

Linguistics, education, and the Ebonics firestorm

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Introduction. One profession with which linguistics has long been associated—at least through the research and activities of linguists in applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, and other subfields—is education. Applied linguistics has been primarily concerned with the teaching and learning of foreign languages, but it also includes the study of language disorders and mother tongue/bilingual education as well as other topics (Crystal 1991: 22). Key journals in this area, among them *Applied Linguistics* and the *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, go back to the early 1980s and the late 1960s, respectively.

In the early 1960s, leading descriptive linguists like Leonard Bloomfield (Bloomfield and Barnhart 1961) and Charles Fries (1962) contributed book-length works on the teaching of reading using a linguistics approach. More recently, Kenneth Goodman (1998) waded in to defend the “whole language” approach to the teaching of reading after the California legislature mandated that reading be taught through phonics and phonemic awareness. And Stephen Krashen (1999) and Kenji Hakuta (www.stanford.edu/~hakuta/) were among the many linguists who rose to the defense of bilingual education, severely restricted in California since 1998 by Proposition 227, a state ballot initiative approved by 61 percent of the voting public.

The closing decade of the twentieth century was an especially vigorous period for public debate about language in the United States and Canada (Heller et al. 1999), and, as the preceding examples suggest, nowhere was this truer than in California. In this paper, I will sketch the outlines of the *other* big language and education controversy that exploded in California in this period—the Ebonics firestorm of 1996 and 1997—and discuss the role of linguistics and linguists in it. At the core of the conflagration were the resolutions approved by the Oakland School Board in December 1996, and I will therefore discuss what those meant, in pedagogical terms, and what the experimental evidence is in favor of and against such pedagogy. But the motivation for the Oakland resolutions was the limited academic progress and success that African-American students experience(d) in elementary, junior, and high schools, particularly in curriculum-central, language arts areas like reading and writing, and it is with the evidence of this that we must properly begin.

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How K–12 schools have been failing African-American students. The extent to which African-American students were failing in Oakland schools—or, viewed another way, the extent to which such schools were failing African-American students—was documented by Oakland Superintendent of Schools Carolyn Gettridge in the *Monclarion* on December 31, 1996:¹

The findings on student achievement in Oakland are evidence that the current system is not working for most African-American children. While 53% of the students in the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) are African-American, only 37% of the students enrolled in Gifted and Talented classes are African-American, and yet 71% of the students enrolled in Special Education are African-American.

The grade point average of African-American students is 1.80 [C-] compared to a district average of 2.40 [C+]. 64% of students who repeat the same grade are African-American; 67% of students classified as truant are African-American; 80% of all suspended students are African-American; and only 81% of the African-American students who make it to the 12th grade actually graduate.

It was statistics like these, which Gettridge herself described as “mind-numbing and a cause for moral outrage” (as quoted in Perry and Delpit 1998: 158) that prompted the OUSD to establish a Task Force on the Education of African-American Students in June 1996; the school board’s December resolutions were directly based on the task force’s findings.

But the statistics that Superintendent Gettridge presented, while indeed disturbing, were in one respect too general and in another too specific. They were too general insofar as they did not reveal how African-American students were doing on subjects like reading and writing, justifying a specific response involving language. And they were too specific insofar as they failed to reveal that the situation was similar for African-American students in virtually every urban school district across the country, making it not just Oakland’s problem, but America’s.

Consider, for instance, reading achievement data for students in several of the largest urban school districts (including Oakland, but also San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, Atlanta, and fifty others)—districts that are part of a consortium called the Council of the Great City Schools. These statistics were presented by Michael Casserly, Executive Director of the Council of the Great City Schools, at a United States Senate Appropriations Subcommittee hearing on Ebonics chaired by Sen. Arlen Specter on January 23, 1997.

Table 1. Students scoring above the fiftieth percentile on 1992–1993 reading achievement tests

Ethnic group (%)	K–6th grade (%)	7th–8th grade (%)	9th–12th grade (%)
Blacks	31.3	26.9	26.6
Whites	60.7	63.4	65.4

Table 1 is a partial representation of Great City School results on standardized, norm-referenced reading achievement tests taken in 1992–93.² The achievement tests are normed so that 50 percent of the students who take them should score above the fiftieth percentile. The white students in fifty-five large United States urban school districts surpassed this norm at each school level, the percentage that did so increasing from 60.7 percent at the elementary level to 65.4 percent at the high school level. By contrast, only 31.3 percent of black elementary students scored above the fiftieth percentile, and this proportion declined to 26.6 percent by the high school level.

