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To
JOHN HAMILTON McWHORTER IV
(1927–1996)

Thank you, Dad,
for teaching me how to play with both hands.
CHAPTER EIGHT

Dialect in the Headlines
Black English in the Classroom?

We have seen how the claim by some educators that Black English is an African language with English words is based on an overly broad conception of language mixture, equating what we have called Level Three mixture, which produces pidgins and creoles, with Level Two mixture, in which languages merely dust each other the way a bee flying away from a flower leaves behind pollen that brushed off its legs while it was drinking.

We also saw that this depiction has been central to a decades-old call to present African-American children with standard English as a foreign language, an issue that most recently came to public attention when espoused by the Oakland Unified School Board in December 1996. This approach had actually first been promoted by white investigators of Black English back in the late 1960s, in response to already alarming discrepancies in scholastic performance between white and black children.

People often asked, “Wasn’t that just a way of trying to get their hands on bilingual education money?” after the dust settled on the Oakland controversy. In fact, the advocates of this approach share a genuine conviction that the failure rate of Black children is due, to a significant extent, to the differences between Black English and standard English. They believe black children are faced with the task of learning to translate at the same time as they acquire the basic ability to
decode written material, discouraging them and planting the seeds for a later general disaffection from school.

To remedy this, these scholars, soon followed by many black educators and linguists, proposed that African-American children be first taught to read and write in Black English, in the same way that children speaking foreign languages, like Spanish or Cantonese, are taught in bilingual education programs. The idea is that black children will benefit from being able to acquire basic reading skills without the extra burden of translating into and out of standard English. Afterward, the children are to be taught standard English, using Black English as a bridge, with special attention paid to the differences between the two dialects and conventions for switching from one to the other. The general goal is to preserve black children’s enthusiasm for learning and encourage greater success in higher grades.

Supporters suppose that the black child accustomed to simplified consonant clusters as in tes’ and des’ is confused when encountering the words test and desk in print; that the black child accustomed to saying dat will be confused when in school they learn that begins with a different sound than dog; that the black child who would often say she walk funny will be confused by the requirement in standard English to mark third person singular verbs with -s; that the black child accustomed to be-less sentences like She my sister will be troubled by the use of to be in standard English equivalents; that the black child accustomed to I can’t see nothin’ will be disoriented in the classroom when confronted with I don’t see anything.

Presented to people with no background knowledge about dialects or Black English, nothing could seem saner than proposals like these. The picture is different when we place the idea within a global perspective on languages and dialects, how children learn them, how Black English is used, and conclusions from experimental research.

**“WHAT DID THEY WANT TO DO?”: HOW BLACK ENGLISH IS BROUGHT INTO THE CLASSROOM**

Before proceeding, it will be useful to answer a question which came up often during the Oakland controversy—namely, “What exactly do they want to do?” It was unfortunate that the Oakland resolution referred to “instructing African-American children both in their primary language and in English,” because this created a public misimpression that the intention was to teach Black English itself rather than simply use it as a bridge to standard English. This same misimpression had to scuttle attempts to use the “bridging” approach in the past, such as in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in the early 1980s. Thinking of these programs as attempting to teach “in Black English,” African-American parents have often suspected that such programs would interfere with furnishing children with a command of standard English, vital to success in American society.

In fact, however, no one has ever suggested the bizarre spectacle of teaching classes in “jive” and outlining rules for multiple negation on the blackboard. Advocates of the bridging approach are well aware that most African-American children have already learned fluent Black English at home. It is precisely this that they view as a problem, in that they suppose that for black children, this nonstandard dialect constitutes a barrier to learning to speak, read, and write in the standard dialect.

An emblem of the bridging approach is the dialect reader, with reading selections written in Black English rather than standard English. Houghton-Mifflin aborted an initial experimental run of such readers in the late seventies after vociferous protests from parents, but there have been various versions of such materials used in scattered locations since. These readers emphasize material in Black English by celebrated African-American authors, such as poetry by Maya Angelou. Material also includes translated passages such as the “Shirley and the Valentine Card” story so familiar to us now, and selections like the following:

- It’s the night before Christmas, and here in our house, It ain’t nothing moving, not even no mouse. There go we-all stockings, hanging high up off the floor, So Santa Claus can fill them up, if he walk in through our door.

A second component of the bridging approach is drills in contrastive analysis, in which students transform sentences in Black English into standard English, such as transforming “brush your teeth” into “brush your teeth,” and “Michael Jackson be dancing” into “Michael Jackson dances often.” Teachers are generally encouraged to write the Black
English sentences on the blackboard and have students translate them; such drills have also been written in a workbook format. A related exercise entails playing tape recordings of spoken Black English and having children orally translate the passages into standard English.

In situational appropriateness drills, students are given sentences in Black or standard English and asked to choose whether such sentences would be best used “Talking to good friends” or “Talking to the principal,” “Cheering at the baseball game” or “Asking directions of a stranger,” etc. In some programs, students of various ethnic backgrounds in the same classroom are encouraged to work together to classify sentences according to dialect.

In addition, the Standard English Proficiency program trains teachers to recognize the systematicity of Black English and how it differs from standard English. Teachers are taught to treat Black English positively, providing standard English as an addition to the student’s home dialect rather than as a replacement for it.

Indeed, then, presenting standard English to black children as a foreign language was by no means a new idea when it hit international headlines in late 1996. On the contrary, its advocates, a multifarious assemblage of linguists, education theorists, school administrators, and teachers, have long seen it as a gorgeous idea denied a fair shake. Widely trumpeted from the late 1960s through the 1970s, the bridging approach scored a seeming victory in Ann Arbor in 1979, when a ruling required the district to institute dialect readers, judging in favor of a group of African-American mothers who charged that their school district had neglected the linguistic needs of their children. Protests from other black parents, combined with bureaucratic inertia, ultimately squelched this plan, but over the years, its proponents have remained committed and have instituted other versions elsewhere.

What is worrisome, however, is the tone of their conviction. Advocates of using Black English in the classroom see this approach not as an idea up for discussion, but as justice incarnate. To the extent that linguists or educators have suggested abandoning the approach, it has only been out of despairing that the public will ever understand the true motives of the program, in the same way as nineteenth-century abolitionists, though racially tolerant themselves, ruefully urged free blacks to leave the country rather than suffer permanent vilification from other whites. Just as some feminists have dismissed even intelligent criticism as simply a failure to “get it,” with “it” considered too obviously correct to require explanation, any critic of the bridging approach is considered at best underinformed, or at worst, rudely insensitive to the plight of the disadvantaged.

As a result, no linguist other than myself would be caught dead publicly criticizing the use of Black English in the classroom. By no means do I intend to imply any noble bravery on my part. No one was more surprised than I was to find that I was alone in dissent, because as we shall see later, I have only been alone when the cameras were rolling.

Perhaps this makes it even more important that I believe that bringing Black English into the classroom, far from being cosmically anointed, would in large part be a well-intentioned but misguided policy. Armed with the information provided in previous chapters, the reader will be able to form their own position based on the advocates’ perspectives and mine. Only in this way, whatever our final conclusion, can we truly “get it.”

**BLACK ENGLISH IN THE CLASSROOM**

Nonstandard Dialects in School Worldwide

We will begin by examining the basic claim of advocates of bringing Black English into the classroom. They claim:

The poor scholastic performance of African-American children is due, in considerable degree, to the differences between Black English and standard English, which make it difficult for African-American children to learn to read the latter.

It is supposed that generations of black children have been shafted by this hitherto unacknowledged linguistic gulf, “bringing a different language to the classroom,” as it has often been put. Advocates support this by presenting lists of the differences between Black and standard English. These differences are real, and, in themselves, demonstrate the systematicity of the dialect. What has been lost in the discussion of the issue, however, are two facts: (1) Most children around the world bring a nonstandard speech variety to the classroom, without these varieties impeding them from learning to speak, read, and write in the standard dialect; and (2) in a great many cases, the nonstandard varieties are
much further from the standard dialect than Black English is from standard English.

Part of the reason bridging advocates attach so much import to the small differences between Black and standard English is that America is a relatively homogenous place when it comes to dialects. There are few dialects that standard speakers could not understand after a brief period of adjustment at most, and therefore it is natural that the gap between Black and standard English looms large in our eyes. However, we have learned in this book that a "language" is actually a bundle of dialects, most of them home language and one of them standard. Children in many countries have always effortlessly made dialect jumps in school that dwarf the one inch between Black and standard English. From a global perspective of what children are capable of, then, African-American children are being vastly underestimated.

One of many, many examples is Germany. The Hochdeutsch ("high German") which Americans learn in school is the standard variety, but in much of the country, the local speech is so different from this that people who speak only standard can barely understand the dialects, if at all. Throughout Germany, children bring a different language to the classroom—but this is not considered a problem. Children acquire the standard dialect in school, this being conceived of as one of its principal functions, and they leave speaking, reading, and writing standard German.

For example, the local dialect of Stuttgart, Schwäbisch (SHVAY-bish), is so far from standard German that it is barely comprehensible to standard speakers. Here is a comparison:

Blow your nose, Luisle! You don’t need to worry. I’ll pay for everything. All you have to do is promise me that you won’t tell anybody who the father is.


Here is the Schwäbisch version:


Even without knowing German, it is clear the gap between standard German and Schwäbisch is as large as the one between standard and Black English, and actually somewhat wider. Deine Nase (dinah NAH-zuh) ‘your nose’ in the standard is simply dei Nas (dye nas) in Schwäbisch; similarly ich ‘I’ is i, zahl ‘pay’ is zahl, versprechen ‘promise’ is versprecha. These are the same kinds of simplified consonant clusters and absent final consonants and vowels that African-American children bring to school. Just as black children bring dat to the classroom instead of that, Stuttgart children bring putz instead of putz ‘wipe,’ isch (ish) ‘is’ instead of ist. Other differences are even larger than any between standard and Black English: Where standard German has haben (hah-bin) for “have,” Schwäbisch has hau (hah-oo); where standard German has kein (kine) for “none of,” Schwäbisch has ko; where standard German has sagst (zakst) for “you say,” Schwäbisch has saisch (zye-sh).

