THE RAPE OF A LANGUAGE AND A CULTURE: A BRIEF EXAMINATION OF THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH AS A MEANS OF VALIDATING CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY

by

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(Under the Direction of Peter Smagorinsky)

ABSTRACT

By examining the history and evolution of African American English, this study attempts to disrupt the foundation of misconceptions surrounding the language and, thus, culture, of African American peoples in the broader context of education. Unearthing effective pedagogical methods for reversing the oppressive and racist pedagogy currently practiced in many classrooms throughout the United States constitutes the primary objective of the following research. All data and research collected throughout the study are the result of an extensive review of academic studies, scholarly journals, and other academic texts.

INDEX WORDS: African American; African American education; African American English; Black English; Ebonics; Standard American English; Race; Language; Culturally relevant pedagogy; African American history; Poverty; Racial identity; Language identity; Bidialectalism; Secondary schools; Linguistic prejudice; Language mastery; Literacy acquisition; Sociolinguistics; Grammar; Language ideology; Racism; Oral language; Academic success; Race and poverty; Language and poverty
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B.A., The University of Georgia, 2004

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2005
THE RAPE OF A LANGUAGE AND A CULTURE: A BRIEF EXAMINATION OF THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH AS A MEANS OF VALIDATING CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY

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August 2005
DEDICATION

To my parents, Mary and Jimmy Jordan, who have instilled in me an urgency and a passion for social justice and a love of humanity.

To the speakers, writers, and creators of African American English: may your language be fully realized and richly appreciated.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincerest gratitude to Dr. Peter Smagorinsky for his guidance and constructive criticism throughout not only this project but also my entire graduate career at the University of Georgia.

I would also like to thank my family for their unconditional love and support during these exciting times. Deepest thanks especially to my father for at least listening to my radical ideas. I am confident that I can help him understand. After all, he and my mother built the foundation for my convictions.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1970) writes: “Concern for humanization leads at once to the recognition of dehumanization, not only as an ontological possibility but as an historical reality. And as man perceives the extent of dehumanization, he asks himself if humanization is a viable possibility” (p. 27). Freire (1970) defines dehumanization not as a given destiny but as a struggle for humanization from an unjust order. African American students struggle for humanization every day in classrooms across the United States. In Janice Hale’s (2001) text *Learning While Black*, V.P. Franklin writes: “Given the racialized treatment of African Americans in the United States, learning while black can be as dangerous to one’s mental and physical well-being as driving while black” (p. xi). Why does quality education remain a dream deferred for so many African American students?

As an aspiring educator who will soon teach in the public school arena, I remain ever cognizant of the low success rate of African American students in education, particularly in the subject areas most concerned with language usage. The linguistic and cultural heritage of African American students is regularly exploited and raped by virtue of the power of the oppressors. By examining the history and evolution of African American English (AAE), this study attempts to disrupt the foundation of misconceptions surrounding the language and, thus, culture, of African American peoples in the broader context of education. Unearthing effective pedagogical methods for reversing the oppressive and racist pedagogy currently practiced in many classrooms throughout the United States constitutes the primary objective of the following discourse.
John Baugh (2000) asserts, “The United States, of all countries, should be a nation in which every child is allowed to celebrate his or her linguistic and cultural heritage, and none should ever be made to bear false burdens of linguistic shame through historical circumstances that have always been beyond their capacity to control” (p.103). In very few classrooms, if any, are African American students allowed to engage in or celebrate their home language. Even further, students are not provided with opportunities to explore the birth and historical significance of their particular language. Baugh (2000) urges his readers to invalidate cultural and linguistic ignorance and strive toward a nation of “linguistic tolerance.” Tolerance, however, does not and should not suffice. As a citizen, educator, and believer in humanity, one must show more than tolerance; acceptance and understanding are imperative for the success of African American students. In doing so, one must also subvert and move away from a curriculum solely influenced by traditional colonialist ideology.

The principle question guiding the latter portion of this study asks: What is a culturally relevant pedagogy? In other words, what methods and pedagogical techniques yield achievement and progress for African American students, specifically in the English classroom? The very structures that should enhance learning and stimulate the attainment of goals generate an environment for African American students devoid of academic success and, thus, opportunities for postsecondary education and survival in the professional arena. More importantly, how does an educator create an environment in which the student can liberate herself?

