THE BLACK ENGLISH ISSUE

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Since July 12, 1979, when Judge Joiner rendered his decision in the *Ann Arbor* case, the issue of "black English" has stirred much controversy. There are as many perceptions of the implications of his decision as there are disciplines. The positions and attitudes of scholars, linguists, psychologists, civil rights leaders, classroom teachers, and the general public show no common pattern. Questions range from, "What is black English?" and "Does it exist?" to suspicions such as, "Is this another obstacle for Blacks in their quest for acceptance?"

The issue is political, sociological, and economic. In some circles these noneducational dimensions overshadow all else. It is an issue on which Blacks are badly divided. The media and some linguists have exploited and distorted the issue. Major professional organizations have not spoken. The issue has become obscured in part by the omissions, subsequent distortions, and concerns associated with the *Ann Arbor* decision. The court found:

1. That a language barrier existed between the plaintiff children and the teachers in the Martin Luther King, Junior, Elementary School because of the failure of the teachers to take into account the home language or dialect of the children in trying to teach them to read standard English. This was caused by the failure on the part of the defendant school board to develop a program to assist the teachers in this respect.

2. That the dialect spoken by the children is a version of English called "black English" and is related to race.

3. That the barrier was one of the causes of the children's reading problems which they all experienced and which impeded the children's equal participation in the school's educational program.

4. That the statute enacted in 1974 by Congress directs the school system to take appropriate action to overcome the language barrier.

As a result of these findings, the school board was directed to file a plan of "appropriate action." The court order required the school district to submit

> . . . within thirty (30) days a proposed plan defining the exact steps to be taken (1) to help the teachers of the plaintiff children at King School to identify children speaking "Black English" and the language spoken as a home or community language and (2) to use that knowledge in teaching such students how to read standard English. The plan must embrace within its terms the elementary school teachers of the plaintiff children at Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School.

The courts have played a significant role in helping the educational establishment become legally more humane. However, the jury is still out on the broader aspects of their legal actions. The *Ann Arbor* decision generated headlines: "Judge Holds 'Black English' is a Legitimate Language," " 'Black English' Rule a Barrier to Learning," " 'Black English' Recognized; Florida Students Get Reprieve." Such headlines and television news often shape public opinion, sometimes polarizing attitudes and creating a climate in which substance is badly distorted. The "prescription" can create a negative epidemic rather than a positive cure.

The response of the court to a few Ann Arbor students' cries for relief has given a brand of legitimacy to a pervasive and hard-to-quantify problem affecting Blacks. It sends shock waves of indignation and frustration through the minds of many. "Black Bottom," "Black Boogaloo," "Black Out," "Black List," "Black Balled," "Black Power," and now "Black English." What next!? All of these expressions are riddled with negative undertones.

The social nature of education, and especially the early education of the young, is much too critical to handle insensitively. The court clearly spoke to this concern in its order. The absent element in the equation, it seems, is a vehicle for translating teacher awareness and acceptance into student mastery of standard English proficiency. To define the goals of a school is one thing. To assemble a team of teachers who can articulate and implement those goals is quite another. There is evidence that children come to school at an early age more alike than different. Psychological hell often breaks loose for minority children, and especially Blacks in white-dominated situations, when they are unable to feel acceptance by and respect from their teachers and peers. Opportunities for oral expression and self-development are interrupted by their "unaccepted" language differences.

A Question of Dialect

One dimension of equity in educational opportunity is the issue of dialect usage. Accountability for effective learning of standard English may indeed become a problem for the courts.

Several factors compound this issue. There are individuals, with all good intentions, who champion the cause of black English. In so doing, they align themselves with others who have a hidden agenda—to maintain the status quo, "keep Blacks in their

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Students speaking black English should not be singled out or isolated. Their dialect, like that of others whose English is accented, can contribute to the cultural richness of American classrooms.

place," reduce academic and economic competition by Blacks, and further isolate them from the mainstream of contemporary society. Black dialect might be acceptable in the back alleys of America, but proficiency in standard English is the road that leads to position, power, and status. In a literate society language is the medium and the word is the message.

Significant regional differences are reflected in the speech patterns of white Americans speaking standard English. The *Ann Arbor* decision, which was designed for relief, is too narrowly focused. It raises the question of Blacks having a unique learning liability. The issue is treated in such a way as to isolate "black dialect," even though regional dialects are common in the United States. Kurath (1949) and McDavid (1958) identified 18 areas of the country where dialects are spoken. They did not isolate black English as a separate entity. Examples of pronunciation, vocabulary, morphology, and syntax for the regions clearly illustrate that there is some overlap in dialect usage. Thus, the issue of so-called black English is allowed to emerge as a strange, new, or unique problem. Figure 1 (1979) illustrates the problem.

Based on the treatment of the issue in *Ann Arbor*, it is possible to conclude that pupils are not learning to read because they speak a dialect; although many children who speak dialects are learning to read. If one is Black and speaks a dialect, black English, he or she is perceived as having a special problem. This raises a deeper concern. Under the guise of "acceptance," black children who speak a dialect could be left to go happily on their way, "doing their black thing."

Isolation of black English could become an excuse for inaction rather than a challenge for a command performance, Section 1703 (f) of Title 20 *notwithstanding*. Adult will, attitudes, knowledge, and skill may be far more important than case law if the American school is to fulfill its responsibility.

In every group of children there are noticeable qualities that are unique. This is especially true in a group of multiethnic and racially-mixed children. A sensitive, well-trained teacher can use these differences to enrich the total learning climate. Teachers must be trained to accept *all* children with their gifts, talents, and deficiencies, even those who speak nonstandard English. ■

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Figure 1. Speaking in Dialects

Standard English	Appalachian English	Black English
1. This is hers, and this is **his.**	**his'n**	
2. There weren't **any/any more.**	**none/no more**	**none/no more**
3. Here are two **men.**	**mans/mens**	**mans/mens**
4. This child has the **most.**	**mostest**	**mostest**
5. The cookies have been **eaten.**	**eat, ate, eated, et**	**ate**
6. Here are two **feet.**	**foots, feets**	**foots, feets**
7. It is **John's.**		**John**
8. The picture has been **hung.**	**hanged**	**hanged**
9. He kept one for **himself.**	**hisself**	**hisself**
10. Here are two **mice.**	**mouses**	**mouses**
11. He is a **painter.**	**a-paintin'**	
12. He has two **leaves.**	**leafs**	**leafs**