Reading proficiency data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—also presented to the 1997 Senate Ebonics hearing by Michael Casserly—were similarly disconcerting. As Table 2 shows, while the gap between black and white reading scores is much less in 1994 than it was in 1971, it is still considerable and shows signs of creeping up from 1984 levels. Moreover, the Table 1 pattern is repeated in Table 2, in the sense that the performance of black students, relative to their white counterparts, steadily declined as they got older. Nine-year-old black students had mean scores 29 points (on a 500-point scale) behind those of their white counterparts; but thirteen-year-old black students were further behind their white counterparts (31 points), and seventeen-year-old black students further still (37 points behind).

Finally, lest it be imagined that the situation has improved since 1993 and 1994, Table 3 shows 1999 data from the Great City Schools (Michael Casserly,

Table 2. Differences in average proficiency of white and black students in reading

Year	9-year-olds (points)	13-year-olds (points)	17-year-olds (points)
1994	29	31	37
1984	32	26	31
1971	44	38	53

Table 3. Students scoring above the fiftieth percentile on 1999 reading achievement tests

Ethnic group	Grade 4 (%)	Grade 8 (%)	Grade 10 (%)
Blacks	19.4	21.5	10.5
Whites	55.5	61.2	36.4

personal communication, December 8, 2000). The data are similar to but not exactly comparable with those of Table 1, since they represent averages for one grade only (fourth, eighth, tenth) at the elementary, middle, and senior high levels, rather than for all the grades at each level. But they are just as devastating, if not more so. The percentage of blacks scoring above the fiftieth percentile norm, which should be 50 percent if the population were reading on target, has sunk even further between 1993 and 1999, from 31 percent to 19 percent at the elementary level and from 27 percent to 10.5 percent at the high school level. The fact that the relative gap between white *and* black students is reduced in the tenth grade (they both show a precipitous decline from eighth grade pass rates) is no cause for rejoicing, since the percentage of black students who score above the fiftieth percentile is so abysmally low (10.5 percent).

It is statistics like these—largely ignored by the government, the media, and the general public in their amused and outraged reactions to the Oakland Ebonics resolutions—that prompted Oakland's African-American Task Force and the Oakland School Board to attempt to take corrective action in 1996. In the next section we'll consider the resolutions themselves, bearing in mind that most of Oakland's critics rarely did so.

Oakland's Ebonics Resolutions and testimony before the United States Senate panel. In response to the educational malaise of black students in its district, Oakland's African-American Task Force in 1996 came up with *nine* recommendations, including full implementation of all existing educational programs, with new financial commitments to facilitate this. The Task Force also advocated reviewing the criteria for admitting students to Gifted and Talented Education and Special Education, mobilizing community involvement in partnership with the schools, and developing new procedures for the recruitment of teachers, counselors, and other staff. The number one recommendation, however, had to do with language:

African American students shall develop English language proficiency as the foundation for their achievements in all core competency areas. (Oakland Unified School District 1996)

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In her statement before the United States Senate hearing on Ebonics on January 23, 1997,³ Oakland School Superintendent Carolyn Gettridge explained *why* the Task Force zeroed in on English language proficiency as a key element in improving student achievement:

The Task Force's research identified the major role language development plays as the primary gatekeeper for academic success. Without English language proficiency students are unable to access or master advanced level course work in the areas of mathematics and science which have traditionally been viewed as the gatekeepers to enrollment in post-secondary education. (U.S. Senate 1997: 1)

One could of course add that English language proficiency affects not only mathematics and science, but also social studies and every other subject in the curriculum. Going beyond the rationale for the language focus, Superintendent Carolyn Gettridge said a little about *how* the OUSD would attempt to achieve increased competency in Standard American English—by building a bridge to it from the African-American students' vernacular:

Language development for African American students . . . will be enhanced with the recognition and understanding of the language structures unique to many African American students. . . . Our interest is in guaranteeing that conditions exist for high achievement and research indicates that an awareness of these language patterns by educators helps students build a bridge to Standard American English. A variety of strategies will be employed to support language development and achieve our goal of high academic performance for all students. (U.S. Senate 1997: 1–2)

Gettridge's testimony added that such bridging would be achieved in part through increased implementation of the Standard English Proficiency program (SEP), a program authorized by state legislation since 1981, which she described briefly as follows:

S.E.P. is a cultural-linguistic program that empowers African American students with knowledge and understanding of African American culture and languages. Classroom instruction demonstrates the differences in language spoken in the student's home and standard English. The language students bring into the classroom is embraced and a bridge is constructed to standard English. (U.S. Senate 1997: 13)

However, Gettridge did not provide any experimental evidence in favor of this bridging or Contrastive Analysis (CA) approach. In this respect she failed to respond to the critique of California State Schools Superintendent Delaine Eastin that "We are not aware of any research which indicates that this kind of program will help address the language and achievement problems of African American students."⁴ This is an issue that I'll address in the next subsection of this paper. To lay the groundwork, first consider the OUSD's famous (or perhaps infamous) Ebonics Resolutions of December 18, 1996, and their revisions of January 17, 1997, both of which preceded the January 23, 1997, Senate hearing on Ebonics at which Superintendent Gettridge testified.

