Teaching BEV Speakers to Write in Standard English

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Last semester a twenty-year-old black undergraduate male enrolled in my section of English Essentials, a mandatory prerequisite to Freshman Composition for students with low verbal SAT scores. The student was unusual in that he had already taken Freshman Composition the year before, his SAT scores having permitted him to enroll. He had received a final grade of D for the course and now signed up for the remedial class of his own volition, hoping to improve his grammar and composition skills. The following is his diagnostic essay:

> In today society the television is a every day social function of learning. Book reading another learning procedure carries just as much weight as watching a television. The television can teach you about many thangs in life, for instance how to react to meeting a new person, how to conduct yourself in a interview, and how you should act a restaurant. In contrast reading a book can help you past a driving test, give you more detail information about a specific subject and more self insurance abour yourself in everyday life.
>
> I like watching the television because it shows the news, it has interesting movies to show and show plenty of sports I like. The television is a learning tool much more different

from reading a book. The process of reading a book I think is more demanding. When you begin to read a book, you have to have peace and quite or else a good sense of consentration. This will be the only way you will remember the metarial you have read. Not only that you must be alble to read you can watch television and be without the ability to read.

Reading a book can help you more than watching a television. If you read offten enough you can develop a second scense. A scense that comes to you and only you from reading. The television it far from helping you achieve this scense of being. The popularity of the television compared to book reading it really hard for me to say. In general one would be lead to think that the television is more popular. Why, its praticaly in everyone's home. How many familys do you know that don't have an television in their home. Well my assumption would be that nearly every family has an television. You can ask the sam question about a books in the family household.
- But I believe people are more apt to watch television then to pick up a book to read.

A new and inexperienced Teaching Assistant, I did not know how to react when I read the essay and later met the student who belonged to the writing; I had been conditioned as an English major to consider such nonstandard speech patterns and grammatical features as indicative of low intelligence, sheer laziness, or even functional illiteracy. I was doubly confounded when I discovered that the other two members of the class were non-native speakers, each spending his first year in the United States. My confidence began to waver.

Unfortunately, the dismay I experienced initially was slight when compared to the hopelessness that swept over me as the semester progressed. As soon as the Black English speaking student had written his first E011 composition, I realized that his diagnostic essay had not been truly representative of his writing capabilities. Not only was that first effort not the sloppy, hastily-written essay I had first assumed it to be, but it was in fact the student's careful, guarded attempt at putting forth a good impression on paper; he had composed it with great pains and great pride. Hence, all subsequent compositions paled in comparison. To make matters worse, the foreign students in the class rapidly and almost effortlessly acquired vocabulary and grammar skills, much to the chagrin of the black student, who struggled on in frustration with but negligible show of improvement. Each class meeting stretched to fill the space of three hours.

As the semester came to an end, I felt a tremendous sense of failure. The black student had worked very diligently, at times spending six to eight hours to produce a jumbled, sometimes incomprehensible composition. But, while I had done my best to teach him how to write in standard, grammatical English, something had been missing from the very start. I realized too late that the errors he continually made were not really those we had discussed--and I had dwelled on--in class. I, like his Composition teacher, had been incapable of locating his central problem and working it through with him. I felt almost guilty as I read his final essay and admitted to myself that he lacked several very basic skills.

This fall I was approached in the University Writing Center by a number of similar Black English speaking students, each frustrated and confused by his inability to express himself in what his Composition teacher could only vaguely refer to as "correct" or "proper" English. These students felt they were fighting against unbeatable odds, struggling to bridge a gap they could not themselves understand. Again I was helpless, able in each case only to tell the student that his ideas were sound but his expression "wrong"—and not to explain why.

With the memory of recent hopelessness and inadequacy still fresh in my mind, I set out to learn the inherent differences between Standard English and that unique dialect which most of us know in name only, the Black English Vernacular. The following pages represent the essence of my findings, the culmination of extensive research and consultation with Professor Louis A. Arena, who teaches "Teaching Standard English in the Inner City" at the University of Delaware. Hopefully this information will provide a very basic but very badly needed introduction to a phenomenon often encountered but frequently misunderstood by composition teachers untrained in linguistics in general and in the existence of BEV in particular.