Despite these obvious significant differences, there is no bridging between Schwäbisch and standard German—no dialect readers, no translation exercises, no situational appropriateness drills. And yet, contrary to what the bridging advocates would predict, there is no educational crisis in Stuttgart. The philosophy is that children learn the standard dialect through immersion in it, and they do. Children there pass through the school system and come out speaking, reading, and writing good standard German. If German children do this without a thought, then this suggests that African-American children, all things being equal, are capable of doing the same.

Indeed, all things are not equal—Stuttgart dialect is not as devalued by general society as Black English is, and the peaceful little Kinder speaking it do not labor under the sociological burdens many black children do. Closer to home, while Mae West could crow in 1934 that she had been “talkin’ Brooklyn” for a long time and was “gonna continue talkin’ it” when there was the threat of a “speech policeman” being installed in Hollywood, Black English is viewed in such a way that this kind of spontaneous linguistic pride is harder for most African-Americans to muster. However, for many advocates of bridging, the issue seems to be conceived as:

A. Black English is devalued.
B. Many black children’s lives make school a low priority for them.
C. Therefore, black children need translation to acquire standard English.

Clearly, however, this is a jumping of the track—C simply does not follow from A and B. C becomes valid on the basis of evidence that such dialect differences hinder children in school. The Stuttgart situation suggests that they do not, and therefore that the problem for black children must lie elsewhere. To uphold this claim about African-American children is to imply that they are not as intelligent as German children.

Or Swiss children. Indeed, children make even larger dialect jumps. Here is a Swiss German example.

Swiss: Nüd nu s Muul häd de. Ussländer verrate.

The foreigner was given away not only by his speech.

A standard-speaking German usually has to acquire Swiss German as a foreign tongue; it is so far from standard German that even many vocabulary items are different: here, what is Sprache in the standard is Muul in Swiss German. Another example is gewesen ‘been’ in the standard (ga-VAY-zin), which is gsy (gzoo) in Swiss German. In the meantime, both standard and Black English have the words language and been. Yet once again, Swiss children learn the standard with no readers and no bridging, just simple immersion.

It is in this light that we must view observations such as William Labov’s that Black English is the American English dialect that diverges the most from standard English. This may be true, but the issue is the degree of divergence, and, overall, Black English diverges from standard English only slightly in comparison with the dialect divergence in a great many other countries. If a park ranger told us that the weasel was the largest carnivore in a forest we were about to camp overnight in with friends, this would not lead us to station someone on an all-night weasel vigil while the rest of us slept. In the same way, Black English being “the most divergent American English dialect” is not, in itself, an argument for presenting standard English to children as a different language.

Examples go on and on. The typical Finnish child learns to say “Do you speak Finnish?” as Puhut sää suomea? In the standard Finnish taught in schools but spoken by no one outside of a television set or off of a podium, the same sentence is Puhutko sinä suomea? In many parts of Finland the local dialects are even less like the standard one, and yet public education is excellent in Finland, without a dialect reader or translation workbook to be found. An example a bit closer to home is Scotland: Recall again our Scottish passage from the Prodigal Son: Efter he had gone throw the hail o it, a fell fainin brak out i yon lanid. This is an English further from the standard than Black English, approaching the distance of Stuttgart German from standard German. Yet children who bring this speech variety to the classroom are taught in standard English—any Scot you know is unlikely to have felt that they were saddled with a foreign language in their school days. Although there is a vigorous and at times high-pitched movement toward the recognition of Scots as a separate language and Scotland as a separate culture, standard English is not considered an impediment to teaching Scottish children. In fact, Scottish children have been reported to find reading in Scots harder than reading in standard English. Every single day, children are making dialect jumps of this kind in Italy, Japan, India, and countless other countries.

In short, the claim of one bridging advocate that “almost universally, students who speak nonstandard or vernacular varieties of a language tend to do relatively poorly in school” simply is not true. It is true that African-American children tend to do relatively poorly in school. Speech, however, is hardly the only thing distinguishing African-American children from others, and the fact that children negotiate dialects effortlessly elsewhere suggests that speech is not the culprit here.

To the extent that bridging advocates acknowledge this issue of degree at all, some have suggested that the very narrowness of the gap between Black and standard English is what makes bridging necessary. According to this argument, the differences between Black English and standard English are so subtle that they are even more confusing to children than the stark differences between English and Spanish, or more usefully, standard German and Schwäbisch.

This argument, though intelligent, is a speculation. When we test that speculation, we see hundreds of cases around the world where schoolchildren sail over just this type of narrow dialect gap.
ple, the difference between spoken Canadian French and standard French is neatly about the same as between Black and standard English. Here is an example:

Parisian French:
Où étais-tu, toi?
where were-you you
Je suis en train de faire la vaisselle—
I am in-the-process-of do the dishes
je vais en ville,
I go in city
et l’autobus arrive.
and the bus comes
Ça te tente de venir avec moi?
that you tempt of come with me

Canadian French:
Où c’est que t’étais, twe?
where it-is that you-were you
Je suis après faire la vaisselle—
I am after do the dishes
je vas en ville,
I go in city
l’autobus s’en vient là.
the bus comes there
Ça te tente-tu de venir avec mwe?
that you tempt-QUES of come with me

Where were you? I’m doing the dishes—I’m going into town and the bus is coming. You want to come along with me?

The differences here are often subtle in the same ways as those between Black and standard English. Canadian French has où c’est que instead of the standard où for “where”; but où c’est que is perfectly understandable in Parisian, just not used. Where for go, standard French has forms pronounced “vay,” “va,” and “va” with I, you and he, respectively, Canadian French uses “va” for all three (spelled “vas,” with I and you), reminiscent of the extension of was to all persons in Black English. While in standard French one can say je m’en vais “I am going,” one does not use venir “to come” in the same expression and say, “je m’en viens.” However, it is eminently logical to use venir in this way, nevertheless, and French Canadians happen to. It is presumably about as “confusing” to the French Canadian child that one cannot write s’en vient as it is to the black child that one does not write done seen. Canadian French uses là “there” as a happy piece of conversational decoration as freely as American teenagers use “like” (the closest English equivalent is Archie Bunker saying “Like all them guys down at the bar there, they don’t know nothing!”). French Canadian children must learn that this is not done in writing. The tu in ça te tente-tu does not mean “you” as those of us familiar with French might think—this tu is simply a question marker in Canadian French that can be used with any pronoun or person (je peux-tu aller? “Can I go?”).

These features are only the tip of an iceberg of spoken Canadian French features that differ in small ways from standard French. According to the bridging advocates’ claim that subtle dialect differences are the most pernicious ones, French Canadian children should be struggling in school.

But they aren’t. With all of the tense issues surrounding the status of Canadian French vis-à-vis the standard dialect of former colonizer France, French Canadian children have never been considered burdened in being expected to learn, and learn in, standard French.

Here at home, the “subtlety” claim is further damaged by a question bridging advocates have never addressed about our own backyard. Namely, why, if Black English is such a barrier to black children in school, is rural Southern white English not considered a similar bar to scholastic achievement in standard English? Poor and rural Southern whites use most of the same sound patterns and sentence structures as African Americans. Yet imagine if rural Southern white children were doing poorly in school. The first thing we would suggest was responsible would be sociological conditions and the effectiveness of the schools themselves. Anyone who suggested that the problem was that
the children were confused by the difference between "I ain't had a Icee all day" and "I haven't had an icee all day," or that they were flummoxed by seeing the word they pronounce as po' written as poor, would get polite attention at best. Yet on the basis of similarly small dialect differences, presenting standard English to black children as a foreign tongue is considered so obviously necessary as to bear no discussion. Surely something is amiss here.

Thus what we see is that the case for bridging cannot simply be a list of the differences between Black and standard English. As we have seen, most languages are actually bundles of dialects, and Black English is simply a dialect of English just as Southern, New England, Appalachian, and Brooklyn Engishes are. Such lists could be compiled for all languages. The issue is whether or not Black English is so different from standard English that black children are being saddled with a burden. In this country, where all English dialects are rather close, this proposition appears plausible at first. However, a look at other situations shows us not only that children easily negotiate similar dialect gaps elsewhere (Canada, the American South), but also that they easily negotiate even larger dialect jumps (Germany, Switzerland, etc.).

Thus the issue is not simply that Black and standard English are different—in most places, children who bring a standard dialect to the classroom are the exception, not the rule. The issue is how different. Speakers of standard and Black English easily understand one another. The small gap between these dialects could not be what holds black children back when elsewhere, children easily acquire standard dialects, which might as well be separate languages in the classroom. Furthermore, we have seen that Black English is not somehow an African language underneath. As common sense would lead us to suspect, Black English is about as close to standard English as it sounds.

The Code-Switching Issue

Another problem with the bridging argument is its assumption that standard English is something African-American children learn only from school and contact with white people. In fact, most African Americans do not speak unbroken Black English all day long, even to each other. They code-switch between Black and standard English. What this means is that the forms of standard English are not nearly as exotic and remote to African-American children as bridging advocates imply.

This is by no means true only of middle-class blacks. On the contrary, most blacks of all sociological strata use standard English forms alongside Black English ones.

Scholars of Black English are quite aware of this, having found that obtaining recordings of African Americans speaking pure Black English is quite difficult because most black people simply do not talk that way. Professors and graduate students treasure and share elusive passages of unadulterated Black English the way jazz aficionados trade bootleg recordings of jazz greats playing after hours. In general, scholarly work on Black English revolves around carefully teasing out the Black English features from the standard English features on a given recording, and this is so par for the course that sociolinguists have developed an imposing statistical methodology for processing and analyzing such data.