For the sake of completeness, I will provide the full text of the resolutions, using the wording and format in Rickford and Rickford (2000: 166–169). Each clause is numbered for easy reference (in both OUSD versions, the clauses were not numbered); underlining is added to highlight wording from the original December 18, 1996, version that was deleted in the revised version approved on January 17, 1997; and square brackets and boldface are used for replacement or new wording that was inserted on the latter date:

RESOLUTION (No. 9697-0063) OF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION ADOPTING THE REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN TASK FORCE; A POLICY STATEMENT, AND DIRECTING THE SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS TO DEVISE A PROGRAM TO IMPROVE THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND APPLICATION SKILLS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS

1. WHEREAS, numerous validated scholarly studies demonstrate that African-American students as a part of their culture and history as African people possess and utilize a language described in various scholarly approaches as "Ebonics" (literally "Black sounds") or "Pan African Communication Behaviors" or "African Language Systems"; and
2. WHEREAS, these studies have also demonstrated that African Language Systems are genetically based [**have origins in West and Niger-Congo languages**] and not a dialect of English [**are not merely dialects of English**]; and
3. WHEREAS, these studies demonstrate that such West and Niger-Congo African languages have been recognized and addressed in the educational community as worthy of study, understanding or [**and**] application of their principles, laws and structures for the benefit of African American students both in

terms of positive appreciation of the language and these students' acquisition and mastery of English language skills; and

4. WHEREAS, such recognition by scholars has given rise over the past fifteen years to legislation passed by the State of California recognizing the unique language stature of descendants of slaves, with such legislation being prejudicially and unconstitutionally vetoed repeatedly by various California state governors; and
5. WHEREAS, judicial cases in states other than California have recognized the unique language stature of African American pupils, and such recognition by courts has resulted in court-mandated educational programs which have substantially benefited African-American children in the interest of vindicating their equal protection of the law rights under the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution; and
6. WHEREAS, the Federal Bilingual Education Act (20 U.S.C. 1402 et seq.) mandates that local educational agencies "build their capacities to establish, implement and sustain programs of instruction for children and youth of limited English proficiency"; and
7. WHEREAS, the interest of the Oakland Unified School District in providing equal opportunities for all of its students dictate limited English proficient educational programs recognizing the English language acquisition and improvement skills of African-American students are as fundamental as is application of bilingual education [**or second language learner**] principles for others whose primary languages are other than English [**Primary languages are the language patterns children bring to school**]; and
8. WHEREAS, the standardized tests and grade scores of African-American students in reading and language arts skills measuring their application of English skills are substantially below state and national norms and that such deficiencies will be remedied by application of a program featuring African Language Systems principles in instructing African-American children both in their primary language and in English [**to move students from the language patterns they bring to school to English proficiency**]; and
9. WHEREAS, standardized tests and grade scores will be remedied by application of a program that teachers and aides

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[instructional assistants], who are certified in the methodology of featuring African Language Systems principles in instructing African-American children both in their primary language and in English [used to transition students from the language patterns they bring to school to English]. The certified teachers of these students will be provided incentives including, but not limited to salary differentials;

10. NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Board of Education officially recognizes the existence and the cultural and historic bases of West and Niger-Congo African Language Systems, and each language as the predominantly primary language of [many] African-American students; and
11. BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Board of Education hereby adopts the report, recommendations and attached Policy Statement of the District's African-American Task Force on language stature of African-American speech; and
12. BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Superintendent in conjunction with her staff shall immediately devise and implement the best possible academic program for imparting instruction to African-American students in their primary language for the combined purposes of [facilitating the acquisition and mastery of English language skills] while maintaining [respecting and embracing] the legitimacy and richness of such language [the language patterns] whether it is [they are] known as "Ebonics", "African Language Systems", "Pan African Communication Behaviors", or other description, and to facilitate their acquisition and mastery of English language skills; and
13. BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Board of Education hereby commits to earmark District general and special funding as is reasonably necessary and appropriate to enable the Superintendent and her staff to accomplish the foregoing; and
14. BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Superintendent and her staff shall utilize the input of the entire Oakland educational community as well as state and federal scholarly and educational input in devising such a program; and
15. BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that periodic reports on the progress of the creation and implementation of such an education program shall be made to the Board of Education at least

once per month commencing at the Board meeting of December 18, 1996.

Many comments could be made about the various clauses of this resolution, considering, *inter alia*, the ones that were the source of public controversy about Ebonics as a separate Niger-Congo and genetically based language (clause 2, in its original wording), and whether the OUSD intended to seek bilingual funding for its Ebonics speakers (clauses 6, 7, and 8). These and related issues are discussed at length in other sources, including McWhorter (1998: 127–260), Baugh (2000: 36–86), Rickford and Rickford (2000: 169–173), Smitherman (2000:150–162), and Crawford (2001).