The Black English Vernacular

Black English is not simply "bad" English, indicative of low intelligence, confused thought patterns, or illiteracy; rather, it represents an individual, legitimate, and cohesive linguistic system in and of itself. Unlike other dialects, which are simply slight variations of Standard English, the Black English Vernacular (BEV) has its own very strict grammatical and pronunciation rules, which depart systematically from those of standard usage.

It is not feasible, nor necessarily useful, to detail here the history and psychology behind Black English; however, it is important that the dialect be recognized as a true language form, reflective of an individual subculture of American society. This form adheres to syntactic and phonological regulations alien to standard speech and consequently does not conform to what the white man considers "proper" or "acceptable." On another level, even the thought structures of the BEV student seem to deviate from those of the average white student because thought and language are so intimately bound. As a result, the BEV speaker encounters difficulty in both spoken and written communication; the concepts he expresses clearly according to the code of his own quasi-language are often interpreted as the tangled, incomprehensible ramblings of an imbecile. In the words of Jim Haskins, author of Diary of a Harlem Schoolteacher: "Perhaps the most defining and confining element in the ghetto subculture is language, for language produces and structures thought. . . . Different modes of speech produce different modes of thought; hence the inability of two groups who have different modes of speech to communicate effectively."[1]

The ramifications of this sociolinguistic phenomenon on college writing are complex and initially staggering. The BEV student has almost invariably been born, raised, and educated up to college age by members of his dialect environment. While he has but minimal difficulty comprehending and being understood in the spoken word, he is faced with a new and frightening problem once inside the college composition course: his written expression, perfectly satisfactory to BEV high school teachers, is no longer acceptable. His ideas are ignored, camouflaged by the cover of apparent ignorance.

Adhering to a variant set of basic features, the BEV speaker encounters his first obstacle in reading; textbooks and scholarly publications are

always written in highly stylized, formal English. Subsequently, his interpretation of printed material is distorted to a certain degree, and he requires greater time for digestion of concepts. Even when a product of long and diligent struggle, the understanding arrived at by the BEV reader is not necessarily valid. The result is frustration and, possibly, the eventual disintegration of ambition.

When we understand that this fundamental obstacle exists at the grass roots level, it becomes easy for us to fathom the whole of the problem facing the Black English student. Not only are his cultural background and vocabulary at variance with those of the average student, but his thought structures and powers of comprehension are different as well. Thus he must essentially learn and practice fresh rules for communication, in much the same way the foreign student does. The process is much more complex and troublesome than even that of a foreign student, however. The BEV student is an American who has been functioning as an English speaker all of his life; hence he must learn a second, alternate code to exist side by side with his present one. To a certain degree, then, he must be "deprogrammed," must have his knowledge torn down rather than constructed on newly-formed foundations. In short, the Black English student must learn a new language, separate from the one spoken by his family and friends--in some cases solely for the purpose of a freshman composition course.

While it would be inaccurate to imply that Black English is a system entirely apart from other English dialects, it is important to realize that the vernacular's distinct rules make it the most complicated, if not the most independent, of systems. Further, BEV rules governing syntax, vocabulary, and pronunciation have proven the dialect to be not artibrary, as formerly believed, but rather as rigid and as controlled as any genuine language system.[2] These rules lend BEV internal cohesion and qualify it a separate subsystem in equilibrium. The rules may not be moved or altered individually; the balance is such that several interrelated rules must shift together.[3]

In addition to obvious distinctions in pronunciation, there are several unshared grammatical features which characterize BEV alone and determine the structure of the dialect in written and speech communication. Moreover, some patterns reflect an intersection of grammar and pronunciation variations. The most significant Black English features are found in the dialect's verb system and, most specifically, in the BEV tense system and treatment of the verb to be.