We can see this in our own daily experiences, which is why many African Americans feel misrepresented when seeing Black English features laid out on a page or blackboard as "how black people talk." Listen to African Americans speaking to each other, on the street, standing in line, at a family reunion, in a film, in an August Wilson play, on the phone, in a schoolyard, in the ghetto, at a jazz club, on a corner, buying clothes at a shopping mall, at the barbershop. You will notice that for every absent to be, there is one present in a sentence or two later; for every done past, a past marked with -ed; for every he tellin' me, a he tells me; for every Man, he know what she said, a Man, he knows what she said; for every bes', a best. Unbroken streams of Black English are typical of jokes and excited narratives, but in ordinary, neutral conversational exchange, African Americans are code-switchers. Few African Americans would feel that the passage from Mama Day (on pages 144–145) is anything less than a natural depiction of the way most Black English speakers use the dialect, which is one of many reasons Gloria Naylor is such a fine writer. In other words, those depicting African American children as dwelling exclusively in a different language are again distorting and exotifying a situation of language use that is quite typical. Code-switching between standard and nonstandard varieties is something we have seen in this book among many peoples, such as white speakers of nonstandard varieties and Caribbean patois speakers traveling along the continuum of creoles. The crucial thing these situations
have in common is that the standard variety is not alien to the speakers
of the nonstandard variety—it is simply not the only variety they are
familiar with. What all of this means is that the African-American child
does not spend the first few years of their life hearing nothing but Black
English—they hear both Black English and standard English. Many
point out that television is a prime source for standard English, and this
is true. More to the point, however, black children are exposed to
standard English because they hear it spoken by their own parents and
families all day every day, right alongside Black English.

The children of course might hear more Black English and speak
primarily in Black English. This is because Black English is the language
of home, and children have yet to circulate in general society, process
more than the basics of what they hear on television, or be exposed to a
standard English-dominant environment in school. What they have is
what is called a passive competence in standard English, which many of
us experience at the stage when we understand more of another lan-
guage than we are able to actually utter ourselves. However, it simply is
not true that in school, African-American children are encountering the
standard English form, for example, walks, as a new speech variety.
Their own intimates say “he walks” all the time, just as they say “he
walk” as well. In school, they simply transform their passive competence
in standard English into an active competence, thereby developing the
code-switching ability that is a badge of African-American identity.

In this, African-American children actually have a leg up on chil-
dren bringing nonstandard dialects to the classroom in many other
countries. In Germany and Switzerland, adults do not code-switch
between the standard and the local dialect as African Americans do,
and virtually the only familiarity six-year-olds have with standard
German really is from television, hardly as immediate and constant a
source of language as human contact. Yet in school, these children
acquire standard German. Surely black children are not stumped when
encountering she is my sister, desk, and he walks in glory on a page,
especially because they have heard these forms quite frequently from
their own caretakers and friends.

Academics who support the bridging approach tend to downplay
this, putting much stock in a few studies that purportedly show that
standard English is, at best, a distant affair for young black people.
However, though I do not intend to imply the tired line of “You’ll never
know,” white scholars taking this stance have not grown up suckled on
the nuances of how Black English is used by parents and close friends.
As a result of this, one cannot help but perceive that many of them—
even with the best of intentions—have developed an idealized concep-
tion of a black community in which standard English is encountered
only on television and in passing interactions with “the man.” Black
scholars are aware that this is an oversimplified picture, but—also with
the best of intentions—often let it pass in their commitment to legitimiz-
ing the dialect. When it comes to instituting an official educational policy,
however, the fine-grained reality becomes more important to consider.

Besides, the studies themselves do not actually show that standard
English is foreign to young black people. In one, teenage gang members
did poorly in adding -ed to the verbs in written sentences like Last week I
kick Donald in the mouth and I’ve pass my test. However, since these boys
were known to be poor students with severe reading problems, to
interpret this as evidence that standard English is largely foreign to
these boys is something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Their very ability to
negotiate between speech and written symbols at all was already so
poor that it is no surprise that their command of tense marking would
be deficient. Contrary to the claim of many bridging supporters that
Black English speakers may not be able to even hear the distinction
between walk and walked because of the dialect’s wariness of consonant
clusters, another test with the same boys showed that they indeed could
hear such differences quite well. And finally, once again, restricting our
view only to black children leads us down blind alleys. Other work has
shown that even white schoolchildren often leave off final suffixes like
-ed in learning to write, even much more so than they do in speaking.
When the effects of pranracial tendencies in learning to write are com-
bined with the tested black teenagers’ low skill level in reading and
writing, in general, we see how unrealistic it is to interpret their perfor-
mance with written sentences as a reflection of their general familiarity
with standard English forms.

Another study often quoted is one by Jane Torrey showing that
small black children, asked to repeat a standard English sentence, often
repeat it back in Black English:

Teacher: He asked me if I could go to the store.
Student: He asked me can I go to the sto'.
But all this study shows is that African-American children are not yet aware that there are two distinct dialects being used around them (because the systems are so alike) and that they have yet to learn the social distinctions between the two varieties. Thus the issue of distinguishing deliberately between them in speech is not yet a concern to them and they use the home dialect more readily because it is this one they have heard more of. This is yet another universal trait in language learning—the nonstandard forms, as the vehicles of casual and intimate speech, are learned first. Hank Ketcham captures this in the way Dennis the Menace’s speech is peppered with ain’t and doin’ despite the adults around him speaking standard English. The fact that black children’s “repetition” is in Black English does not show that standard English is a foreign language to them, but simply that it is not yet a code they dwell in naturally—that is, they do not have active competence in it yet. When encountering such forms every day in school, such children build up their passive knowledge of standard English and become the bidialectals their parents are.

Indeed, many studies, conveniently forgotten whenever bridging comes up, have highlighted the massive role that standard English plays in African-American children’s passive and even active competence. Even Jane Torrey noted this in other work, and was joined by other researchers, some black.

Finally, one can easily assess this issue by simply observing African-American children in a classroom. In Oakley elementary school classrooms, for example, I have observed black kids spontaneously and eloquently switching between standard and Black English at work and play. Many teachers, white and black, unhesitatingly say that the black children they teach are bidialectal. This is beautifully illustrated by one who, during the teaching of certain subjects, requests “English, please” when her students answer in Black English. This teacher has never used dialect readers or bridging exercises, and yet the students, all quite fluent in Black English, make the switch effortlessly.

None of this is to say that all African Americans are comfortable speaking nothing but standard English open-endedly. Many are indeed ultimately more comfortable in Black English. However, it is an oversimplification and distortion of the language environment of most African Americans, even of the most depressed inner cities, to suppose that they encounter standard English forms for the first, second, or even third time under the cold fluorescent lights of the classroom—black children hear standard English alongside Black English in their cradles.

Many of the African-American bridging advocates recount having grown up in Black English-speaking communities, but do this while speaking standard English and projecting transparencies written in it. One often wants to ask them exactly how they learned standard English if black children are suckled virtually exclusively on des’, habitual be, and don’t nobody know. They might answer that they acquired it in school, being lucky enough to make their way through the educational system in a way that would be beyond many African Americans. But what about the standard English one hears all over any African-American community? Surely this was where their standard English competence truly began. What about the proper general store proprietor with a high school education who hollers an order to the delivery boy in Black English and then courteously converses with customers—black ones—in standard English? Elderly Mrs. Williams down the street who used to teach Sunday school? Or, the Oakland boys and girls interviewed by the networks in December 1996 elegantly switching between standard and Black English for the cameras, many appearing slightly perplexed that anyone would claim that black kids spoke only Black English?

Or, to pull back the camera a bit—standard English is spoken alongside rural Southern English, just as it is alongside Black English. Linguists have even analyzed it with the same statistical tools in order to isolate the nonstandard data from the standard. Imagine doing some tests with semiliterate white Alabama teenagers and finding that their performance in correcting sentences into standard English was poor; imagine asking one of the rural Southern children from the Atlantic story on page 179 to say “I haven’t had an icee all day” and getting “I ain’t had a icee all day” back. How likely would we be to interpret this as meaning that these children have no real contact with standard English and were going to need translation exercises in school to acquire it? We do not usually suppose that because children and uneducated people are more comfortable in local dialect that standard English is Hittite to them. Standard English is no less familiar to most African-American children than it was to Brett Butler or Dolly Parton growing up.

It would be interesting to see what would have happened if it had been mostly white school administrators rather than black ones who
had proposed in 1996 that black children live only in Black English. Many black linguists and educators would have been quite offended, and the same linguistic studies now devoted to statistically isolating the Black English from African-American speech would have been retooled to isolate the standard English component. Op-ed pieces would have sprouted up like mushrooms calling attention to archetypes like the grocer and Mrs. Williams, as well as literary passages from Gloria Naylor, Terry McMillan, Bebe Moore Campbell, Richard Wright, and Claude Brown.

The Verdict from the Studies

Nevertheless, all of this evidence stands alongside a handful of studies that suggest that children learn better when taught in their home dialect. These are the only truly cogent arguments for the bridging approach.

The studies in question are the following:

1. Tore Österberg (1961) showed that children speaking a nonstandard Swedish dialect learned to read faster and better in their home variety.
2. Tove Bull (1990) found similar results with a nonstandard Norwegian variety.
3. A. McCormick Piestrup (1973) found that African-American children in Oakland’s reading performance suffered to the extent that teachers constantly and impatiently corrected their speech during classroom sessions.
4. Hanni Taylor (1991) found that inner-city college students in Chicago improved their skills in writing standard English when they were taught to translate Black English into standard English.
5. Simpkins and Simpkins (1981) found that African-American students in Iowa learned to read faster when taught with dialect readers.
6. Leaverton (1973) found that African-American students’ reading performance rose when they used a combination of standard and Black English texts.

7. Rickford and Rickford (1995) found that in one of two brief experiments, African-American students displayed better comprehension of texts in dialect than of texts in standard English.

Of these studies, only the last two actually apply to our central question, whether or not black children are impeded from learning to read by the gap between Black and standard English.

The Piteän Swedish dialect studied by Österberg is so different from standard Swedish that it is popularly considered “a language on its own,” and is described as “impenetrable” to even Swedish-speaking outsiders. We can see this on the page:

Standard: Han nosar, metar, och solar.
Piteän: Han lukts, meit å sol se.

English: He sniffs, fishes, and sunbathes.

Obviously these varieties are further apart than Black English from standard English.

Tove Bull gives no samples of the Norwegian dialect studied, but nonstandard Scandinavian dialects are well known for how divergent they often are from the standard ones, and various studies of such dialects in Norway show differences as great or greater than between standard and Piteän Swedish.

The Piestrup study’s finding that black children suffer when their speech is relentlessly “corrected” is important, in that it identifies one of the true issues in the failure of black children in school. (It will come up again in this chapter, but it does not explicitly address the bridging approach itself.)

The Taylor study examined writing rather than reading, and because it treated college students who had already acquired basic reading and writing skills, in the strict sense it addresses remedial techniques rather than the introduction of skills themselves. (As such, it is also pertinent to other issues and will also come up again later.)