The format of the research collected throughout the study is, for the most part, organized chronologically. I begin by analyzing historical theories of African American English and the myths found therein. Following such examination of the language, I explore the African
American experience in education, providing close analysis of the correlation among race, poverty, and language. In connecting with the educational experiences of African American students, one transitions to the rising notion of culturally relevant pedagogy. As most academic research concludes, I am left perhaps with even more questions than first posed for the original study. Thus, the thirst for more knowledge and greater answers continues.
Chapter 2: Historical Theories and Perspectives of AAE

To understand the current constructs of African American English (AAE) I must trace backward through the muddy, nebulous history of its origin. By better understanding and disseminating knowledge about African American English, educators can better apply such knowledge to address educational and social issues concerning African American students. Questions of whether AAE is a dialect of English or a language in its own rite fascinate much of the general public and frustrate those who are unwilling to acknowledge the validity of a fundamental element of African American culture. For more than thirty years, scholars have hypothesized in greater detail as to the origins of AAE, its evolution, and its future. Some contend that AAE shows strong influences of African languages spoken by slaves who were brought to this country in droves from the seventeenth century through the nineteenth century (Rickford and Rickford, 2000). Meanwhile, others uphold that the demoralizing and violent experience of slavery eradicated most African linguistic and cultural traditions. Such scholars suggest that AAE derives from English dialects spoken by white peasants and servants whom slaves encountered in America (Rickford and Rickford, 2000). Still other scholars argue that the central question should not be the “Africanness” of black vernacular but its “creoleness” (Rickford and Rickford, 2000, p. 129). More recently, a concern as to whether AAE is diverging or veering farther from white vernacular and Standard English has taken center stage. Undoubtedly, several hypotheses and positions exist regarding the birth of AAE and its continued existence.
Linguist John McWhorter (1998) writes:

“There is not a single sentence structure in Black English that is traceable to West African languages … We would die trying to find any African language that worked anything like Black English. On the other hand, if we went to England and took a train into the countryside, we would find much of what we were looking for” (p.174).

In seeking the answers to questions about the development of AAE one must consider various kinds of evidence. Rickford and Rickford (2000) provide an outline for seeking such data:

- Assessment of sociohistorical information about how many African Americans were in contact with how many European Americans, when, where and how – such information would allow one to gauge whether the conditions in the United States were similar to those in Caribbean countries where more African features were retained
- Samples of black speech from earlier periods. Unfortunately, such data are often not as reliable nor as abundant as most scholars would hope
- Comparisons between current AAE with West African languages and Caribbean English
- Comparisons among white nonstandard dialects of English not only in the United States but particularly in Britain
- Comparisons among the speech of older, middle-aged, and younger African Americans in an effort to trace the evolution of AAE (p. 130)

Sociohistorical events pertinent to the development of AAE surface during the seventeenth century with the settlement of Jamestown, Virginia in 1607. According to Rickford and Rickford (2000), approximately twelve years after the settlement was established, the
Jamestown settlers acquired twenty Africans as indentured servants. The contracted work of indentured servitude often involved a period of five to ten years, after which the indentured servant would be eligible to receive land and be free to work for himself. Some African Americans whose period of service had expired were provided with land in much the same way as their European American counterparts. Twelve British colonies were established in North America by the end of the seventeenth century: New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina and South Carolina. Though Africans were accounted for in each of the colonies, they did not constitute a large part of the population. The main workers included English and Irish indentured servants, as the more labor-intensive crops such as rice, tobacco, and cotton had not yet become staples. According to Rickford and Rickford (2000), in 1671 only two thousand Africans resided in Virginia, which constituted a mere five percent of the total population of forty thousand. Particularly in the New England and Middle colonies, the number of Africans was even smaller.

Some sociolinguistic and historic scholars (Rickford and Rickford, 2000) suggest that the newly arrived Africans acquired the English of other indentured servants and colonials relatively quickly and successfully. Even further, Africans arriving in North America during the seventeenth century perhaps transferred words and other features from their native languages and simplified the features of English they encountered in the colonies. Burling (1973) asks his readers to “imagine the time when Europeans began to meet Africans, first in the ports of West Africa and later on the new plantations of the Americas” (p. 112). He furthers this image by theorizing the following:
In certain limited situations, Africans and Europeans must have had a desperate need to communicate, but they would never have had the intimate contact needed to form a community with unified speech. The Africans, having only limited contact with native speakers of English, had no consistent or reliable source to imitate. Sailor and African, master and slave, must have had to fall back upon a reduced and simplified form of English, a form shorn of frills and subtleties, but a form still capable of the basic communication necessary to carry on daily life (p. 112).