Of course it is impossible for the sake of relative brevity to investigate the entire, complex linguistic system manifested in what we call Black English; a great number of lengthy scholarly treatments are now being devoted to just that endeavor. However, it is feasible to shed light on six basic features which occur most frequently and which perhaps reflect the sharpest stratification of English, as follows: BEV use of the invariant be, absence of copula, absence of the -ed past tense marker, absence of the -s suffix, consonant cluster deletion, and use of multiple negation. Admittedly, these phenomena represent only a sample, but they may be used nevertheless to demonstrate the sorts of problems encountered in typical Black English compositions. Once such problems have been acknowledged and explained according to the regulations behind them, the BEV student can see in a new light his deviations from Standard English. When

this has been accomplished, using models of each dialect's usage, the student is ready to undertake code-shifting in his writing, switching from the rules of his spoken dialect to those of Standard English. Thus he is able not only to retain the dignity of his family and culture, but also to articulate his ideas "properly," according to the rules and syntactic patterns of Standard English. Consequently, his seemingly jumbled thoughts can become untangled, clear ones, and his compositions fluent and understandable.

Features of BEV

I. Invariant "be"

Standard English sentences frequently use the five variant inflected forms of the verb to be as a main verb. The speaker rarely uses the infinitive form be alone, except in the case of imperative constructions. For example:

SE: I am the captain of the basketball team.
Paula is in the fourth grade.
The Black Knights are the best players.
Sean was the loudest boy at the party.
Joan and Philip were in the clubhouse.
BUT Be reasonable.

In Black English, on the other hand, the invariant form be is often used as a main verb, regardless of the subject of the sentence, as follows:

BEV: Sometimes she be mad at me when I leave.
I be there at four o'clock most likely.

There are two sources for the occurrence of the be form in BEV: non-tense usage and will be and would be contraction deletion.[4] According to the former BEV rule, the form is acceptable for use without specification to tense, to indicate an action or object distributed intermittently in time.[5] This phenomenon is peculiar to speakers of Black English and is therefore usually misunderstood by Standard English composition teachers. Our first tendency is to wrongly interpret the be form as a lazy or ignorant substitute for one of the present tense forms, am, is, or are. In actuality, this is far from the truth; the student means to signify an action or state which occurs from time to time only, but is misinterpreted to indicate a permanent quality. Thus we fail to recognize the systematic grammatical deviation at hand and discount the be form as simply "wrong." The following example illustrates this all-too-familiar discrepancy between intended meaning and understood meaning:

BEV statement: I be good.
SE interpretation: I am good.
Intended meaning: Sometimes I am good.

The second explanation for the BEV be form occurrence involves the Standard English contraction of the forms will be and would be. Because be begins with a labial consonant, the contraction 'll is occasionally deleted in Standard English speech. In the case of BEV speakers, however, this phenomenon is common in written communication as well as spoken. Again, the teacher of composition can easily misconstrue the writer's message when this occurs, reading a present tense construction where a future construction is intended, as follows:

> BEV statement: We be here every Friday night.
> SE interpretation: We are here every Friday night.
> Intended meaning: We will be here every Friday night.

The 'd of the contracted form of would be is either merged with the be following it so as to become indistinguishable or is deleted completely by BEV speakers according to the final d elimination rule, explained below. As a result, as in the case of will be, above, the invariant form be appears alone as a main verb and, as such, may easily be misinterpreted in written communication, as follows:

> BEV statement: I be happy to meet your sister.
> SE interpretation: I am happy to meet your sister.
> Intended meaning: I would be happy to meet your sister.

Thus, because there are three instances in which the Black English speaker uses the invariant be form, any positive statement using that form may conceivably be interpreted three different ways:

> BEV statement: If somebody hit him, Darryl be mad.
> SE interpretation: If somebody hit him, Darryl is mad.
> Possible BEV meanings: If somebody hits him, Darryl is mad.
>   If somebody hits him, Darryl will be mad.
>   If somebody hit him, Darryl would be mad.

It is crucial that the composition teacher realize these significant distinctions between Black English and Standard English conjugation of to be and, more specifically, between meaning possibilities within BEV itself.