Thus while it has been said on the basis of these seven studies that the data on the bridging approach is limited but all positive, only three of these studies actually suggest that Black English is a barrier to
acquiring reading skills. Furthermore, the Leaverton results are weakened by the fact that the children were only given Black English readings along with standard ones, which leaves us unable to tell whether the rise in reading scores was based on Black English being easier to process or on the simple novelty of the mixture. Meanwhile, the results from Rickford and Rickford are in the strict sense inconclusive—the study consisted of two runs; in one of them the students actually performed better with the standard texts.

However, there is in fact a great deal of data beyond these three explorations. Namely, there have been no fewer than nine other such studies, all of them concentrated, professional experiments testing the use of Black English in teaching reading to first graders through fourth graders. Contrary to the oft-heard claim that all the data on the bridging approach is positive, in all nine of these studies, none of which are ever mentioned by bridging advocates, dialect readers and contrastive analysis had no effect on African-American students’ reading scores. This means that for every study supporting the bridging approach—and we have seen that two of these cannot truly be said to do so unequivocally—there are three that conclusively do not. (The studies are listed in the bibliography.)

In one of these studies, for example, Patricia Nolen tested 156 inner-city African-American children in Seattle for reading comprehension, comparing their performance with standard English texts with texts in Black English. Even after submitting the results to painstaking statistical analysis to pinpoint the exact contribution of all potential linguistic factors to the outcomes, she found that there was simply no difference in scores between children taught with standard texts and children taught with Black English texts. Finding similar results in St. Louis, Samuel J. Marwit and Gail Neumann concluded that these findings suggest that either linguistic discrepancies due to subject race are not pronounced enough to impair comprehension or are simply unimportant to the process of understanding.

Paul Melmed came to similar conclusions after a study of working-class black third graders in Emery, California:

Descriptions of linguistic and dialect feature differences are not sufficient evidence for suggesting that these differences interfere with reading and learning S[standard] E[nglish] material.

On the basis of these findings a case for teaching SE to black English speakers before teaching reading is not justified. In addition, a case cannot be made for translating SE texts into black English phonology for beginning readers. Rather, it seems that SE texts can adequately be used to teach B[ack] E[nglish] speakers to read.

It is unfortunate that black children’s reading scores will not lend themselves to as direct and simple a remedy as the bridging approach, but the data make a statement too strong to dismiss. Why might the results have been positive in the three other cases? Such things are familiar in the social sciences, in which a phenomenon called “the Hawthorne effect” is well known: In many cases, when a new approach is tried, the excitement created by the change produces results that fade as the novelty wears off. The sociolinguist Ralph Fasold used a hypothetical example in which the idea is tested that children will learn better when barefoot in a classroom painted dark green. The very frisson of the new conditions might well stimulate children for a while, but old patterns would settle in over time. It is possible that the novelty of seeing Black English in print would sometimes stimulate students in short-term experiments, and that the freshness of the approach would equally stimulate teachers to give unusually concentrated attention to students amidst this temporary excitement. The question is whether these learning conditions would have long-lasting benefits, and the evidence from the other studies against this is so overwhelming—nine is too many to dismissed as static—that the other studies would seem to be classic examples of the Hawthorne effect in action.

In the long view, the overall conclusion that the studies lead us to is not surprising. If we really stop to reflect on the nature of learning to read, it is difficult to see the small differences between Black English and standard English as a significant impediment. Bridging advocates propose that the k at the end of desk, the verb to be in she is my sister, and the -s in walks are potentially so confusing to black children that learning to read becomes a minefield, but this view neglects the role of context in reading. Even if a black child were confused by seeing, for example, the way he walks written when they would usually say “da way he walk” (and this is questionable itself), encountering -s used again and again within contexts referring to individual people and things would tell them, as intelligent beings, that walks was the form used with named
subjects, *he*, *she* and *it*. The fact that they also hear third person singular
-s used around them all the time by black people would only make this
less of a mental strain. Similarly, even if they would not usually say
"the," this word would not appear to them as a cryptic glyph on the
page—seeing a form so similar to their *da*, used before nouns in the
exact same way as they use *da*, would teach them quickly that *the* is *da*—
especially when the corner grocer, Mrs. Williams, and their mother and
older sisters have surely said "the" a lot more than once within their
earshot. And finally, in the long view, most of the sentence—specifically
way he walk—is identical in both dialects. Many of the scholars who did
the nine studies came to similar conclusions. Melmed, for example,
noted that although *pass* and *past* are pronounced identically in Black
English, black children would highly unlikely to be confused by a
sentence like *His perfect pass to the man in the end zone made him famous,
since past would obviously be rather surreal in such a sentence.

If children in Stuttgart can perceive the relationship between *sagt*
and *saiq*, and *koi* and *kein*, if children in Switzerland can link *nicht* and *nud*,
gewesen and *gsy*, if a Finnish child can spontaneously relate *sinaa* and
*saa*, *puhun* and *puhut*, then African-American children can manage
desk and *des*, *she* my sister and *she* my sister. I shudder to think what is
implied by supposing otherwise.

All standard English requires of the black child is to learn that
certain slight variations on their home speech are "school talk." What
makes standard English even less new to these children is that, unlike
their peers in Stuttgart or Switzerland, black children come to school
having heard standard language forms around them all their lives.

**WHY DO BLACK CHILDREN FAIL IN SCHOOL?**

**America's Educational System**

The proposition that the poor performance of African Americans in
school is due to the gap between Black and standard English is plausible
at first glance. The efforts of linguists, educators, administrators, and
schoolteachers to institute bridging programs are neither ridiculous nor
a cynical grab at bilingual education funds. However, what is plausible
is not always true, and the evidence strongly indicates that the causes lie
elsewhere.

Even the dean of Black English specialists, William Labov, after
painstaking and socially committed study of the dialect, concluded as
far back as 1967 that

the number of structures unique to BEV [Black English vernacular]
are small, and it seems unlikely that they could be responsible for
the disastrous record of reading failure in the inner city schools.

Labov was not alone; not only the authors of the nine studies concurred,
but many linguists and education specialists have made similar state-
ments over the years.

If Black English is not the reason African-American students so
often fail in school, then what is, and how might basic facts about
linguistics point the way to a solution? Our first task is to identify what
the problems are. After extensive exchanges with teachers, administra-
tors, and educators, combined with observations from a life (albeit a brief
one) as an African American, I suggest that there are three main causes.

One cause is the quality of America's schools, which truly should
be considered a national emergency. Washington devotes money to
building weapons for wars never to be fought, and paying for votes
from the wealthy with coffers-draining tax entitlements, meanwhile at-
tacking welfare programs accounting for but a pittance of government
expenditure and letting its public school system become the mockery of
the world.

Conditions in many public school systems in America today are
beyond belief and make it a wonder that any child is inspired to learn in
such settings. Even the infrastructure is a crime: In many Oakland
schools, for instance, chipping paint, bathrooms out of order, and school
chairs down for the count are not extraordinary but routine. More to the
point, the claim that black students are not acquiring standard English
misses the point that, as dozens of East Bay teachers have informed me,
a great many students are barely being taught at all. Overcrowded
classrooms and insufficient teacher salaries combine to create chronic
teacher shortages, leading to ever-mounting resentment and disaffec-
tion among all concerned. As a result, in one typical recent curriculum,
elementary school students were given exactly six brief writing assign-
ments per school year, which were only passingly corrected, and they
received a minimum of individual attention. Similar conditions have been reported from innumerable school districts in the country.

A sterling example of how easily teaching conditions can turn a small dialect gap from an innocent bystander into a felon is a "study" that purportedly showed that Black English barred students not from reading standard English but from mathematical competence. It was not in the 1880s but the 1980s when a teacher traced the low performance of her African-American students in math to the supposed absence of certain prepositional and adverbial concepts in Black English, claiming in all seriousness that these gaps rendered order, direction, and causality virtually alien concepts to them at least as represented in word problems. She reported that the students were not only incapable of solving word problems in algebra, but also that they lacked the linguistic resources to even have the methods for solving such problems explained to them! It should be said that this teacher fully respected the legitimacy of Black English. However, she had nevertheless - albeit with constructive intention - come to the conclusion that Standard English encoded logic better than Black English.

But as we have seen, there are no dialects which hinder logical thought. Anyone who thinks fine-grained logic is impossible in Black English is advised to either (1) Rent *Eddie Murphy Raw* and identify precisely where in the 93 minutes Murphy lapses into faulty logic; or (2) read *The Color Purple* and tell the legions of literary critics and scholars who have made this book a Pulitzer Prize-winning landmark of American fiction that Celie's thoughts have a tendency to stray from the line of basic logic.

Getting down to the nitty-gritty, Black English is as chockablock with prepositions and adverbs as standard English: I have yet to encounter an African American over the age of three who would have to wrestle with the words *at, to, by, with, for, from, behind, under, on top of, next to, in front of, after, before, without, fast, slow(ly), never, very, bad(ly), well, worse, better, or...* well, you get the point. One could find every last one of these words used on any five rap CDs, or overhear them all in about a half hour's walk down a street in a black neighborhood. To be sure, expressions such as "if and only if" are not used in Black English because it is a home dialect—rural Southerners do not use such expressions either when jawing after dark. However, these students were not locked into their home dialect exclusively. As we have seen, African Americans code-switch. Because standard English is also available to them, they can easily be taught the meaning of mathematical terminology. More to the point, for whatever it's worth, they could even have been taught the same concepts in Black English—with standard English terminology inserted where necessary.

What's more, this study was conducted in an experimental private school where the black students were doing well in English and the humanities! Surely if a child can read *The Catcher in the Rye* and history textbooks, they are capable of comprehending the language necessary to explain how to figure out when two trains traveling toward each other will meet.

The author presented various misinterpretations of prepositions, adverbs and clause connectors in black students' math assignments, but the problem is that none of these reflect any actual trait of Black English. For example, there is no particular use of *after* in Black English to explain the students' problems solving word problems hinging on this word. The author also assumes a tight linkage between language structure and logical capabilities which, as we saw in Chapter Three, is extremely dicey. For example, neither Black English nor any colloquial speech form (including colloquial standard English) dwells in the intricately layered sorts of sentence sandwiches that word problems entail, but this does not hinder black people from processing sophisticated logical concepts. One might note that where English has *more than three people*, French has *plus de trois personnes*, literally "more of three people." Certainly this wrinkle does not hinder French children from perceiving differences in quantity.