Thus, a pidgin language is formed as a medium through which two distinctly different cultures may communicate. Rickford and Rickford (2000) define the pidgin as being simpler than any of the contact languages. A pidgin is typically mixed but most importantly it shows “strong grammatical influences from the languages of the socially subordinate speakers who bear the primary burden of linguistic accommodation and play the central role in creating it” (p. 132). In contrast to Rickford and Rickford’s definition of the pidgin, Burling (1973) seems to suggest that the forming of a pidgin takes place between different cultures, specifically the Europeans and Africans, as an almost amicable, mutual transaction. Rickford and Rickford (2000) provide an example of pidgin acquisition in a slave child born on a plantation. Once the child becomes socialized within the constructs of the plantation, the pidgin used for communicating may become the child’s sole language. Once a pidgin is used as the native language, that language is now referred to as a Creole, which typically develops more words and a more complex grammar than most pidgins.

Other theories entertained by scholars, involve the possibility that Africans arriving to America in the seventeenth century may not have constituted a sufficient population nor maintained sufficient distance from English norms for the creation of pidgin and creole varieties.
to be successful. Such theorists propose that pidgin and creole varieties infiltrated America through slaves imported from the Caribbean. Toward the end of the seventeenth century and the early eighteenth century, many African slaves were brought to America after having lived and worked in Barbados, Jamaica, and other island colonies. Pidgin and creole-like speech were already forming within such colonies. Following the establishment of South Carolina in 1670, the first Africans brought to the area were from the Caribbean. In addition, between the years of 1701 and 1726, twice as many slaves were brought to New York from the Caribbean than were brought from Africa.

Unfortunately, virtually no samples of slave speech exist from the seventeenth century. One example is cited as an exception in Rickford and Rickford (2000) as being the testimony of a slave, Tituba, at the Salem witch trials in 1692. Tituba’s testimony was recorded by Magistrate John Hathorne and published 174 years later by Samuel Drake. Little is known of Tituba other than the fact that she was an Amerindian slave, raised by an African family in Barbados before she was transferred to Massachusetts. A statement in her testimony included the following: “He tell me he God.” Meaning, “He told me he was/is God.” (Rickford and Rickford, 2000, p.133) Tituba’s testimony contains features very common to creole speech patterns, including the absence of the copula (is/was in this case) and the use of an unmarked action verb (told in this case). Such evidence of early African American speech lends great credibility to its current existence.

Moving through the eighteenth century, more and more Africans are brought into the American colonies, most of who were brought directly from Africa. The numbers of Africans in the separate colonial regions, however, were greatly skewed. Rickford and Rickford (2000) provide data that states: “Blacks represented only 3 percent of the population in New England, 7
percent of the population in the Middle colonies, but nearly 40 percent of the population in the plantation-rich South” (p. 134). Because 87 percent of all Africans in the American colonies were located in the South, many scholars concentrate on this region when studying the development of AAE through the eighteenth century.

Steadily, African Americans begin to outnumber European Americans throughout the South. By 1730, 69 percent of South Carolina’s population was comprised by African Americans. In 1776, the number more than doubled: ninety thousand to forty thousand according to Rickford and Rickford (2000). In the more swampy, coastal regions of South Carolina and Georgia, the numbers grew even more so. The greatest example of Creole English in America – Gullah – developed in these regions and still thrives there. Rickford and Rickford (2000) propose that two side effects of the explosive increase in black population during the eighteenth century may have held significant “linguistic consequences.” First and foremost, African Americans increasingly learned English not from European Americans but from other African Americans. The English learned by many African Americans may have contained varying dialects and vernacular; such would reflect the process of language acquisition and the influence of African languages. The second side effect, though of no less import, suggests that European Americans, sensing that their social and economic dominance was being threatened, passed harsh laws restricting the rights of African Americans, securing their status as property for life, and invoking horrendous punishments for them. Historian Philip Foner (1975) describes the slave code of 1705 as a measure that 

“increased punishments for slaves by providing that for petty offenses, slaves were to be whipped, maimed or branded; for robbing a house or a store a slave was to be given sixty lashes by the sheriff, placed in the pillory with his ears nailed to the posts for a half-hour,
his ears then to be severed from his head…for the first time, too, the law prescribed the castration of recaptured fugitive slaves” (p. 194-5).

Rickford and Rickford (2000) suggest that laws such as these reinforced “sociopsychological barriers between blacks and whites, fomenting black resentment and leading to the crystallization of a black identity expressed, in part, through a distinctive vernacular” (p. 135). For instance, the occurrence would be most unlikely should a slave wish to speak exactly like the white man who castrated him.