II. Copula Absence

As emphasized above, the BEV use of be should never be interpreted in the present tense. Where the present tense forms is and are are necessary, either for present tense construction or as auxiliaries, the Black English speaker often deletes them entirely from his sentence. However, when the subject is I and the expected Standard English form am, the BEV speaker almost invariably pronounces and writes am or its contracted form 'm.[6]

The elimination of is and are reflects the BEV deletion of a contraction discussed above. The general rule of thumb is that the forms is and are may be absent in Black English wherever they can be contracted in Standard English. The resultant differences are as follows:

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SE statements:  I am hungry, or I'm hungry.
BEV statements: I am hungry, or I'm hungry.
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BUT

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SE statements:  That dog is dead. or That dog's dead.
BEV statement:  That dog dead.

SE statements:  You are in trouble or You're in trouble.
BEV statement:  You in trouble.
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While the proper Standard English forms are often grammatically present and acknowledged in writing, many BEV students carry this pronunciation discrepancy over into written expression. Even when proper present tense construction is known, the Black English speaker needs to learn to form possible contractions without completely eliminating the remnants of them in speech and writing.

III. Absence of the "-ed" Past Tense Marker

In some Black English speech, "devoicing" takes place at the end of syllables terminating in the stops b, d, and g. In other words, when these consonants are found at the end of words, they take on the pronunciation of their corresponding voiceless stops, p, t, and k, respectively. For this reason, many BEV speakers pronounce the -ed suffix attached to verb bases ending in a vowel as t, rather than d, as found in other English dialects.[7] The resulting difference in pronunciation may be illustrated as follows:

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SE statement:   Bubby played basketball for one season.
BEV statement:  Bubby playt basketball for one season.
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Moreover, some BEV speakers delete the -ed sound completely when it occurs at the end of a verbal base terminating in a vowel, thus:

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SE statement:   They tried to leave class early.
BEV statement:  They try to leave class early.
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While the first phenomenon is most common in speech, the tendency of most BEV students is to eliminate the -ed marker entirely in written communication. This deletion of the word-final d sound occurs throughout Black English pronunciation but is particularly significant in the case of the past tense suffix; when this fundamentally pronunciation-related problem is carried over into writing, the lack of -ed is not only counted as a misspelling, but is also misinterpreted as an indication of ignorance or violation of tense construction rules. Hence, this feature enters the domain of grammar and becomes a communication impairment to be reckoned with by the teacher of composition.

IV. Absence of the "-s" Inflection

In Standard English the -s inflection is used to indicate noun plurality (1 dog, 2 dogs), the third person singular present tense form

of a verb (John runs, Sally walks), and possession (This was George's desk.) In Black English, however, -s is often absent. While part of this phenomeno may be interpreted as consonant cluster simplification, explained below, it is generally believed that BEV deletion of Standard English -s is simply grammatical fact: in some cases, -s is not part of the underlying grammar of the BEV dialect.[8] While the absence of presence of -s varies greatly according to its grammatical function and the geographic location of the user, the feature does appear enough in writing to be explained here.

The most marked absence of the -s marker can be seen in present tense verb forms where the subject is in the third person singular. -S does not exist in this case in the BEV grammar and thus is not used to mark present tense with third person singular subjects. Rather, the verbs remain the same in the third person singular, as follows:

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SE:  I ride          BEV:  I ride
     you ride               you ride
     he rides               he ride

     I go                   I go
     you go                 you go
     he goes                he go
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This absence of -s results in BEV use of don't for doesn't. For example the auxiliary doesn't for a third person singular subject becomes don't in BE

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SE statement:  He doesn't want to leave.
BEV statement: He don't want to leave.
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Similarly, the third person singular has becomes have, as follows:

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SE statement:  He has a new bike.
BEV statement: He have a new bike.
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This pattern involves all present tense verbs with third person singular subj
Because he is unfamiliar with the grammatical rules of Standard English, the BEV student may overcompensate for the discrepancies he hears in his own speech by adding the -s suffix seemingly at random: I wants, you wants, they wants. These hypercorrect forms must be recognized for what they are: not characteristic features of the BEV dialect, but an attempt to adopt the grammatical rules of Standard English.