The misconnected connections were just as attributable to the students' lack of experience with the particularly close and specific engagement with phraseology that word problems require. This would in turn be due to cultural and socioeconomic factors. These define black Americans as crucially as language, which would once again appear to have been misidentified as the culprit.

The experimenter indeed "drilled" the black students in the meanings of these elusive prepositions and adverbs, and lo and behold the students did better in math. However, we have all the reason to suppose that these students did better simply because of concentrated attention in general. Surely no African American student floated out of one of these remedial sessions elated in their new-found knowledge of the
meaning of the word of. Here is a paradigm case of how Black English can be seen as the cause of things that are actually traceable to simple teaching methods themselves. In a supreme coincidence, the school where this study was conducted was called The Hawthorne School.

The Inner-City Underclass

However, the decline in American education can only be part of the problem; it does not explain why African American children perform so much worse in the classroom than other groups. The condition of the schools affects everyone, as seen in the ever-declining preparation for college that freshmen of all ethnic groups at public universities demonstrate. There are two other factors that account for the especially alarming failure rates among black children.

One is, of course, the socioeconomic disparity between blacks and whites, especially in inner-city communities, America’s greatest shame. As a result of the urban sinkholes left behind by white flight and the movement of industry to faraway suburbs, many black schoolchildren come from neighborhoods where drugs and welfare have taken the place of work, gangs rule the streets, fathers barely exist, and children are raised by adolescent women who are products of the same subculture. Such parents do not typically read to their children and often have only elementary reading skills themselves; the inner city is a fundamentally oral culture where the printed page is of marginal concern.

Areas like this often bring nothing less than the aftermath of a bombing to mind, and naturally, education becomes a distant matter for children from such settings. Growing up in the despair of poverty, without gainfully employed role models, such children often have a chilling lack of any sense of a meaningful future. Products of this life are often virtually undisciplinable, have a minimal and often antagonistic relationship to classroom lessons, and tend to attend school erratically and eventually drop out before graduation, in statistical proportions distressingly familiar to all of us. Even black children in lower grades manifest symptoms of this malaise. Legions of teachers have told me of the difficulty of even maintaining many young black schoolchildren’s attention in class. Cultural patterns are ingrained at a very early age, and with only their siblings, parents, and other neighborhood denizens as models, many disadvantaged African-American students mentally start on the path toward life in the streets as early as toddlerhood.

Once again, amidst the focus on language issues, it has been easy to lose sight of the role of socioeconomic factors in the depressing black students’ test statistics. Most of the children who make up these statistics do not have the fundamental, bushy-tailed commitment to school that the typical white child has. As I write this, it has recently come to attention that test scores have plummeted in the Sausalito, California, school district over the past seven years as black children have risen from 44 percent to 78 percent of public school enrollment. Reading about the festering housing projects most of these black children come from, with the usual litany of drug addiction, crime, unemployment, and neglectful parenting, it is extremely difficult to imagine that putting “Michael Jackson be dancing” on the blackboard would even begin to turn these students around.

Nothing could illustrate this better than a reminiscence by Robert Reich, former secretary of labor, who encountered a group of underclass black teenage girls in Memphis, one of whom was proud of a good report card. Here is one of their exchanges:

“Alicia’s smart. She say she gonna be rich,” Tiffany tells me in a mocking tone. “She gonna take that report card and turn into a b-i-g job. That’s what she think.”

“No way,” says Sheela.

“Way too!” Alicia shoots back.

“No one gonna be rich from here, less they deal drugs,” Sheela tells Alicia. “No one gonna be a nothin’ from here. Girl, you don’t know whatcha talkin’ bout.”

“Yes I do,” says Alicia defiantly.

“Rich, my ass.”

“Yo’ mom’s on welfare. Yo’ dad’s a bum.”

“No jobs here.”

“You out of you’ mind, girl.”

“Rich? Stupid more like it.”

“Honey, you can take that report card and shove it up where you can’ see it, cause it don’ mean nothin’ here.”

After a while Alicia stops defending herself, and the other girls turn their backs on her and walk off together, laughing.

If Alicia didn’t eventually turn away from school and walk off laughing with her peers, she was an exception. To be sure, bridging advocates
often acknowledge that dialect is only one of many possible causes. However, the pathology of the inner city is so frightfully, exponentially pervasive that assigning the structure of Black English even a minimal role in the poor grades of its victims is rather like venturing that a one-legged marathon runner came in last because of the cut of their running shorts.

The Psychology of Disinclusion

These factors are related to a final and more general problem. It is not only African-American children from the foulest inner cities who are failing disproportionately in America’s schools. Much of the failure is among black children from healthier circumstances.

This problem is a manifestation of a phenomenon impossible to parse with statistics or frame in a formal study but pervasive all the same. It is well known among all educators, although rarely discussed at length in public because of how easily the “racist” charge is leveled in our culture today. It can be described as a less fundamental orientation toward education among many African-American students than among typical white, Asian, or other schoolchildren. Most importantly, it manifests itself in all socioeconomic strata, not just among inner-city children.

I have observed this phenomenon at work throughout my life. Growing up in Philadelphia in the 1970s, I was fortunate enough to attend a private Montessori school through sixth grade, in which there were generally about eight black students in my class of about twenty-five. Discussing problems with schools in the inner city, educators have often observed that black children visibly turn away from school in about the fifth grade. At the school I attended, the quality of education was excellent, the teachers attentive and gentle, the neighborhood middle class and quiet. Yet even there, it was exactly in the fifth grade that a group of the black students began to isolate themselves socially from the rest of the class, and most importantly, they became “problem students” inattentive to schoolwork. These students were from working-class circumstances rather than the middle-class ones of most of the rest, but they were by no means products of the inner city—their parents worked, many came from two-parent families, and they were well fed and clothed. Furthermore, they received careful, individual attention from the teachers—one of the teachers was even the mother of one of these students. Yet one could see that these kids had tuned out, that they had a basic sense that school was not for them. They were not just having trouble with the work—they didn’t care about it, which was unusual among students in the class. These problems did not abate and not much came of these kids later.

The coalescence of this group was part of a peaceful but distinct division of the class along ethnic lines that occurred that year, and some of the other black students in the class gradually allied themselves with them. Soon, their grades began falling too. The ethnic allegiance itself was healthy, but the intimate association between this and poor school performance was sad to see.

From middle school on, I attended another private school where there were usually about ten black students in my class of about sixty-five, many of whom had attended the school since kindergarten. This number had long remained a near constant one. As of the ninth grade, there was a significant increase in the amount and caliber of homework expected: Longer papers, more reading, more advanced math. When we returned for tenth grade, no fewer than four of the black students, all of whom had entered the school in kindergarten or shortly thereafter, had quietly not returned and were attending neighborhood public schools instead. These students were all from middle-class backgrounds and had been steeped for years in the best education Philadelphia had to offer. Yet the main reason all four of them left was problems with schoolwork. The important thing was that it was hard to miss a certain dismissive attitude toward schoolwork among most of them. I recall one of them, early in ninth grade, making it quite clear to me that she had no intention of putting forth the extra effort now required—once again, school was just not part of the program, not for her. To be sure, now and then there were white kids who left the school for similar reasons, but never in such large proportions at such an indicative juncture. In addition, two of the black students who stayed through graduation became pregnant shortly thereafter and did not go on to college (at least not right away), while almost all of the white students did.

This phenomenon continues through college and beyond. In graduate school, a white teaching assistant in engineering once reluctantly told me that he could not help noticing that there was a tendency for the
black undergraduates in his classes to simply not try as hard as the white and Asian students and to just give up after a certain point. As a professor myself I have had to reluctantly acknowledge a similar tendency among black students. Early in my doctoral studies, I immensely enjoyed working on a project on the verb to be under John Rickford. I will never forget when a fellow black graduate student told me that before meeting me, my dedication to the subject simply for its own sake in a report I gave made her wonder whether I was “a brother” or not. The implication here of a dissonance between having an African-American identity and delving into an academic issue just for the fun of learning about something is sad, and yet so typical that the comment barely threw me at the time.

The last thing I mean to do here is to disparage these students. Just as I did then, I see their attitudes as symptomatic of a general phenomenon difficult to escape. These students were not stupid, nor were they willfully lazy—they were simply victims of a fundamental association of school with an oppressive culture sensed as “other.” There are plenty of exceptions, and some students fall under the sway of this attitude more than others, but the tendency is unmistakable. The way this tells on even black students with the exact same opportunities as white ones testifies as eloquently as the reaction to the O. J. Simpson verdict to the continuing racial rift in our society.

The sentiment runs wide and deep, and calling it “resistance to mainstream culture” omits a vital component, which is fury. In Atlanta in the 1940s, my mother was conclusively ostracized by neighborhood children for being a “walking encyclopedia.” One of my earliest memories twenty-five years later in Philadelphia is black children asking me to spell a word and jeering at gleeful length when I did so—I quickly learned that to be accepted by the black kids in the neighborhood one did not spell in public. This was Mount Airy, famous as one of America’s first integrated neighborhoods, and it is important that I never had any such encounters with the white children, nor did they play such a game with any white child. We later moved to an all-black middle-class neighborhood in New Jersey. By then, I knew that books were something one only did behind closed doors with a flashlight, but a friend of mine had yet to learn this lesson. At the time we moved there, it was a current neighborhood sport to ask him how high a building was, or how many miles Florida was from New Jersey, hear him give the answer, and then derisively roar in laughter at agonizing length, throwing insults, popping him on the back of his head, and calling others to come join the fun. And these kids lived in big, expensive houses on clean, wide streets in a new suburban development.