Explicit comments regarding the language of African Americans begin to surface during the eighteenth century, along with several literary attestations. Rickford and Rickford (2000) cite historians Marvin Kay and Lorin Cary as the source of the following statements:

Philip Reading, Anglican minister in Delaware, wrote in 1748 that slaves there “have a language peculiar to themselves, a wild confused medley of Negro and corrupt English…”

J.F.D. Smyth, “an English visitor to the colonies at the beginning of the American revolution,” described the language used by the Virginia and North Carolina slaves in the 1770s as “a mixed dialect between the Guinea and the English.”

The Rev. James Marye Jr. wrote from Orange County, Virginia, in 1754 that “there are great Quantities of those Negroes imported here yearly from Africa, who have languages peculiar to themselves, who are here many years before they understand English; and great Numbers there are that never do understand it.” (p. 136)

Advertisements for runaway slaves in the eighteenth century also showed evidence of the impact of slave speech. The English of slaves was assessed in the advertisements on a scale ranging from low (cannot speak English) to speaks broken English to “speaks fast and bad English” to
“speaks very good English” or “speaks very proper” (Rickford and Rickford, 2000, p.137).

Interestingly, these categories exist in various forms today. Undoubtedly, a distinct variation in slave speech existed, perhaps as a result of different social circumstances and the personal history of the individual. Rickford and Rickford (2000) state: “Insofar as wide linguistic variations existed, eighteenth-century African America was much like the African America of today, although the sociohistorical circumstances shaping the variations were quite different” (p. 137).

As a result of the invention of the cotton gin, the production of cotton expanded significantly. Such growth caused tobacco and other staples to be replaced by cotton as the staple crop and spurred the development of new states such as Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, and Texas. Thus, the slave population grew from seven hundred thousand in 1790 to approximately four million by 1860 (Rickford and Rickford, 2000). The primary source of new slaves was the domestic slave trade. According to Rickford and Rickford (2000), slaves were moved en masse from the areas of Virginia, Maryland, Kentucky and Tennessee to the main cotton-producing states of Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas. A result of the domestic slave trade included the spread of the black vernacular westward. Some scholars propose that much of the “apparent uniformity of Spoken Soul” may be due to the population diffusion in the South. An additional effect of the domestic slave trade was the division of the black family; mothers, fathers and children were typically separated from one another in the process of the domestic slave trade. Rickford and Rickford (2000) provide a heart wrenching account by a slave child, Josiah Henson, as he remembers being torn from his mother:

I seem to see and hear my poor mother weeping now. This was one of my earliest observations of [white] men; an experience which I only shared with thousands of my
race, the bitterness of which to any individual who suffers it cannot be diminished by the frequency of its occurrence, while it is dark enough to overshadow the whole after-life with something blacker than a funeral pall (p. 139).

In the same sense that the slave codes of the eighteenth century caused barriers between the white and black cultures, so too did the traumatic separations that took place during the domestic slave trade. Not wanting to take on any identity features characteristic of their oppressors, the black race most likely remained even more determined to maintain and develop their own sense of cultural identity, including linguistic and expressive patterns. Rickford and Rickford maintain that the fact that “Spoken Soul often marks the oppositional identity of blacks vis-à-vis whites and mainstream culture is undoubtedly part of the reason for its vibrant existence to this day” (p. 139).

Possibly the most significant event during the nineteenth century for African Americans was the Civil War and Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. The following account was given to Zora Neale Hurston by Wallace Quaterman who was born a slave in Georgia in 1844. In telling of how his freedom occurred, Quarterman states:

The overseer ask me what is that, if that is thunder? I tell um I don’t know. I know was the Yankee come…An’ he call me an’ tol’ me to run down in the fiel’, and tell Peter to turn the people loose, that the Yankee come. An’ so I run down in the fiel’, an’, an’ whoop and holler. An that, the people them throw ‘way they hoe them. They throw away they hoe, an’ then they call we all up, you know, an’, an’ give we all freedom ‘cause we are jus’ as much as free as them (p. 140).

While freedom for African Americans brought many hardships, many responded by relocating to the bigger cities and industrialized states. The migration stimulated a convergence among
African American Vernacular English (AAVE) varieties and led to a “relatively focused and uniform urban vernacular” which still exists today (p. 140). Also, freedom for African Americans afforded them increased opportunities in education, public service and involvement in leadership positions in the church. While many were not so fortunate, those who were presented with a chance to advance educationally, economically, and otherwise were given more exposure and access to the “mainstream” or “standard” speech of the white middle class. The evidence of AAE in the nineteenth century is abounding in sources such as novels, short stories, slave/ex-slave narratives, sermons, music, and poetry.