In the possessive, the -s marker is also frequently absent. Instead of adding 's, the BEV speaker often indicates possession only by word order, as follows:

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SE statements:  The giant's hand is big.
                This is Joey's car.

BEV statements: The giant hand big.
                This Joey car.
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As with the verb forms discussed above, the -s marker does not appear in BEV absolute possessive constructions because it simply does not exist in the underlying grammar.[9]

It is important to mention that some BEV speakers use <u>mines</u> for Standard English <u>mine</u>, yielding sentences such as these:

> SE statements: This is mine.
> The blue car is mine.
>
> BEV statements: This mine<u>s</u>.
> The blue car mine<u>s</u>.

This form is used as a regularization of the form <u>mine</u> to conform to the other possessive pronoun forms, <u>his</u>, <u>hers</u>, <u>its</u>, <u>yours</u>, <u>ours</u>, and <u>theirs</u>.[10]

While Standard English speakers use the <u>-s</u> (or <u>-es</u>) suffix to indicate plurals, the BEV student occasionally omits the inflection. Thus we see statements such as the following:

> SE statements: Those boy<u>s</u> are too loud.
> My family has three car<u>s</u>.
>
> BEV statements: Those boy too loud.
> My family have three car.

This feature is not always present and varies according to the speaker's geographic location; most Northern BEV dialect users have the plural suffix in their grammar, but some Southern users never use it.[11]

It is interesting that some Black English users form regular plurals with irregular nouns, such as 1 <u>foot</u>, 2 <u>foots</u> and 1 <u>deer</u>, 2 <u>deers</u>. Also, there is a tendency in BEV to add the <u>-s</u> suffix to irregular nouns already pluralized: <u>feets</u>, <u>womens</u>, <u>childrens</u>.

V. <u>Consonant Cluster Deletion</u>

'In Standard English, some consonants are voiced, and others are voiceless, as follows:

> Voiced: pai<u>d</u>, rea<u>l</u>, tu<u>b</u>
>
> Voiceless: audi<u>t</u>, snake<u>s</u>, cu<u>p</u>

In the case of a word-final consonant cluster, each consonant is usually pronounced by the Standard English speaker. However, there are two instances in which the speaker of Black English frequently drops the final letter from a consonant cluster. The general deletion rule is that when the two final consonants are equal in voicing--that is, either both voiced or both voiceless--the final consonant sound is dropped.[12] Subsequently, the BEV speaker pronounces such clusters as follows:

friend $\longrightarrow$	(friend́)	$\longrightarrow$ /frɛn/	
guest $\longrightarrow$	(guesⱦ)	$\longrightarrow$ /gɛs/	´ = voiced
hold $\longrightarrow$	(hold́)	$\longrightarrow$ /hol/	ˇ = voiceless
first $\longrightarrow$	(firsⱦ)	$\longrightarrow$ /fɚs/	

This pronunciation rule presents obvious spelling difficulties for the BEV student and must be explained thoroughly for remediation. Moreover, consonant deletion can lead to even greater problems where it interferes with standard past tense -ed conjugation of verbs ending in consonant clusters. The pronunciation and subsequent grammatical discrepancy which arise in such cases may be illustrated as follows:

burned —→ (bɜrnd́) —→ /bɔrn/ , written burn

asked —→ (aeskɹ̆) —→ /aesk/ , written ask

walked —→ (wolkɹ̆) —→ /wolk/ , written walk

guessed —→ (gɛsɹ̆) —→ /gɛs/ , written guess

It may be noted that the word guess is pronounced exactly the same as guest in Black English. Likewise, the following sets of words or pronounced in BEV as if identical:

cold = coal = cole → /col/

sold = soul = sole → /sol/

rift = riff → /rif/

meant = men → /mɛn/

These homophones present still more difficulties because of the Black English consonant cluster deletion rule; misspellings which result from BEV pronunciation deviations are often interpreted by the composition teacher as incorrect word usage or confused thought, as seen below:

BEV statement: I never like the coal.
Actual meaning: I never liked the cold

BEV statement: I didn't understand what those men.
Actual meaning: I didn't understand what those meant.