Many African Americans who liked school have similar tales to tell, and we can be sure that a bookish black kid is suffering the same treatment at this very moment. The smart kid is second only to the “faggot” as a target of scorn among many black children. Of course, black communities are hardly the only ones where it is uncool among children to be smart and like school—after all, the nerd stereotype is a white invention, and many whites report having been teased and beaten up for being “smart.” However, after talking about this with many whites, I venture that there is a particularly pointed, hostile tenor to the scenes I have described—trapping a child in a tight circle of fingers pointing in joyous, cackling rage because he likes school—that is much more typical of black communities. The kids I am describing didn’t think my friend was merely weird. They considered him an arrant jackass sleeping with the enemy, deserving of the sharpest possible condemnation.

The unique element of rage, rather than simply dismissal, here stems from a sentiment that one is kowtowing not just to a culture that is different, but ultimately better. No one could deny the pride which African Americans have in their culture, and black people hardly consider white America paradise. However, this self-esteem coexists with a societally induced sense of inferiority—an underlying suspicion that white people, with their money and cars and universities, are inherently cut of better cloth. Classic experiments like the old one in which black children preferred white dolls over black ones point this up brilliantly. Among middle class blacks, this attitude manifests itself in a tendency Shelby Steele has identified as a reluctance to strive wholeheartedly for the top for fear of failing and proving racism correct. African Americans are not unique in this—no oppressed group escapes this burden. Nevertheless, this internalized oppression is currently an albatross on the African-American soul, and civil rights victories could only begin to change it. It will only disappear when there is true socioeconomic equality between whites and blacks, and in our lifetimes this, of course, is inconceivable. In the meantime, this means that black children who ally themselves with books and learning are seen not only as odd, but as
implying that they are *better* than other black children. Unsurprisingly, many black children do not choose to risk alienation by appearing to make such a statement.

Thus it does not take being born to a crack-addicted mother to fall behind in school despite all assistance. The typical white student brings to school a fundamental assumption that fulfilling the requirements of an education is an inextricable part of being a legitimate member of society. They may not be class A students, they may not love books, they may cut some classes, they may even have disciplinary problems—but fundamentally, school, for better or worse, is as basic to a life pathway as buying a car or getting married, getting expelled or dropping out is an embarrassment, and despite superficial tokens of rebellion, school performance is processed as one of many indexes of a person’s worth. This is not the frame of mind many African-American students bring to the classroom. For the ones from the saddest sociological circumstances, life at home and on the streets makes school all but an irrelevance. Even for many of the more fortunate ones, however, commitment to school is continually leavened by a fundamental sense that it is the province of a mainstream to which they do not belong. This is partly an echo of the mindset of the teenage girls in Memphis, partly due to a fear that school invites a failure that would confirm their deepest fears, and partly due simply to the persistent line between black and white in America.

Once again, these are not new conclusions. For example, it is instructive to note another observation by William Labov (page 223): “The conclusion from our research was that the major cause of reading failure is cultural and political in the classroom.”

From a wide-lens perspective, these facts point up a major general flaw in the argument that Black English holds black children back in school. Since the late 1960s, the discrepancy between white and black children’s test scores has continually gotten worse. Bridging advocates often point this out as making the adoption of bridging programs particularly urgent. However, these scores also pose a question or two: Presumably, if the statistical gap has increased, then so has its cause. Has Black English gotten deeper over the past thirty years? No—not even those smitten by the “divergence” data would claim that a smidgen more habitual be here and a little less of something else there would be more than a drop in the bucket with regard to test score learning problems. Some people are under the impression that the slang in Black English is richer today than ever, but this conclusion would surprise Clarence Major, who wrote a thick dictionary of Black English slang in 1971. No African American would say that a Black English speaker of 1970, transported in time to 1998, would find today’s Black English further from standard English and more like a separate language.

On the other hand, have the conditions of our schools and the horror of the inner city gotten worse over the past thirty years? The answer is a resounding yes. Which, then, is more likely to be the source of black children’s worsening reading scores, Black English or socio-economics? Given the capabilities of other children worldwide, the extended acquaintance black children already have with standard English forms, and the failure of the bridging approach in experiments, what exactly would lead us to conclude that Black English had anything at all to do with the problem?

**WHAT SHOULD WE DO NOW? LINGUISTICS AND BLACK CHILDREN’S CLASSROOM SUCCESS**

We are now in a position to return to an earlier question: Does linguistics have anything to offer regarding the true needs of African-American students?

I believe that the answer is yes, but that any such suggestions from linguistics will address not the bridging approach as we have seen it defended, but a variation on this approach that has become popular among some linguists and educators. Many such thinkers acknowledge that children elsewhere have no trouble with dialect gaps, and that standard English is already a vital part of the black speech repertoire. They remain in favor of the bridging approach, however, out of a conviction that African-American children remain a special case nonetheless.

Specifically, they observe that unlike Stuttgart German, Swiss German, Brooklyn English, or rural Southern English, Black English is a denigrated dialect, spoken by a dispossessed group. For them, the issue is not so much that black children are incapable of negotiating the small gap between their dialect and standard English. Instead, they observe...
that black children are discouraged from making the transition because of the stigma that teachers attach to their speech and the alienation these students feel from mainstream society. Eventually they end up resisting the dialect out of disaffection and resentment.

This position, a variation on the more linguistically focused basic position, can be summarized as follows: The poor scholastic performance of African-American children is due in considerable degree to an alienation from standard English caused by the stigma attached to speaking Black English, and the wariness of mainstream society which many African-American children feel.

Many people taking this position see the bridging approach as a useful way to present Black students with standard English as an addition to their home dialect rather than as a replacement, respecting and utilizing Black English as a friendly bridge to the standard dialect.

In general, unlike the dialect gap, the issues of stigma and alienation are real ones. As one friend of mine put it, "whether you talk the way a certain group talks is a matter of whether you want to be at their party, and whether you feel like you were invited."

It is clear that this problem must be addressed, as it is integral to the very sociocultural issues that are the true cause of black children’s performance in school. However, the fact remains that there is a logical disjunction between these rightful concerns and the conclusions drawn from them. Again, the line of reasoning is (A) Black English is devalued. (B) Many black children's lives make school a low priority for them. (C) Therefore, black children need translation to acquire standard English. The problem here is that if we stand back for a minute, we can see that translation exercises are not exactly the most natural solution to problems A and B. In fact, if we had addressed the issues of stigma and alienation in an alternate universe in which the bridging approach had never been devised, we can be sure that translation exercises would have been one of the last solutions to be ventured.

This is because this variant advocacy of the bridging approach is less an independent conclusion than one accommodating to a pre-established frame of reference. C is seen as a natural solution to A and B only because C has already been so prominently on the table, in the same way as we swat a fly with the newspaper close at hand even though the flyswatter hanging in the closet would do a better job. In fact, there are a great many more possible solutions to A and B than C.

and in this light, it must be reiterated that studies have clearly shown that C is false. It will be more useful to approach the problem without assuming C as a preordained conclusion, asking, "What else might we do about A and B?" rather than "How might we justify C?"

Therefore, our goal is to address the legitimate issues of stigma and sociology without resorting to an approach that is unnecessary and does not work. In my view, there are five recommendations that linguists might make to help turn the tide for African-American students, which we will discuss in sections following.

"THE LANGUAGE OF THE STREETS": ADDRESSING THE STIGMA

The issue of the stigma connected to Black English is crucial. This factor is what separates this dialect from other nonstandard ones we have seen; few people are looked down on for speaking Swiss German or colloquial Finnish. These dialects are seen not as sloppy speech but simply as different. Although the standard dialect indeed conveys the most prestige, the nonstandard ones are thought of as innocent variations, not as degradations. But Black English is widely viewed as a willfully slovenly plague. Employers often openly admit disqualifying applicants who sound black on the telephone, associating Black English with unreliability and low intelligence. Studies have shown that teachers, after being played tapes of children's voices, spontaneously rate black voices as less confident and less eager. Most tragically, teachers have very often classified black students as learning-disabled on the basis of their speech patterns, convinced that Black English sound patterns and structures are evidence of cognitive deficiencies.

How does this affect classroom performance? When teachers, under the impression that Black English is merely bad grammar rather than alternate grammar, correct black children’s speech relentlessly, the children eventually clam up in fear and shame, turned off forever from the joy of learning and achievement. Here is a transcription of one classroom session of this sadly typical practice in action:

Teacher: This one. Come on, you're right here. Hurry up.
Child 1: (reads) Dey...
Teacher: Get your finger out of your mouth.
Child 1: (continues without hesitation) ... call
Teacher: Start again.
Child 1: Dey call, 'What is it? What is it?'
Teacher: What's this word? (pointing out the word they)
Child 2: Dey.
Child 1: Dat.
Teacher: What is it?
Child 3: Dat.
Child 2: Dey.
Child 1: Dey.
Teacher: Look at my tongue. They.
Child 1: They.
Teacher: They. Look at my tongue.
Child 1: Dhey (approaching “they” but more like “dey”).
Teacher: That's right. Say it again.
Child 1: Dhey.
Teacher: They. O.K. Pretty good. O.K.

It doesn’t take much to see that these kids are not on their way to liking books. The children are accomplishing the crucial task of associating a written word with one in the spoken language, but instead of being praised for this, they are impatiently, repeatedly corrected by the teacher, who is under the impression that dey is a faulty pronunciation rather than an alternate one. Even if this teacher had no problem with Black English per se but were simply trying to ensure that these children acquired standard English, the tone of voice (“Hurry up,” “Start again,” “What is it?” “Pretty good.”) conveys a dismissive, belittling attitude toward their performance, and the length of time attempting to elicit a perfect “th” is what will stick in the children's minds, while their sense of victory in reading itself is doused. This teacher’s performance is obviously a seed for the sense plaguing black students that school is not for them.

Indeed, it is tales of suffering this kind of treatment, including consignment to speech therapy, that prominent African-American bridging advocates like Geneva Smitherman, Noma LeMoine, and Robert Williams eloquently tell, not of having had trouble decoding standard English on the page.

For these reasons, it is urgent that the first of our five suggestions be adopted:

*Train schoolteachers in the systematicity of Black English.*

Any schoolteacher who is to be within a ten-mile radius of an African-American child must be fully aware that sentences like *Don't nobody know my name* are neither bad grammar, lazy thinking, or a sign of inability to do math, but simply an alternate dialect to the standard. America’s teachers must approach Black English as something to be added to standard English not eradicated by it. They must be taught the basic rules of Black English in order that they see that it is a coherent and nuanced system. Not only does common sense suggest that this would help to free young African Americans to learn, but the Pieper study (see page 219) demonstrated that black children perform better in school when their dialect is respected rather than scorned.