What I want to focus on instead is the more fundamental issue of whether the OUSD intended by these resolutions to teach African-American students Ebonics or in Ebonics, as most of the country and the world assumed, or to use Ebonics partly as a springboard for helping them to master Standard English.⁵ The quotations from Superintendent Gettridge's senate testimony indicate that the latter rather than the former was the main goal. And the preamble (capitalized and unchanged in both versions) to the resolutions does refer explicitly to the goal of improving "the English language acquisition and application skills of African-American students." It is true that the December 1996 wording of clauses 8, 9, and 12 does refer to instructing African-American children "in their primary language" (as McWhorter 2000: 202–203 and others have pointed out). But, as noted by Rickford and Rickford (2000: 172), these could be legitimately interpreted as referring to technical instruction in the features of the primary or source variety as part of the compare-and-contrast process used to develop mastery in the target variety (in this case, Standard English). And while most Contrastive Analysis approaches are built on a philosophy of respect for the legitimacy of the source variety, which we certainly endorse, it is not necessary to try to develop verbal fluency in Ebonics among inner-city African-American students: "tutoring them on Ebonics would be like giving a veteran angler a lesson on baiting hooks" (Rickford and Rickford 2000: 172).

In any event, the revised resolution wording of January 1997 was clearly intended to remove ambiguities on this score, with clauses like "used to transition students from the language patterns they bring to school to English" replacing the earlier ambiguous wording. And to make the matter maximally explicit, the OUSD issued a press release shortly after the first version of the resolutions came out (and ran into a hornet's nest), emphasizing that:

1. The Oakland Unified School District is not replacing the teaching of Standard American English with any other language.
2. The District is not teaching Ebonics.
3. The District emphasizes teaching Standard American English and has set a high standard of excellence for all its students.

Given that the primary *goal* of the OUSD was to help its African-American students master Standard English (a goal that it ironically shared with its detractors!), the debate can be refocused (as it never was in the media) on the efficacy of the *means* (including CA) that Oakland wanted to use to achieve this end. To the extent that linguists specifically responded to this issue, the answer seemed to be that the approach was efficacious and advisable. But the relevant evidence was not always provided, and the endorsement was not completely unanimous, as we will see.

Arguments and evidence FOR the Contrastive Analysis approach that Oakland intended to use to implement its resolutions. The precise methods the OUSD intended to use in teaching its African-American students Standard English were never spelled out in detail, certainly not in its resolutions. The revised (January 17, 1997) resolution's *closing* clause (12) specified, in fact, that "the Superintendent in conjunction with her staff *shall immediately devise and implement* the best possible program for facilitating the acquisition and mastery of English language skills, while embracing the legitimacy and richness of the language patterns . . . known as Ebonics . . ." (emphasis added). The only methodological mandate in this was that the students' vernacular (Ebonics) was to be taken into account in the process. However, as noted above (see quotes at the beginning of section 2), Superintendent Gettridge's Senate testimony on January 23, 1997, did indicate that the sixteen-year-old Standard English Proficiency (SEP) program, with its Contrastive Analysis and bridging strategies, was to be an important element in their approach.

The SEP program itself was already in use in some of Oakland's classrooms (the postresolution plan was to implement it more widely), and Oakland was a key SEP site in California, serving as host of its annual statewide conferences for several years. In the SEP handbook, a massive 340-page document,⁶ the goal of helping vernacular-speaking African-American students master Standard English is spelled out quite explicitly (SEP handbook n.d.: 5):⁷

This handbook is designed as a resource for school site administrators and classroom teachers in initiating, implementing and improving Standard English programs. The contributors to this handbook maintain that proficiency in Standard English is essential in providing students with those skills that will afford them the opportunity to experience optimum access to the social and economic mainstream.

The handbook offers a theoretical and functional framework to operate an oral-based language program that is designed to assist speakers of Black Language [Black English or Ebonics] in becoming proficient in Standard English.

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Moreover, while emphasizing that a positive attitude towards one's own language is the starting point for the program, the SEP handbook goes on to specify that Contrastive Analysis, with its discrimination, identification, translation, and response drills (see Feigenbaum 1970) is its basic methodology (SEP n.d.: 27):

The approaches used in this study are drills which are variations of the contrastive analysis and the comparative analysis [techniques] in teaching Black children to use Standard English. . . . By comparing the Standard English structure to be taught and the equivalent or close nonstandard structure, the student can see how they differ. Many students have partial knowledge of standard English; that is, they can recognize and produce it but without accurate control. . . . For many students, this sorting out is the beginning of a series of steps from passive recognition to active production.