In order to remedy the great number of problems arising because of the Black English consonant cluster deletion rule, the teacher of composition must instill in his students a certain linguistic sensitivity, so that they may achieve the sort of "subjective objectivity" necessary for self-correction.

VI. Multiple Negation

It is proper, in certain instances, to use the double negative in Standard English, as follows:

Harold was not unworthy of such extravagant praise.
We are in no way unprepared for the battle.

However, the use of multiple, cumulative negation, characteristic of the Black English Vernacular, represents deep, grammatical error. The

BEV student does not negate his sentences simply by adding or changing one word; nor does he negate two words simply for the sake of emphasis. Rather, he may use two or more negatives as he sees fit, and frequently opts to negate all indefinite words in a given sentence. According to Jim Haskins,

> The black English rule of negation is that a negative is attached to all negatable elements within the same simple sentence. That is, for a negative sentence to be grammatical according to the rules of black English, all indefinite pronouns, all indefinite articles, all indefinite adverbials, and the verbal auxiliary must be made negative: "Nobody ain't never met no ghost nowhere."[13]

While Black English does allow for a variety of possible negative constructions, the sentence quoted by Haskins is valuable because of its illustration through violation of the three rules necessary for correct formation of negative Standard English sentences. For the most part, Standard English speakers construct negative sentences by using but one of these rules, as follows:

Rule 1: Take the first indefinite word before the verb or action word and make it negative.
Example: Somebody broke the cookie jar.
Nobody broke the cookie jar.

Rule 2: Attach the negative to the auxiliary or "helping" verb.
Example: Leroy broke the cookie jar.
Leroy did not break the cookie jar.

Rule 3: Attach the negative to the indefinite after the verb.
Example: Rodney broke something of yours.
Rodney broke nothing of yours.

It is imperative that the BEV speaker realizes Standard English has fewer opportunities for sentence negation. He may more easily assimilate this concept by remembering the following general rule of thumb: One negative word in a Standard English sentence makes the entire sentence negative.

Attitude

From the time the BEV speaker first enters a Standard English environment, he is informed that his use of the language is incorrect and unacceptable. He is labeled, reprimanded, and continually criticized as being uneducated and unintelligible. His teachers constantly correct his grammar and pronunciation, annoyed at being charged with an insurmountable task. Both teacher and student are confounded and resentful, and in many cases the negative view often held by educators becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: the teacher perceives the BEV student as unreachable and unteachable, and so does not attempt that which must necessarily fail. The result is a vicious circle, and in Haskins' words, "many black children never learn standard English in school and thus are essentially denied the economical, social, and vocational success that is the express goal of the public school system vis-à-vis its graduates."[14]

Hence, though the BEV student is repeatedly corrected, he is never actually taught exactly what the seemingly intangible, "correct" way is. In order to successfully teach such a student grammar and composition skills, the teacher must make it his responsibility to learn the history and structure of the Black English dialect. This entails throwing away all preconceived, ultimately racist notions and accepting the Black English dialect for what it is: not necessarily "bad" English, but different English. Thus, he must develop not only a certain emotional sensitivity, but a linguistic sensitivity as well. This is the only way we can hope to bridge any cultural and social gap and to avoid causing resentment on either side.

As stated above, the BEV speaker recognizes his handicap as soon as he enters the Standard English environment. He feels frightened and linguistically inferior, certain in the knowledge that his language will prove professionally, as well as socially and educationally, retarding. Thus, he is eager in most cases, at least at the college level, to learn "proper" usage and "acceptable" means of communicating. The teacher's sensitivity need not extend so far as to make apologies for the necessity of Standard English or allowance for Black English, nor to ignore the fundamental problem at hand. The best attitude to adopt is one of frankness tempered with tact: this sort of honesty puts both teacher and student at ease and allows class members to examine the two conflicting dialects with relative objectivity, free of embarrassment or hostility.