Haskins (1973) aligns with Rickford and Rickford (2000) in stating:

Whenever a group of people is accorded a subjugated position in a culture, in order to survive it must band together … to survive in a culture that has historically ignored them, blacks have had to develop different ways of living, different ways of eating, different ways of dressing, and different modes of speaking, as a kind of code (p. 39).

Continuing throughout the twentieth century, particularly before the Civil Rights Movement, blacks encountered significant struggles nationwide. Discrimination in employment, segregated housing, and distinct inequalities in the education arena represent only a portion of the adversity and suffering heaped upon the black populace. The intense mid-century segregation in schools and housing resulted in significant changes in the grammar of AAE, increasing the divergence between black and white vernacular (Rickford and Rickford, 2000, p. 143). Federal interventions during the twentieth century such as New Deal legislation, the Civil Rights Act, and affirmative action helped alleviate a certain percentage of burdens created for African Americans by producing gains in black employment and, thus, income. However, federal affirmative action was revoked and effectively outlawed through a series of Supreme Court
decisions from the 1970s to the 1990s. By eradicating affirmative action, the brief opportunities for black employment, economic gain, and access to higher education were also destroyed. Thus, the disparities between the black and white races remain very clear and broad in scope.

Even though African Americans today hold very distinguished positions as administrators, mayors, police chiefs, judges, congressmen and congresswomen, and senators, the portrayal of African Americans as the “other” continues to lurk in communities, homes, and classrooms. The attitude and actions of the oppressors continue to fuel the existence and development of African American English, the language of the oppressed.
Chapter 3: AAE in the Classroom: Defining a Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Cynthia Jackson (2001) asks her reader to

“imagine an American teacher deciding to teach in another country. The teacher does not become knowledgeable about the history and culture of the country and the people. Nor does the teacher understand how the history and culture influence behavior and learning styles, the social dynamics between and among the communities in which the children live, the experiences of the children and their schooling” (p. 63).

The scenario created by Jackson represents the current state of many classrooms in America. Over the years, many educators, politicians, the general public and the media have offered various solutions to address the educational shortcomings and language instructional needs of African American students. Toya Wyatt (2001) notes, however, that few of these solutions have taken into account the complexity of the language acquisition process for African American children, as well as other child populations. The range of language diversity that exists in the African American community is vast and seldom acknowledged as being more than “an incorrect way of speaking.” Wyatt (2001) states:

“Children do not just acquire language in the same way they learn their ABCs or their numbers. There are so many factors that influence how children acquire language and what they come to know about language. African American children also come from a variety of differing language socialization experiences. As a result, they are not a monolithic group. Not all African American children speak African American English (AAE). Furthermore, children who do speak [AAE] differ from each other in the degree or frequency with which they use African American English features and rules” (p.261).
Understanding the course of language development and varying language socialization of individual students is crucial for educators involved with language instruction and language programs.

Wyatt (2001) proposes that African American children are no different from other children in that they undergo the same “universal early language learning stages.” Similar to other children, African American children begin to say their first words around one year of age and their first two-word utterances around 18 months of age. Differences begin to surface and distinguish the language production of African American children from other children around 3 years of age (Wyatt, 2001). At this age, according to Wyatt (2001), children begin to master the language-specific syntactic, morphological, and phonological rules of their native language structure. By understanding the language diversity that exists not only between communities but within communities, educators can adapt their pedagogical approaches to welcome the success of all language speakers from all backgrounds.

Wyatt (2001) affirms that one of the key factors that may impact an individual child’s second language learning experience is their community’s reaction to, response to, and view of AAE and GAE (General American English):

“Educators need to understand the type of resistance they may encounter from some students who receive subtle messages that their first language system is inferior and that they must give up their native language system to learn another. Resistance can occur when educators bring negative language attitudes and biases about AAE into the classroom setting whether conscious or unconscious. The unconscious or conscious
denigration of a child’s home language by teachers can have deteriorous consequences for second-dialect learner success” (p. 275)

Educators must show a mutual respect for both languages in the classroom while teaching GAE to AAE speakers. Purcell-Gates (2002) describes how teachers’ insistence on the use of Standard English can only have a negative effect on a student’s language and literacy development: “If you are forbidden to use your language to learn to read and write, if you are forced to speak differently when reading and writing, then you are in effect being closed off, or at least seriously impeded from accessing the world of print” (p. 134). Bidialectal competence should be the primary goal of language instruction without threatening the cultural identity of AAE speakers or discounting the credibility of one dialect over the other. The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association states: “No dialectal variety of English should be viewed as a ‘disorder or pathological form of speech or language. Each social dialect is adequate as a functional and effective variety of English’” (Lanehart, 2001, p. 275). Efforts to discredit second-dialect learning advocate a view of AAE as language that is substandard and deficient. When educators convey to their students, whether directly or indirectly, that AAE can be just as effective as GAE in various settings and that “both dialects represent complete, rule-governed language systems,” second-dialect learning is apt to be a more positive and effective learning experience for AAE speakers (Wyatt, 2001).

