

Teaching Standard English Composition to  
Speakers of Black English Vernacular

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What is Standard English? Who knows? Even the "experts" disagree. But the speaker of a non-standard dialect such as BEV knows that whenever he receives a paper back from a teacher, it is bloody with ink marks--his precious thoughts have been massacred! Somehow his writing differs fundamentally from whatever is accepted as "normal" or "proper" English by the middle-class-white world.

If the teacher of composition begins to observe the student's papers carefully, it is obvious that many of the errors which a BEV speaker makes in grammar, syntax, and spelling are highly systematic. He is using the internalized forms of a dialect of Standard English which appears to have developed as a consequence of the slave trade in America.

The black people who were brought to this country in the hold of cargo ships spoke many different African languages because they were from many different sections of Africa. According to diaries and other documents from the period, often slaves who spoke the same African language were separated, to lessen the chance that they could plan a revolt.

Research done by William Stewart and J.L. Dillard<sup>1</sup> seems to indicate that BEV originated when the captives began to invent a form of pidgin English so they could communicate with each other. This pidgin language became a creole when it was passed on to the slave children born in this country.

Creole languages, because their main function is communication, not accuracy, tend to simplify the structure of the dominant language of the culture. They generally have no consonant clusters at the end of words; they have no past tense or tense in verbs; they have no copulative be; and they have no inflected possessives. Black English, which has all the characteristics of a creole language, ranges in present day

America all the way from pure Creole to Standard English, depending on the socio-economic background of the speaker.

The careful composition teacher will notice that many of the pronunciation features of BEV become grammatical problems when students begin to write. Because of consonant cluster deletion,<sup>2</sup> the student often omits ed past tense markers, s present tense markers, s possessive markers, and s plural markers.

He may delete the copula be wherever Standard English contracts: e.g., He here for He's here. He often uses the habitual or onvariant be whenever Standard English would use a form of be plus an adverb of duration: e.g., He be tired for He's always tired. He uses "will" or "would" plus "be" in situations where Standard English would not do so: e.g., In a few weeks it be Christmas or The dogs would bite each other and they be tearing at each other. He may use "been" or "done" plus the past form of the verb: e.g., I been had him for six months now or I done wrote that yesterday.

The uses of ain't and multiple negation have been easily observable features of BEV for many years, but until recently teachers had been unaware that such usage is not substandard to the black student; it may be a regional feature of the dialect he has spoken since childhood. It may be relatively easy for the teacher to outlaw the use of ain't in SE composition, but the avoidance of multiple negation may be very difficult for the BEV speakers to realize. It is no simple task for a student to go from sentences like: We ain't never had no money notime nohow to even simple, ordinary double negation. The student who achieves merely double negation has accomplished quite a feat! Negatives pose yet another problem in composition for BEV speakers. The structure of BEV calls for a negativized auxiliary at the beginning of a sentence: e.g., Can't nobody say I wasn't wrong or Ain't none of them here notime. The teacher needs to be alert to all these problems with negatives.

Two other syntactical patterns of BEV cause difficulty for students attempting to write Standard English. (1) in a BEV sentence which has a proper noun for a subject, many students use pronominal apposition: e.g., Mary she don't never eat dinner or John I don't never see him. (2) BEV inverts the standard order of imbedded questions: e.g., The man want to ask can I stay here or She asked would you dance with her.

Several pronunciation features of BEV may cause severe spelling and reading problems for the student.<sup>3</sup> BEV is "r-less"; it tends to reduce consonant clusters; it loses final dentals after vowels; and it has a loss of consonants in unaccented syllables. These pronunciation features create a whole set of homophones for the BEV speaker which do not exist in Standard English. The teacher who is unaware of the pronunciation patterns of BEV may interpret the many spelling errors on the paper as an impossible teaching difficulty, when the problem may be related much more to pronunciation than to spelling at all.

What methods can be helpful to the teacher who wants to help a BEV speaker achieve the SE composition skills which will be required of him at every phase of his adult life? Richard Bailey says in an article included in Varieties of Present-Day English<sup>4</sup> that the first thing an instructor must do is to restrain the critical impulse. Any student will become discouraged if he is faced with a barrage of red marks even though his paper may seem to the teacher to merit such treatment. Many students who are highly verbal, even articulate, outside the classroom become nearly unable to express themselves on paper if accuracy becomes much more important than fluency in the eyes of the teacher. Before any teaching can be done, the student must know that the teacher respects his language as a marvelous system for communication of his ideas and experiences.

The teacher who achieved rapport with the student can then begin to diagnose composition problems realistically. Look at the overall composition. Does the student have a sense of form? Bailey observes in his article that it is far easier to teach accuracy to a student who understands the "form" of written English (i.e., the feeling for where sentences should begin and end) than it is to teach "form" to a student who has been drilled endlessly in accuracy.

After ascertaining the question of the student's knowledge of "form," the teacher should examine the student's paper for types of errors, and label the ones which are sharp features--i.e., those which are considered the most flagrant deviations from Standard English usage. These errors will probably occur where BEV pronunciation conflicts with SE grammar: e.g., plurals, possessives, present tense endings, past tense endings, "ain't" and multiple negatives. The teacher should then concentrate his teaching on the labelled errors by using drills or games of appropriate nature for the age and experience of the student.<sup>5</sup> After the student has sufficient, i.e., thorough, practice with sensitizing himself to the conflict between the SE pattern and the BEV pattern, the teacher can hold the student accountable for that particular grammatical structure in all future compositions. In this way, one by one, the student and teacher can concentrate on the habitual patterns of BEV vernacular which cause the student to experience painful and long-standing difficulty with SE composition.

William Labov notes in Chapter 5 of his Language in the Inner City<sup>6</sup> that we mustn't confuse SE with eloquence or power of expression. He notes a highly logical, persuasive, but non-standard argument by a BEV speaker on the subject of the color of God. He compares that discourse with the self-conscious, empty expression of a college-educated Black adult who was asked about the possibility of visits from the dead in dreams. Labov's point is that much of what we call SE composition style is a matter of fashion--changeable from century to century, even decade to decade. The teacher of SE composition to BEV speakers must, therefore, restrain any tendency to judge the student's language morally or socially, and aim for encouragement of the student's probable natural verballity; but the teacher must also see that the student acquires the accuracy of production of standard grammar, spelling, and syntax which will enable him to achieve his full potential in a society where Standard English is the language of success.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>See Black English by J. L. Dillard (N.Y.: Vintage Books, 1973) for a thorough discussion of the various theories of the origin of BEV.

<sup>2</sup>The following list of BEV grammatical and syntactical features which conflict with SE is taken from materials prepared by Dr. Louis A. Arena, Director of the Writing Center, University of Delaware.

<sup>3</sup>See Jay L. Robinson, "The Wall of Babel; Or, Up Against the Language Barrier," Varieties of Present-Day English (N.Y.: MacMillan Co., 1973), pp. 413-50.

<sup>4</sup>See Richard W. Bailey, "Write Off Versus Write On: Dialects and the Teaching of Composition," Varieties of Present-Day English (N.Y.: Macmillan Co., 1973), pp. 384-411.

<sup>5</sup>See any articles by Virginia F. Allen for methods and drills suitable for teaching English as a second dialect. Particularly helpful is: "Some Strategies for Teaching Standard English as a Second Dialect," Teaching English as a Second Language and as a Second Dialect (NCTE, 1973).

<sup>6</sup>William Labov, Language in the Inner City: Studies in the BEV (Phila: University of Penn Press, 1972), pp. 213-22.