However, despite its twenty years of implementation and its reported use in over 300 schools, there is no publicly available empirical evidence of the SEP's effectiveness (as noted by Yarborough and Flores 1997). So it is of little use in arguing for the approach the OUSD intended to take in implementing its resolutions or in defending it against its many critics. This is also true of the well-designed "Talkacross" program designed by Crowell and colleagues (1974), featuring Contrastive Analysis between "Black English" and Standard English in a 69-page teacher's manual and a 193-page activity book.

The Linguistics Society of America (LSA), the American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL), and Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) were among several language-related organizations that approved resolutions of their own in the wake of the Ebonics firestorm.⁸ In general, these provided support for the principle of respecting the legitimacy of the linguistic systems students bring to school, recognized the systematic nature of Ebonics, and endorsed the value of taking it into account in teaching Standard English. But even when they made reference to the existence of evidence in favor of the latter approach, they did not specifically cite it. This was also the case with Parker and Crist (1995), who reported that they had used the bidialectal, Contrastive Analysis approach successfully with Ebonics speakers in Tennessee and Illinois, but provided no supporting empirical evidence.

Such evidence does exist, however, in at least three striking cases, and I will turn to them shortly. But it may be useful to enumerate some of the arguments that linguists and others make in favor of Contrastive Analysis specifically, or more generally, in favor of taking Ebonics and other vernacular varieties into account in developing reading, writing, and other language arts skills in Standard English (see Rickford 1999b).

One argument is that this approach proceeds from a position of strength: the students are already competent in a valid, systematic language variety (their vernacular), and this fluency can be used as a springboard for teaching about important qualities of language in general (metaphor and rhyme, logical argument, authentic dialogue, rhetorical strategy) and about differences between the vernacular and the standard or mainstream variety in particular. The general strategy is facilitated by the fact that Ebonics and other vernaculars are often used by award-winning writers (e.g., Langston Hughes, Toni Morrison, Sonia Sanchez, August Wilson—see Rickford and Rickford 2000), several of whose works are already in use in American classrooms,⁹ and by the fact that students encounter other fluent and effective vernacular users (e.g., preachers) regularly in their own communities (Rickford and Rickford 2000). Another argument in relation to the specific contrastive strategy is that “this method allows for increased efficiency in the classroom, as teachers can concentrate on the systematic areas of contrast with SE [Standard English] that cause difficulty for vernacular speakers rather than taking on the more daunting task of teaching all of English grammar” (Rickford 1999a: 13).

Moreover, an approach like this, it might be argued, is likely to have positive effects on both teachers and their vernacular-speaking students. Teachers, like many members of the general public, often erroneously perceive students’ vernaculars as illogical, unsystematic, and evidence of cognitive deficits or laziness (Labov 1970; Van Keulen, Weddington, and DeBose 1998: 232). These misperceptions irk linguists because they run counter to everything we know about human language. But what’s worse, they can lead to lower teacher expectations and poorer student performance in a cycle of self-fulfilling prophecy that’s now depressingly well-documented (Tauber 1997). Students in turn are often relieved and delighted to learn that the vernacular they speak naturally is not the source of weakness that teachers often make it out to be, but a source of strength. Not only might their self-identity and motivation be enhanced by this,¹⁰ but the resistance to Standard English that’s sometimes reported as an element in black students’ limited success in school (cf., Fordham and Ogbu 1986) is likely to be reduced in the process.

A third argument in favor of Contrastive Analysis and taking the vernacular into account is that the prevailing, status quo alternative of ignoring and/or constantly correcting students’ vernaculars in an ad hoc and disparaging fashion clearly does NOT seem to work. This is evident, not only from the kinds of statistics reported in section 2, but also from reports in Piestrup (1973) and elsewhere that the corrective, disparaging approach leads students to withdraw from participation, turn to disruptive behavior, and perform more poorly in school.

The fourth and perhaps most effective argument is that there are at least three empirically validated studies of the effectiveness of taking the vernacular into

account in teaching Standard English using Contrastive Analysis. The first is an experimental composition program conducted by Hanni Taylor with African-American students at Aurora University, outside Chicago, in the 1980s. The second is a fifth- and sixth-grade program run by Kelli Harris-Wright in DeKalb County, just outside Atlanta, in which home speech and school speech are contrasted. The third is the Academic English Mastery Program (formerly the Language Development Program for African-American Students) in Los Angeles, run by Noma LeMoine. I'll say some more about each of these before considering arguments and evidence against this approach.

In the Aurora University study (Taylor 1989), African-American students from Chicago inner-city areas were divided into two groups. The experimental group was taught the differences between Black English and Standard English through Contrastive Analysis. The control group was taught composition through conventional techniques, with no specific reference to the vernacular. After eleven weeks, Taylor found that the experimental group showed a dramatic *decrease* (–59 percent) in the use of ten targeted Black English features in their Standard English writing, whereas the control group in fact showed a slight *increase* (+8.5 percent) in their use of such features in their writing.