Educators of AAE speakers must also consider the type of social pressures felt by African American students, particularly in communities where AAE serves as a sign of cultural identity and creates an environment of belonging. Such issues become more important during the teenage years when peer acceptance is critical. Many African Americans who speak GAE become very familiar with labels such as “acting White” or “sounding White.” The negative
force surrounding GAE in pockets of the AAE speaking communities serves as a potential obstacle for educators attempting to promote GAE in the classroom. Educators must remain mindful of language attitudes not only in the classroom but in the communities outside the classroom setting as well.

Janice Hale (2001) cites Representative Augustus Hawkins of California: “What do you do with a former slave when you no longer need his labor?” (p. 111). Hale succinctly states that “our children are being educated in schools that deliver girls to public assistance and the boys to unemployment and incarceration” (p. 111). Unarguably, African American students are not being exposed in the classroom to that which will help them achieve financially and socially in the twenty-first century. Hale suggests a model of culturally appropriate pedagogy which is guided by five basic principles:

1. Future success requires that children be connected to academic achievement
2. It takes a whole village to raise a child
3. Children learn what they are taught
4. School is interesting
5. Learning is fun

Researchers and scholars have begun to determine certain aspects of culture that contribute to the disparity between academic achievement in African American students and their European American counterparts. A prevalent theory suggests that a significant number of African American students respond well to stimulation from the creative arts, which are rarely, if ever, emphasized in school curricula. The environment of many African American students contains visual arts such as posters, paintings, even graffiti. The audio arts play an instrumental role as well through radio, compact discs, music videos, and film. More fashionable arts serve as
stimuli also with “creative hairstyles, hats, scarves, and a general orientation toward adornment of the body, an orientation that grows out of the African heritage” (Hale, 2001, p. 115). The performance styles of ministers, athletes, dancers, and other entertainers provide further evidence of a strong connection to the creative arts. Hale (2001) suggests that African American students should not be required to sit for long periods of time without an opportunity to expend energy and learning activities should be designed that enable students to move as they learn (p. 118). The culture of African American students is highly dynamic and such knowledge can create endless possibilities for effective pedagogy in the classroom.

Judith Baker (2002) provides an excellent model for a culturally relevant pedagogy based on the language acquisition of her students in a Boston public high school. The system Baker developed is based on the theory that “there are at least three forms of the English language that most Americans need to learn in order to lead socially fulfilling and economically viable lives” (p. 51). The three forms are described below:

- “home” English or dialect, which most students learn at home, and recent immigrants often learn from peers, and which for first and second generation immigrants may be a combination of English and their mother tongue
- “formal” or academic English, which is learned by many in school, from reading, and from the media, although it may also be learned in well-educated families
- “professional” English, the particular language of one’s profession, which is mostly learned in college or on the job, or, in my school, in vocational education (p. 51-52)

Baker finds that if she makes the “trilingualism” explicit and can motivate students to want to learn each language, each form of English, then she can enable them to master the mechanical
differences between each. As suggested by Wyatt, Hale, and many others, Baker builds upon a firm respect for each student’s home language. Baker’s students actually study the various home languages brought into the classroom. They identify speech patterns, rules of grammar, vocabulary, tonal features, and emotional characteristics of language. Then, students eventually compare the home language features to the features of what is called “formal” English. Essentially, the students become experts about their home language and, in turn, share their expertise with their classmates. Baker writes: “For my students, the validation of their home language which comes from studying it allows them to feel comfortable with language study in general. It becomes just as acceptable to ask, ‘How do you say this in formal English?’ as it is to ask, ‘How do you say this with your friends?’ or, ‘How do you say this in your grandmother’s kitchen?’” (p. 56). Baker’s work and that of other researchers suggests that educators who are willing to “do the work” can effectively teach African American students to speak “Standard English” without jeopardizing their cultural identities. Educators must help students understand why they need to learn “formal” English and help them realize that the ability and willingness to use “formal” English in certain social circumstances can empower them (Thompson, 2004).

