grammatical description takes up only roughly the first half of the book, and the brevity of this half (about 120 pages) is such that linguists still consider the dialect only partially described, while laymen could easily see it as a mere checklist of colorful “mistakes,” rather than a substantial and irrefutably complex description of a true system of grammar. The rest of the book covers topics such as conversational patterns, Black English in literature and the media, and of course, the use of Black English in education. However, most of the topics in the second half have long been amply covered elsewhere, and the author does not happen to be a specialist in them.

The accepted approach to writing a grammatical description is to, as it were, stand back from the language or dialect, take a deep breath and describe it objectively, as if one were a foreigner encountering the language of an obscure tribe in the Amazon. It would seem that this would be very difficult for most people working on the dialect today to muster. Instead, there is a sense that Black English, because of the unfortunate history of black people in America, is an exception, and that any enlightened approach to the dialect must be channeled by a guiding intention to defend it from racist dismissal. To analyze the dialect in the purely objective fashion of the linguist—that is, as something of a geek—is seen as somehow beside the point.

As a result of Political Correctness, then, regarding Black English:

1. Structural description constitutes a starkly small proportion of a massive bibliography driven primarily by advocacy;
2. Its actual and obvious historical origins are treated as controversial and suspect rather than engaged and investigated further;
3. Its depiction by academics to the general public has often been so transparently invalid as to reinforce the dismissal its advocates are in battle against.

A typical article, then, is one by Charles DeBose and Nicholas Faraclas tracing Black English's use of the verb "to be" and some other parts of its grammar to languages of Southern Nigeria like Yoruba.⁷ The simple facts are that 1) there is very little resemblance of any importance between these parts of grammar in Black English and the same one in Yoruba and its relatives and 2) slaves from southern Nigeria were not imported to the United States in significant numbers. Yet, this article appeared in an anthology of substance. Germane is that DeBose is one of the black linguists who has been bitterly skeptical of the Canadian school's work, although disinclined to address their argumentation in the detail considered *de rigueur* in academia according to scholarly practice, while Faraclas' work is couched openly in a leftist paradigm, committed to showing how even trained linguists' work on indigenous languages is tainted by Eurocentric or imperialist bias.

It is, sadly, not surprising that the work on Black English that proceeds in the fashion considered traditional in the field of linguistics has been done mostly by people outside of the United States, mainly Canada and Germany. An ossified sense among black academics and their

Draft: Please do not cite without permission from the author.

fellow travellers that to be authentic is to be oppositional has, sadly, left America as a whole no more enlightened on the truly fascinating dialect it has birthed than it was forty years ago.

¹ Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977), 17.

² John Baugh, *Beyond Ebonics: Linguistic Pride and Racial Prejudice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³ e.g. Ralph Fasold, "One Hundred Years from Syntax to Phonology" in Sanford B. Steever, Carol A. Walker, and Salikoko S. Mufwne, eds., *Parasession on Diachronic Syntax* (Chicago: Chicago Linguistics Society, 1976), 79- 87.

⁴ c.f. John H. McWhorter, *Word on the Street: Facet and Fable about American English* (New York: Plenum, 1998), 155- 199.

⁵ e.g. Shana Poplack, *The English History of African American English* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, ed. 2000).

⁶ Lisa J. Green, *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁷ Charles DeBose and Nicholas Faraclas, "An Africanist Approach to the Linguistic Study of Black English: Getting to the Roots of the Tense-aspect-modality and Copula Systems in Afro-American" in Salikoko S. Mufwene, ed., *Africanisms in Afro-American Language Varieties* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1993), 364- 387.