In the DeKalb County (Georgia) study, described by Harris-Wright (1999), but without the specific results to be presented here, selected fifth and sixth graders in the bidialectal group (primarily African American) have for several years been taught English through a comparative approach that does not involve “devaluing the skills that they learn at home” (Harris-Wright 1999: 55). By contrast, control groups are offered no explicit comparison between their vernacular and Standard English. As the results in Table 4 show (Kelli Harris-Wright, personal communication), between 1995 and 1997, students in the bidialectal group made *bigger relative reading composite gains* every year than students in the control group, who actually showed slight losses in two of the three years.¹¹ More recent results (1998, 1999) for individual elementary schools in DeKalb County point in the same direction, with the experimental, bidialectal students showing greater gains between pretest and posttest than students in the control group.

Finally, we have results from the Academic English Mastery Program (AEMP) in the Los Angeles Unified School District, shown in Table 5.¹² Once again, students in the experimental group show greater gains (on tests taken in 1998–99) than students in the control group. Similar results obtain for the reading and language components of the SAT-9 test.¹³

Arguments and evidence AGAINST the Contrastive Analysis, bidialectal approach. Many, many statements (sometimes diatribes) were broadcast in the media and voiced by the general public AGAINST the Contrastive Analysis vernacular-respecting approach that Oakland proposed to use to implement its resolutions. However, since so many of these were uninformed about the OUSD res-

Table 4. Reading composite scores for bidialectal and control groups

Group	1994–95	1995–96	1996–1997
Bidialectal Posttest	42.39	41.16	34.26
Bidialectal Pretest	39.71	38.48	30.37
GAIN by bidialectal students	+2.68	+2.68	+3.89
Control Posttest	40.65	43.15	49.00
Control Pretest	41.02	41.15	49.05
GAIN by control students	–0.37	+2.0	–0.05

Source: Kelli Harris-Wright, 1999, personal communication.

olutions and what they might mean in pedagogical terms, and about linguistics and its possible applications, they are of little utility in a reasoned discussion. By contrast, a number of linguists have, over the years, queried various aspects of the Contrastive Analysis, bidialectal approach, and at least one linguist has consistently opposed the Oakland resolutions and their implementation. It is their argumentation and evidence that we'll focus on in this section of the paper.

One of the oldest positions, typified by Sledd (1972), is that the teaching of Standard English under the guise of bidialectalism is both impossible and immoral. The impossibility claim hinged on the argument that “the necessary descriptions of standard and nonstandard dialects are non-existent, and materials and methods of teaching are dubious at best” (372–373). But the situation has changed dramatically in the intervening thirty years, especially in the last five years, which have seen a flood of books and articles about African-American Vernacular English, so this argument is no longer tenable. The immorality argument is that “forcing” students to learn Standard English buys into the prejudices and corruption of the dominant society and ignores the fact

Table 5. Mean scores and gains for experimental and control writing groups, LA Unified School District

Group Test	Mean Pretest score	Mean Posttest score	GAIN
Experimental Writing	10.80	13.30	2.5
Control Writing	9.06	10.74	1.68

Source: Maddahian and Sandamela 2000.

that “in job hunting in America, pigmentation is more important than pronunciation” (379). We should aim for higher ambitions and deeper values in educating students than kowtowing to the majority, and, if anything, we should work on changing the prejudices and increasing the receptive abilities of whites rather than the productive abilities of blacks. To the extent that this kind of argument takes the linguistic and moral high ground, it is attractive, but not entirely convincing. There does appear to be a relation between the ability to command Standard English (whether or not one retains one’s vernacular) and success in school and employment and mobility in a wide range of occupations. In addition, the parents of vernacular speakers are almost unanimous in wanting their children to master some variety of mainstream or Standard English (Hoover 1978).

The preceding argument is not really against Contrastive Analysis but against the explicit teaching of Standard English. However, there does exist a cluster of arguments against Contrastive Analysis and bidialectalism as methodologies. One, summarized by Craig (1999: 38), who in turn cites Jagger and Cullinan (1974), is that “such programmes were ‘bi’ in name only, because there was no structured use or development of cognitive/communicative capacity in the vernacular to match what was being attempted in English.” Some programs (including the SEP) involve translation only into Standard English, and never into the vernacular. But, as I have noted in an earlier paper, “if translation is not carried out in both directions, the message . . . conveyed is that the vernacular variety has no integrity or validity” (Rickford 1999a: 14). The boring, stultifying nature of the drills that some contrastive approaches depend on is also problematic. However, as I’ve observed elsewhere (Rickford 1999a: 15): “these are not intrinsic weaknesses of contrastive analysis,” and programs like the AEMP in Los Angeles, which makes extensive use of literature and other techniques, show that “drill and kill” can be minimized or eliminated.