Of course, cultural relevance involves more than language. Negative experiences most commonly occur when a student’s history, culture, and/or background are nonexistent in the textbooks and curriculum, even more so when that cultural background is misrepresented. The goal of creating culturally relevant pedagogy is to develop a curriculum that allows African American students to excel academically while maintaining a strong connection to their native culture. Ladson-Billings (1994) illustrates an example of culturally relevant pedagogy that can be used across the curriculum and throughout grade levels:
“Let us examine how a fifth-grade teacher might use a culturally relevant style in a lesson about the U.S. Constitution. She might begin with a discussion of the bylaws and articles of incorporation that were used to organize a local church or African American civic association. Thus the students learn the significance of such documents in forming institutions and shaping ideals while they also learn that their own people are institution-builders” (p. 18).

Making the transition between two cultures apparent in one’s pedagogy provides students with a vital skill that will contribute to their survival and achievement in the world outside of the classroom. Ladson-Billings outlines significant components of a culturally relevant pedagogy that lend success for African American students:

1. When students are treated as competent they are likely to demonstrate competence. Culturally relevant teaching methods do not suggest to students that they are incapable of learning. Provide intellectual challenges by teaching to the highest standards and not to the lowest common denominator.
2. When teachers provide instructional “scaffolding,” students can move from what they know to what they need to know. Students are allowed to build upon their own experiences, knowledge and skills to move into more difficult knowledge and skills.
3. The focus of the classroom must be instructional. Although a classroom is a complex and dynamic place, the primary enterprise must be to teach. In culturally relevant classrooms, instruction is foremost.
4. Real education is about extending students’ thinking and abilities. Rather than a “drill and kill” approach to knowledge acquisition, the approach of
successful teachers makes student learning a more contextualized, meaningful experience.

5. Effective teaching involves in-depth knowledge of both the students and the subject matter. Good teaching starts with building good relationships. (p. 123-125)

Perhaps Ladson-Billings’s outline seems commonsensical. Yet, if the five principles stated above are perceived as such, why are so many African American students failing in comparison to the European American classmates? As Thompson (2004) states: “Today, the classroom is one arena in which the traditional Eurocentric perspective is most obvious. Because negativity and hopelessness predominate in news reports and research regarding African Americans and because most textbooks reflect a Eurocentric bias …students are likely to hear about slavery, Martin Luther King, Jr. and possibly Rosa Parks” (p. 190). Even though abundant, positive facts exist regarding African Americans, those data are rarely, if ever, introduced in the classroom. For instance, according to Thompson (2004), nearly 400 African American men and women earned doctoral degrees from the late 1800s through World War II. Are students ever told of the positive achievements and contributions made by African Americans outside of “Black History Month?” School curricula have been criticized since the early 1930s for not only excluding pertinent information about African Americans and other minority-groups, but also for miseducating. Because expansive periods of history are often not included in most curricula, students of color rarely see their culture reflected in a positive way (Thompson, 2004).

Students must unlearn inferiority. In her article “Whose Standard? Teaching Standard English” Linda Christensen (1994) demands student be taught and encouraged to hold their voices sacred, to ignore the teachers who have made them feel that what they have said is wrong
or bad or stupid. Students must be taught how to listen to the knowledge they have stored up but to which they are seldom asked to relate. Knowledge cannot be introduced or portrayed as foreign and unattainable. Christensen recalls a young woman she met at a conference whose father was Haitian and whose mother was Puerto Rican. She told Christensen, “I went through school wondering if anyone like me had ever done anything worthwhile or important. We kept reading and hearing about all of these famous people. I remember thinking, ‘Don’t we have anyone?’ I walked out of school that day feeling tiny, invisible and unimportant” (p. 143).

Educators have daily opportunities and a responsibility to affirm that their students’ lives and language are unique and important. By the selections of literature students read and through the history they are taught, teachers give legitimacy to students’ lives as worthy of studying and celebrating.

Far too many African American students suffer the ill effects of an inferior education and lackluster teachers. In “Applying linguistic knowledge of African American English to help students learn and teachers teach” John Baugh (2001) discusses a model he labels as the three legs of the educational stool: the role of educators, the role of parents, and the responsibilities of students themselves. Characteristic of a three-legged stool, Baugh’s stool will “surely topple if any of the legs are either missing or substantially shorter than the others” (p. 319). A majority of successful students become so as a result of strong support from caring adults. Naturally, in an ideal circumstance, students are surrounded by parents and “competent-to-superior” educators. However, a lack of parental support and less-than-qualified educators can cause the support structure to collapse altogether. Baugh (2001) proposes two modest, but important, goals that are fully capable of being realized. First, as other scholars and researchers have suggested, no child should be made to feel ashamed of his or her native language or culture,
regardless of the child’s background and regardless of the school that child attends. Secondly, teachers must respect their students, including their linguistic heritage and vernacular culture. Such educators are far more likely to be successful than teachers who devalue students without a proficiency in General American English.