To the extent that programs like California’s Standard English Proficiency program already do this, they should be expanded, and it should be de rigueur in any district with a substantial representation of African-American students. The goal would be to make teachers aware that Black English is not something students should be corrected out of, but simply something standard English is to be added to. This is exactly the attitude of teachers in places like Stuttgart, and with this change in attitude, America would catch up with the rest of the world in treating nonstandard dialects as variations rather than degradations.

It would be best if teachers were taught about Black English through more than just lists of words and constructs showing how it differs from standard English. “Been Dere, Done Dat!” one journalist titled a contribution to a special issue of *The Black Scholar* on the Oakland controversy. This title tapped into a sentiment common among bridging advocates and sympathetic spectators that the legitimacy of Black English has long been conclusively demonstrated for anyone who cared to listen, and that the Oakland dust-up reflected the persistence of racism and willful ignorance. But as I have argued, a thoroughly reasonable person white or black, can be fully aware that Black English has rules and still consider it to be a collection of bad habits—systematic bad habits (after all, viruses are marvelously complex organisms). Teachers should be made aware of the general nature of languages as bundles of equally complex and nuanced dialects, and they should be shown the ways in which Black English is complex as well as the ways in which it is simple. This battle will never be won by crowing that “Black English is short, sweet, and to the point,” as one advocate has proclaimed—the
next thing you know, someone earnestly writes a book claiming that Black English speakers cannot understand math.

GENTLE TRANSITION: AFROCENTRIC CURRICULA FOR BLACK STUDENTS

Teacher awareness, however, will only be but one part of the picture. In Los Angeles schools where the Standard English Proficiency program has been in place since 1981, informing teachers of the value of Black English, black students' test scores have not risen but have in fact gotten worse. (It is important to keep in mind that these programs include not only the teacher training but also bridging exercises.) This development suggests that stigma from teachers is only one part of the problem. As I suggested earlier, in my opinion, the shockingly poor performance of black students is primarily traceable to an alienation from education that is prevalent in the African American population.

Language attitudes are definitely one facet of this alienation. Teachers have noted that many black students associate standard English with whites, distance, and falsehood, while cherishing their in-group dialect as a badge of solidarity (recall Richard Pryor's nasal, milque toast voice when imitating whites, in roughly the voice of the character Smithers on The Simpsons). However, this is part and parcel of a rejection of school in general, not just the dialect it is taught in. Moreover, to defang this sentiment by describing it in academese as "resistance," which implies a passive pout, is a mistake. A pout would be more easily remedied than the reality, which is that "So why you talkin' white?" is less a question than a sharply confrontational charge of treason. Its speaker might just as well be saying "So why you readin' anyway?," "So why you wanna learn dat geometry?," "So what you wanna know about all dem white people anyway?" and finally, "So why you got to be goin' to school?"

Overcorrection from teachers may well contribute somewhat to this alienation, but is by no means a necessary element. I can testify that neither the black students in Philadelphia who tuned out at Newpath Montessori nor the four who left Friends' Select after ninth grade had ever been ridden by teachers for their "bad grammar," despite the fact that all of these students were at home in Black English. These students had opportunities to excel that even most white American children lack, including committed, enlightened teachers (Friends' Select was a Quaker school). Yet it was clear that they sensed the same barrier between themselves and "the school thing" that children from lesser circumstances do. For them, books, math, history, and even art and music class were okay here and there but in the end, well, for white people. While my New Jersey friend who was teased for liking books retreated into social isolation, his brother, in response to similar pressures, became a virtual poster boy for the "resistance to standard English" idea at thirteen, adopting a colorful Black English quite abruptly, when he had used virtually none before. Not only had he never been chided for using a dialect he had barely spoken, but this striking dialectal transformation was part and parcel of a general rejection of whites; he became the most stridently "black-identified" of our group.

In order to help black students feel the natural identification with school that students of other races generally feel, nothing could be more sensible than this second suggestion:

Institute Afrocentric curricula at predominantly African American schools.

Black students can be taught basic skills of comprehension and analysis using literature on African-American themes (but in standard English as much as possible) and focusing on African-American historical and social issues as well as the mainstream ones. Utilized as extensively as possible without denying black students the exposure to mainstream materials vital to their functioning as American citizens, the Afrocentric curriculum will bring classroom education closer to the African-American student, and leave them more open to mainstream information as well.

In one exemplary Afrocentric elementary school classroom I have visited, for example, the walls were festooned with colorful collages, clippings, student drawings, and posters on not only African and African-American themes, but also Mexican, Native American and even Cambodian themes, generating an appreciation of cultural differences as well as of African-American culture specifically. Children are called to order with the Yoruba summons "a-GO," spontaneously respond with the acknowledgment "a-MEH," and then proceed to alternate between mainstream subjects, such as mathematics, and subjects taught from an Afrocentric perspective, such as history through the lens
of current events such as the changing of the guard in the former Zaire (the Oakland controversy itself had been a subject not long before my visit). In such classrooms, one senses that the children are indeed getting a more vital and useful education than most white children get in any setting, and most importantly, the sense of home sparks enthusiastic participation in classroom activities.

Such classrooms are a classic application of John Dewey’s principle of starting students with what they know. Many bridging programs, such as those created by Mary Rhodes Hoover, include Afrocentric literature and history, and this aspect of these programs should be continued and expanded.

There is a caveat here, however. It is crucial that such curricula be designed to prepare black children for constructive membership in American society. Hopefully, school boards will resist pressure to incorporate pseudoscholarly propaganda from certain Afrocentric writers, such as that ancient Greece “stole” its philosophy and technology from a “Black” Egypt, that Jews dominated the slave trade, that world history is reducible to an eternal crusade against the black man, etc. A few books widely read by African Americans, such as George James’ Stolen Legacy; Molefi Asante’s Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge; Cheikh Anta Diop’s Civilization or Barbarism: An Authentic Anthropology; and the Nation of Islam’s The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews, have misled a great many innocent people to believe that such ideas are based on facts, deliberately hidden from general view by a racist white establishment. The appearance in 1991 of Black Athena, a dense, omnivorous double volume by a white scholar, which was widely reviewed, has unfortunately reinforced the misconception that this “Afrocentric history” has a scholarly basis. In fact, however, the emperor has no more clothes here than when claiming that Black English is an African language.

An overwhelming amount of research, particularly amidst the extremely critical reception of Black Athena in the 1990s, has shown that any unbiased person comparing Afrocentric history with the actual evidence is forced to conclude that many of these books are one part shoddy research and one part outright fabrication. There is no evidence whatsoever that Cleopatra or Socrates were black. There is no evidence that Greek thought was an importation of Egyptian thought—Greek and Egyptian writings match no more closely than the writings of Thoreau and Confucius. It has never been documented that Aristotle traveled to Egypt, and, more importantly, he could not have raided a library at Alexandria that was not even built until twenty-five years after his death (and even then was stocked mostly with Greek, not Egyptian, books). If by some chance white scholars have been hiding documents that would show otherwise, authors like James, Asante, and Diop do not reveal any, and therefore they cannot have based their ideas on having seen them. Finally, I personally can attest from years of study of the Atlantic slave trade that the idea of Jews as leaders in the enslavement of African-Americans’ ancestors is, at best, a laugh.

We can only respect these authors’ desire to lend black people a sense of noble heritage, and we must acknowledge that the extended study, expert mentoring, and obscure sources that would have shown these authors the flaws in their arguments may not have been available to them (especially James, who wrote in the 1940s). Nevertheless, the simple fact remains that the core of this Afrocentric history simply is not true.

The danger here is clear and present: We need not worry that these falsehoods might be fed to black youngsters, because they already have been. The Portland Baseline Essays is an Afrocentric teaching curriculum incorporating these notions that has, alas, already been used in Atlanta, Pittsburgh, Indianapolis, and Washington, D.C. This noble packet includes not only the types of things already mentioned, but also that the Egyptians had invented flying machines and built the pyramids by telekinesis.

Not all schools have included such blatant fantasy in Afrocentric curricula, but for better or for worse, it is the extremes that attract the most attention. Not only does this element turn taxpayers and legislatures against funding Afrocentric curricula, but it perverts the very aim of the strategy as a whole. There could be few crimes greater than to teach black children that wild-eyed whitey is out to get them at every turn, watch them retreat even further from the only society in which they can succeed, and then stand screaming that nothing has changed for blacks in America.

ALL THAT GLITTERS: HARD FACTS ABOUT TEACHING THROUGH BLACK ENGLISH

At this point, however, some readers might be asking: If it makes sense to institute Afrocentric curricula in English and history, then why not an Afrocentric approach to language arts as well? If we are to heed
John Dewey, why not start black students from the dialect that they know best?

The reason for not doing so is that the relationship between schooling and language skill is a special one, for black and white children alike. When it comes to lending children a historical perspective, Harriet Tubman and George Washington Carver will be as useful as Patrick Henry or Carlton E. Morse. When it comes to teaching children to engage narratives, literature of any stamp, black, white or plaid, will serve the purpose. However, when it comes to language skills themselves, the particular linguistic mission of schooling does not offer us this kind of choice. If that mission were simply to give children the gift of “language,” then we could indeed use either black or standard English. But this is not the goal. Although children often come to school knowing nothing of history and having never read a book, they come to school fully equipped with the gift of Language itself, whatever dialect they speak. When it comes to language skills, schooling has a more specific mission: to teach children how to express themselves in the particular fashion required of all functioning adults in society. This means giving children as strong a command as possible of the standard English dialect.

The idea of using Black English as a bridge toward just such command could seem innocent enough. However, this would do more harm than good. This is because of a very simple fact about learning languages:

People learn speech varieties best by immersion.

For our purposes, it will help to take a look at language immersion first from the speaking angle, and then the reading angle.

First, speaking. Many of us have spent years learning a second language in the classroom, only to find that when we get off the plane in the country where the language is spoken, we cannot understand a word and can barely manage to ask our way out of the airport. While we can manage things like “My uncle is lawyer but my aunt has a spoon,” “The young boy walks,” “If I had a book, I could write with a pencil” and other faceless sentences learned in the drills and vocabulary lists we spent so much time on, the sad fact is that it is a rare person who has much interest in talking slowly about silverware or walking boys. Time and again, people say that they never really learned the language until they were immersed in it, required to speak it and nothing else for months on end.