A third methodological argument is that Contrastive Analysis and the interference hypothesis that undergirds it (Lado 1957) no longer hold the theoretical sway they once did in the field of second language acquisition, where it was first developed, since they seem to account for only a limited portion of second language learner’s errors (Ellis 1994). However, the interference hypothesis does seem to account for a larger proportion of errors when two dialects of a language are compared and contrasted, and while error analysis and other analytical strategies should also be pursued, we have no substantive evidence that Contrastive Analysis is unhelpful to dialect speakers seeking to add a second variety, and some strong evidence to the contrary (see the end of the section arguing for Contrastive Analysis).

We come now to more specific arguments raised by John McWhorter against the OUSD’s “translation approach,” as he calls it. I’ll use the brief summary from his (1997) paper as my point of reference, but his (1998) book provides further details, especially in chapter 8 (201–261).

McWhorter's first argument is that "Black English is not different enough from standard English to be the cause of the alarming reading scores among black children" (1997: 2). However, the argument made by many linguists is that while there are indeed some major differences, it is precisely the many subtle differences between the two varieties that cause students difficulty in reading and especially in writing when they fail to recognize that they are switching between systems (Stewart 1964; Taylor 1989).

McWhorter dubs this latter position "Ebonics II"—especially to the extent that the subtle differences are negatively viewed and stigmatized by teachers—and he calls it a "thoroughly reasonable position." However, he still feels that the concerns could be better addressed by having students learn Standard English via immersion. But "immersion" is already the method in use in most urban school districts; and the results, as noted above, are not encouraging. Moreover, in the homes and communities where the students spend most of their time when not in school, Ebonics is widely heard and spoken, so "immersion" in Standard English on the model of students who go to another country for immersion in the language of that country is quite impractical.

McWhorter's other concerns include the claim that students speaking other dialects (e.g., Brooklyn, Appalachian, or rural Southern white English) "are not taught standard English as a foreign language, even though the latter is extremely similar to Black English. To impose translation exercises on black children implies that they are not as intelligent as white children" (1997: 2). To which I would retort that students from these other dialect areas often do have language arts and other educational problems that may well relate to their language differences. To the extent that this is so, I would rather give them the same benefit of linguistically informed bidialectal methods than deny the latter to everyone. Moreover, I am not convinced by the "intelligence insulting" argument. Nothing is more stultifying than the devastating rates of school failure with existing methods shown in section 2. If Contrastive Analysis and bidialectal education help to alleviate and even reverse the situation, as the evidence suggests, they are worth the effort.

McWhorter also argues that "the reason African American children fail disproportionately in school is due to declining school quality and the pathologies of the inner city" (1997: 2). I would agree that the (primarily) urban schools in which African Americans receive their education are indeed worse off than the ones in which whites do, in general terms (see Rickford 1999a: 5–8), but I would still argue that, other things being equal, an approach that took students' language into account, as the Contrastive Analysis approach does, is still more likely to succeed than one that does not.

McWhorter's biggest argument is that there are at least nine studies, including Melmed (1971), Nolen (1972), Marwit and Neumann (1974), and Simons and Johnson (1974), that show that "dialect readers have no effect whatsoever on African American students' reading scores." (Rickford 1999a: 2). But notwith-

standing the fact that these are all nonlongitudinal, one-time studies, and that the only longitudinal dialect reader study involving African-American students (Simpkins and Simpkins 1981) shows very positive results, the crucial point to be noted is that Oakland never proposed using dialect readers in their language arts programs. The SEP program that was to be their primary implementation vehicle used Contrastive Analysis rather than dialect readers as their method of choice. McWhorter does not cite one empirical study that provides evidence against the efficacy of the Contrastive Analysis, bidialectal approach, and we have already seen several arguments and significant experimental evidence in its favor.

Summary and conclusion. My goal in this paper has been to sketch the outlines of a recent major public debate involving language and education—the Oakland school district’s resolutions about taking Ebonics into account in teaching Standard English and the language arts—and to summarize the linguistic and pedagogical arguments in favor of and against Contrastive Analysis, the major strategy that they planned to implement. My own preference for the kind of innovative methods the OUSD proposed is probably obvious. I am led to this both because of the obvious failures of existing methods that make no reference to the vernacular, and show no concern for bidialectalism, and by the arguments in favor of Contrastive Analysis approaches, especially the empirical evidence of their success where they have been given time to succeed.