A culturally relevant pedagogy involves empowering and educating students holistically. Thompson (2004) asserts: “Students must be excelling academically. However, instead of feeling that they have to act white or eradicate their own culture in order to do well in school, they must also be taught in ways that value and build on their culture” (p. 206). If African American students are going to succeed and thrive in classrooms, they must be presented with both a culturally relevant and a culturally responsive education.
Chapter 4: Final Reflections and a Broadening Perspective

In her introduction to The Skin That We Speak, Lisa Delpit (2002) writes poignantly: “Our language embraces us long before we are defined by any other medium of identity” (xvii). She continues: “Just as our skin provides us with a means to negotiate our interactions with the world…our language plays an equally pivotal role in determining who we are: it is The Skin That We Speak.” As one explores the tenuous origins of African American English and traces its evolution, the rich evidence of its survival as a language four hundred years later is undeniable. Educators, politicians, and the general public can no longer deny the validity of African American English nor can they continue to denigrate an entire culture on the basis of language. Of course, racism and linguistic prejudice will continue ad nauseum. Regardless, the research and theory to support speakers of AAE exists and, though it has only begun to be disseminated, it has been created in abundance.

African American English is spoken in homes, schools, churches, on streets, stages, and airwaves everyday. In coming to terms with African American English, what it is, and why it matters one encountered the following remarks from Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison. Morrison (1981) insists that the distinctive ingredient of her writing is “the language, only the language … It is the thing that black people love so much – the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them. It’s a love, a passion. Its function is like a preacher’s: to make you stand up out of your seat, make you lose yourself and hear yourself. The worst of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language. There are certain things I cannot say
without recourse to my language. It’s terrible to think that a child with five different present tenses comes to school to be faced with books that are less than his own language. And then to be told things about his language, which is him, that are sometimes permanently damaging. He may never know the etymology of Africanisms in his language, not even know that “hip” is a real word or that “the dozens” meant something. This is a really cruel fallout of racism. I know the standard English. I want to use it to help restore the other language, the lingua franca.”

African American English thrives in the music, poetry, prose and everyday voices of its speakers. Until AAE speakers themselves are fully accepted as equal, not as the oppressed, their native language will continue to endure harmful criticism and severe denigration. Salikoko S. Mufwene (2001) writes: “What cannot be denied is indeed also the fact that English varieties associated with African Americans have received the lion’s share of attention, correlated more with the socio-economic segregation of their speakers than with the greater distinctiveness of their structural features” (p. 23). Other varieties of English such as Old Amish English, which is as different from textbook English as Gullah, receive very little spotlight.

Perspectives on African American English, even among scholars and within the African American culture, vary greatly. Mufwene (2001) conducted a survey of African Americans in which he asked each participant to define AAE. Every participant denied the existence of African American English. John McWhorter (2001) closely echoes the perspective of Mufwene’s participants by stating:

“It is a fact that Black English is not different enough from standard English to pose any significant obstacle to speaking, reading, or writing it. Black English is simply a dialect of English, just as standard English is…It is mutually intelligible with standard English
both on the page and spoken and its speakers do not occupy a separate nation…We also
must not make the mistake of equating Black English with mere ‘street slang.’ Black
English speakers indeed often use a colorful slang .. just as standard English speakers use
slang…African Americans are often aware of the similarity between Black speech and
that of poor Southern whites, such speech is essentially as different from standard English
as Black English is” (p. 25-26).
I suggest that McWhorter’s rhetoric is problematic for various reasons but primarily for its lack
of recognition of the complex, rich nature of African American English. Although AAE has
been explored under a microscope throughout the years, scholars and laypersons alike seem to
continually struggle with a definition for AAE. Is a definition necessary? Mufwene (2001)
suggests that “we might be better off not even trying to define AAE…there is probably no way
of defining AAE – if a language variety can be defined at all – that does not reflect a particular
bias, and this problem is true of any language variety in the world” (p. 37).

More importantly, would further discourse on the definition of AAE aid in the success
and achievement of African American students in today’s classrooms? I propose that ongoing
discussion and examination of the associations among language, culture, and poverty,
particularly concerning African American students, are critical to breaking the voracious cycle of
academic failure. Though the formation of culturally relevant pedagogy represents a strong
beginning, more teachers must be asked to question their current belief systems regarding not
only language instruction but the larger constructs of race and class. The stigmatization
of African American English is not directed at the language itself but at its speakers. Educators must liberate themselves from their oppressive roles.
References