Application

As emphasized above, the composition teacher must acquire at least a basic understanding of the underlying rules of Black English in order to teach students of that dialect to write well. Once this has been achieved, and the proper attitude adopted, he can design composition units which allow the BEV student to develop his writing abilities while standardizing his grammar and pronunciation. It is my belief that the practice of teaching composition through grammar and then back through composition again is the most practical and efficient method for developing in students successful composition skills; since each has such direct bearing on the other, grammar and composition cannot by any means be separated, but must be taught in conjunction with one another. Further, a syllabus incorporating such a methodology is, I believe, essential for teaching Black English speaking students the code-switching capacities necessary for cogent expression in Standard English.

The teacher must first closely analyze the diagnostic essays of his black students and classify their errors in much the same way Mina Shaughnessy suggests in Errors and Expectations (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). In all probability, the major errors found will be those described above; at any rate, however, they should be arranged in order of severity and frequency of occurrence. From here the teacher can design his semester syllabus or schedule for individualized instruction, beginning at the outset of the semester with writing problems indicating sharpest stratification and working his way down through the less serious difficulties.

It is necessary for the BEV student to learn the essential differences, grammatical and phonological, between his spoken dialect and formal Standard English. For this reason, I would suggest carefully outlining the underlying rules for each, with particular emphasis on Standard English. From this foundation the student can more successfully build his sentence skills, first identifying the features of his speech and later switching in his writing from that grammar to the grammar of Standard English. Code-switching exercises

must be provided for sufficient practice with each feature on the sentence level.

When the student has sufficiently mastered the rules and applications of the feature being covered, it is necessary to reinforce his learning by designing composition assignments which allow him to exercise his newly-acquired skills. For example, the composition corresponding to an _-ed_ past tense marker unit may be written completely in the past tense; the multiple negation feature may be consciously translated into Standard English negation within the context of a composition written to persuade the reader _against_ a particular action--in the negative where at all possible.

Since the BEV student often experiences an inordinate amount of writing anxiety because of his linguistic insecurity, it is crucial that the composition teacher put him at ease wherever possible. For this reason, I suggest providing the student with thought-provoking, even controversial subject matter, eliciting an emotional response and thus making the invention process much easier. This sort of assignment encourages fluency and allows the student-to concentrate more fully in his final draft on the mechanics and structure of his writing. Also, class discussion of subject matter, as well as the exchange and discussion of student compositions wherever possible allows for greater openness and student involvement; in such a potentially sensitive situation, some BEV students are uncomfortable or inhibited and may be most receptive to criticism and explanations from their peers.

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Notes

[1] Jim Haskins, "Black English as a True Language Form," in The Psychology of Black Language (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), pp. 39-40.

[2] Haskins, p. 40.

[3] William Labov, "Is the Black English Vernacular a Separate System?" in Language in the Inner City (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), p. 38.

[4] Ralph W. Fasold and Walter A. Wolfram, "Some Linguistic Features of Negro Dialect," in Contemporary English, ed. David L. Shores (New York: J. B.Lippincott Company, 1972), p. 72.

[5] William Labov, "Contraction, Deletion, and Inherent Variability of the English Copula," in Language in the Inner City, p. 73.

[6] Fasold and Wolfram, pp. 73-75.

[7] Fasold and Wolfram, p. 63.

[8] Labov, "Some Features of the English of Black Americans," in Varieties of Present-Day English, ed. Richard W. Bailey and Jay L. Robinson (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1973), p. 250.

[9] Labov, "Some Features of the English of Black Americans," p. 253.

[10] Fasold and Wolfram, pp. 80-81.

[11] Fasold and Wolfram, pp. 81-82.

[12] Louis A. Arena, University of Delaware, in an interview, Fall 1980.

[13] Haskins, p. 41.

[14] Haskins, p. 43.

Further Reading

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