But I am not wedded to this method, and I even tend to feel, with respect to writing at the secondary school level, for instance, that we do have to tackle larger conceptual and organizational problems rather than getting bogged down in grammatical minutiae. Some recent high school writing samples I have seen do indeed have several intrusions from the vernacular into what was supposed/expected to be a Standard English text. But if all those were converted to Standard English immediately, the writing would be no less poor, and we can’t fix the minor mechanical issues and ignore the larger conceptual ones. I think the kinds of Contrastive Analysis methods that the OUSD proposed to follow will be most useful and effective at the elementary and middle school levels, and I think that given the myriad problems with existing approaches, the OUSD deserved to be free to experiment with other alternatives.

Regrettably, it must be reported that in early 2001, four years after the OUSD took America and the world by storm with its Ebonics proposals, much of the vigor of that early drive has gone. Key personnel such as Superintendent Carolyn Getridge and School Board Member Toni Cook are no longer in those positions, and the SEP, while still practiced by a valiant few, is no longer a favored district-wide strategy. It is true that personnel from the OUSD partnered with William Labov and others from the University of Pennsylvania in a million-dollar study of “African American Literacy and Culture,” but the OUSD component was mostly focused on cultural and general pedagogical strategies rather than specific

language-related ones. The SEP itself is very much on the ropes in California, with funding for the annual conference and oversight by personnel in the state superintendent's office no longer available.

At the same time, linguistically aware and committed personnel such as Folasade Oladele remain in the district, and they have been trying, through teacher education sessions, to sensitize teachers to the regularities of African-American vernacular and the value of taking it into account in teaching Standard English. The prospects for larger-scale efforts involving linguists are promising.

NOTES

1. This article was reprinted in *Rethinking Schools* (an urban education journal), vol. 12, no. 1, fall 1997, 27, and in the book-length version of that issue (Perry and Delpit 1998).
2. Casserly's tables also included results for Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Alaskan/Native American/Other students. Of these other groups, the Hispanic students' reading scores were most comparable to those of the African-American students. Thirty-two percent of them scored above the fiftieth percentile at the K-6 grade level, 30.4 percent did so at the middle school level, and 24.2 percent did so at the high school level.
3. More precisely, the hearing was before the United States Senate Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, chaired by Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.).
4. Eastin's comment appeared in the *San Jose Mercury* newspaper, 20 December 1996, 1A, in an article by Frances Dinkelspiel titled, "Black Language Policy in Oakland: Talk of the Town."
5. In this paper, as in Rickford (1999c), I will use Ebonics and African-American Vernacular English or Black English as essentially equivalent. Despite claims that they are different (see, e.g., Smith 2001), especially insofar as Ebonics is claimed to be an African variety and NOT a dialect of English, the features cited as representative of these different varieties are virtually identical, as noted in Rickford (1999c).
6. The date of production of the handbook (which is not necessarily followed in all California schools that use the SEP approach) is unclear (in my copy at least), although it appears to be sometime in the 1980s. Its authors/contributors are listed in the acknowledgments (4) as: Sue Boston, Audrey Guess Knight, Yvonne Strozier, Rex Fortune, and Orlando Taylor. Taylor is a Howard University linguist and speech pathologist who has contributed to the study of Ebonics for decades, and who testified before the United States Senate panel on Ebonics in January 1997. He is also one of the coeditors of Adger, Christian, and Taylor (1999).
7. In view of its explicit Standard English orientation, it is especially ironic that California Senate Bill 205 was introduced in 1997 to kill the SEP program, on the argument that it was important for students to master Standard English. Fortunately, the bill died in a state senate committee on April 7, 1997.
8. The LSA resolution, approved on January 3, 1997 is reprinted in Perry and Delpit (1998: 160-161), Baugh (2000: 117-118), and Crawford (2001: 358-359). The AAAL resolution was approved on March 11, 1997, and the TESOL resolution on March 10, 1997.
9. I received two requests in the winter of 2000 to speak to Palo Alto high school students studying August Wilson's *Fences* about the pervasive African-American vernacular in his plays.
10. As Van Keulen, Weddington, and DeBose (1998: 243) note: "when teachers accept Black students' home language and use books, other materials, and activities that incorporate their culture, teachers signal their recognition of Black students' values and concern for their self-esteem.

Self-esteem and confidence are very important to academic success because students with high self-esteem will have the confidence to take on new challenges in reading, writing, and other academic tasks.”

11. Students in the bidialectal group generally had lower absolute scores (particularly in the 1996–97 year) than students in the control group, although it is striking that the bidialectal group was able to surpass the control group in their posttest performance in 1995.
12. The AEMP involves more than Contrastive Analysis, including language experience approaches, whole language, and an Afrocentric curriculum. But at the heart of it is respect for students’ home languages and comparison of African-American language and Standard American English structures. For more information, see LeMoine (2001).
13. For instance, at the 109th Street school, African-American students in the experimental AEMP (n = 12) had mean scores of 21 and 24 on the reading and language components of the SAT-9, whereas a comparison group of African-American students who were not in the AEMP (n = 104) had lower mean scores of 16 and 20, respectively.

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