For adults, some initial drilling and memorization is helpful before this immersion period. However, it is often observed that children have astonishing capacities for learning languages. Young children of immigrant parents are often fluent in accent-free English after six months of school. They do this with no deliberate effort, and certainly without doing translation drills in the new language.

It is true that currently many immigrant students are taught in bilingual education programs, in which their native language is used alongside the new one. However, contrary to popular belief, these programs are not designed to teach children to speak the new language itself. Immigrant children learn the new language much less at the blackboard than through social interaction—in other words, immersion. The purpose of bilingual education is to allow children to acquire basic scholastic skills like reading and mathematics in the language they know well already. The benefits of such programs are clear, and I in no way mean to speak against them. However, where children are not provided with such programs, they learn to speak the new language just as quickly, as those who remember their Old World immigrant ancestors having to sink or swim in American schools so often attest. What suffers is the children’s acquisition of other skills. These ancestors’ descendants tend to miss that part of the issue, but the point stands that bilingual education programs are not a model for explicitly instructing black children in standard English because this is not the intention of such programs.

Today in Canada, for example, Anglophone children successfully learn French in immersion programs with no explicit instruction. Moreover, it is by no means middle-class white children and eager white immigrants who learn languages under such circumstances. The Ethiopians who speak the Gurage dialects (shown in Chapter 7) are confronted with Amharic, the national language of Ethiopia, when they go to school. Amharic is as different from the Gurage dialects as German is from English. This is not the best educational policy—students indeed spend the first couple of years confused about their lessons—but when it comes to speaking (we’ll getting to reading shortly), they do learn sterling Amharic. The Ethiopian running the restaurant you eat at or driving your taxicab speaks Amharic and may have learned it in this very way. Millions of East Africans pick up Swahili in school similarly.

Again, my point is not to denigrate bilingual education programs but simply to make clear that they are not designed to teach children how to speak the new language itself, and that within them or without
them, children have awesome capacities for picking up speech varieties. If immersion works this well for children learning different languages, then it can certainly work for children who need merely to reinforce their ability in a dialect they have heard around them since they were born. Children adopt new dialects as effortlessly and unconsciously as new languages. For example, many people born in Great Britain who emigrated to the United States as children still speak British English with their parents while speaking perfect American English everywhere else, even switching between the dialects when both their parents and Americans are present.

When it comes to learning to read, as opposed to speak, standard English, the bilingual education model seems more plausibly applicable to Black English, in that the purpose of bilingual education programs is to allow children to learn to read first in the language they know best. Here, however, the old issue of degree raises its head. It is obvious that a Chinese child must make a stretch to learn to read in English before they speak it. However, it is difficult to see the black child as laboring under the same burden; more realistically, the black child learns to read in a dialect that is a minor variation on their home one, which they hear around them regularly. Never has bilingual education been suggested for speech varieties that are so very close. Advocates of bridging have guessed that this dialect gap is a problem nevertheless, but what children accomplish elsewhere, the presence of standard English in most African Americans' speech, and the failure of bridging techniques to improve black test scores in no fewer than nine studies, all suggest otherwise. This being so, we can assume that an immersion approach will teach black children to read as well as speak standard English—and millions of African Americans today attest to this.

Let's zoom in on the nature of immersion. Immersion in a speech variety, by definition, requires a setting in which the native language temporarily has no place, forcing the speaker to use and experience the new language over long periods of time, expressing every shade of thought. Many young adults experience this kind of immersion while spending a year living with a family in a European country, and there is a noticeable difference in how well people who do this learn a foreign language in comparison with those who travel overseas and spend much of their time utilizing the "escape valve" of speaking English with Americans.

For this reason and this reason alone, it is not advisable to bring Black English into America's classrooms. The job of the American school is to give black children a firm command of speaking, reading, and writing standard English. Because the best way for children to acquire a new speech variety, especially one so close to their home dialect, is through immersion, this means that there is no place for dialect readers and contrastive drills. This is not because Black English is wrong—it isn't—or because standard English is better—it isn't—but because Black English would be, by definition, an impediment to immersion in standard English, just as Italian or Turkish would be. Every hour spent listening to tapes of someone talking like their big sister on the phone with friends last night, every hour spent engaging Black English on the page instead of standard English, every hour spent giggling about whether you say "Michael Jackson be dancing" with friends or with the school principal, is one less hour spent immersed in the standard English dialect that needed to succeed in the world. Dialect readers and contrastive analysis drills are no more appropriate to such a schoolroom than tennis rackets would be at a ping-pong lesson. Bridging techniques would be antithetical to the crucial aspect of immersion.

Indeed, drills and exercises in Black English work against the very goal of creating comfortably bidialectal people. There are two reasons for this. One is that bridging techniques address standard English at the conscious level, when languages and dialects can only be truly learned at the unconscious level. It is a noble goal to want to make black students feel that school is for them by making substantial room for African-American culture. This is laudable for literature and history, which develop conscious skills. But acquiring true command of a language or dialect reaches to the subconscious. Conscious training only takes us as far as "the young boy walks," and if children do not even need this initial leg up to learn foreign languages, they certainly do not need it to learn a minor variation of their home dialect.

The second reason is that translation exercises and dialect readers ultimately present standard English as a party trick, highlighting it as something external to black identity, something "other." As we have seen, many bridging advocates concede that there is no significant dialect gap at stake, but they support the technique as a way of making black students feel that standard English is for them, juxtaposing the
dialects in egalitarian fashion. However, the very act of juxtaposition also automatically renders standard English as "else," distant, "not them." We are not seeking to teach black children standard English as a code to be grudgingly called on when "out there" in stiff, itchy clothes. A person who conceives of standard English this way—as a tool to be manipulated in a conscious way—will never be any more at home in it than we are at home in French when saying things like le jeune garçon marche. A person is truly fluent in a language or dialect only when feeling it as a part of themselves, as an expression of their soul. We can see this in terms of foreign languages in how often people with stunning command of a second language acquire this degree of comfort within the unparalleled intimacy of a romantic relationship with a native speaker of the language. We also see it in how people describe reaching a stage in learning a language where they can "be themselves." This stage and "My uncle is a lawyer but my aunt has a spoon" are light-years apart. Highlighting Black English as "black" and standard English as "something else" would encourage a conscious engagement with the standard rather than a subconscious one.

Some might argue that the sociocultural context here requires that we intercede on the conscious level because children are reluctant to engage with standard English on the subconscious level. However, the fact will always remain that a solid command of standard English (or any dialect) requires subconscious engagement. For this reason, rather than bringing black students by the hand into a half-hearted command of standard English by using a conscious process, we should accommodate surrounding conditions in such a way that black children open up to allowing standard English to penetrate their subconscious.

More specifically, we must stimulate black children to connect with the school setting as a whole to make it a part of their souls, for them. Teacher training in the legitimacy of Black English would work toward this goal by leading teachers away from the mistaken impression that black students' casual speech is a symptom of stupidity or sloth. Afrocentric curricula would make school seem less remote and more relevant to the lives of most black children. If students connect with this setting, and this setting is one where business is conducted in standard English, then black children will add standard English to their verbal repertoire as part of an overall acceptance of school as being for them. In other words, if school is a major aspect of "what I do" to these children, and if standard English is as integral to the school setting as the paint on the walls, then standard English becomes part of "what I do." This is how languages and dialects are learned all over the world; this is how African-American children will acquire standard English.

As we have seen, it is not true that this is too much to ask of children in general (Stuttgart), and black children have a massive head start at it anyway because standard English is spoken in their homes as well as Black English. African Americans who have a true command of standard English are proof that schools can accomplish this without translation exercises. None of the millions of successful, bidialectal black adults in America today acquired their standard English using contrasting analysis techniques. They acquired standard English because membership in mainstream society, where affairs are conducted in standard English, was vital to them. More properly, because they were committed to membership in mainstream society, they learned standard English as a matter of course—few such people at any point consciously thought of themselves as "acquiring standard English" or even of making any special effort to be able to "speak well." Their bidialectal competence is, in other words, subconscious, not conscious—as we see in the ambivalence many fluently bidialectal African Americans feel about being told that they speak Black English at all.

My friend who acquired Black English at thirteen is an ironically useful embodiment of the how and why of young people acquiring new dialects. Instead of adding standard English to Black English, he added Black English to his standard. He did it simply by imitating the neighborhood kids and his relatives, and surely needed no translation drills to do so. He learned Black English successfully because of his new identification with black culture—in other words, because it was "for him." We sense that immersion did a much better job of this than a "Black English in 40 Lessons" cassette program would have.

Thus our goal should be for all black children to be as fundamentally open to schooling as the "One Hundred Most Powerful Blacks" in each month's issue of Ebony were as children, thereby becoming effortlessly, subconsciously fluent speakers of standard as well as Black English. In order to do this, we must acknowledge that sociocultural conditions have changed in many black communities. It also means we must make accommodations, such as teacher training in Black English
and Afrocentric curricula. How human beings learn languages, however, will not change.

**TAking Black English Into Account in the Classroom: Constructive Suggestions**

How, then, might the education of black children proceed along these lines on the level of daily instruction? The issue plays on three levels: speaking, reading, and writing, which I have only occasionally distinguished until now.

Taking each level in turn, consider my third suggestion:

*Allow young African-American students to speak in their home dialect in class.*

Traditionally, teachers have treated black children like foreign learners and corrected their departures from standard English. However, there is a crucial difference that this practice neglects. When a Russian university professor I once had had a class with refrained from shaking hands with a visitor after class saying, “My hands are of chalk” instead of “My hands are covered with chalk,” the sentence was wrong, period. No native English speaker anywhere would utter such a sentence; it is based on no spoken system. However, when the African-American child says, *When you gone, he be gettin up on yo des*, she is precisely following the rules of an established dialect spoken by millions of other people. She is not speaking incorrect standard English—she is speaking another kind of English, and speaking it well.

Some might suppose that even if Black English is legitimate on its own, that the way to teach black children the new dialect is to correct them into it. However, all evidence indicates that this simply will not work:

1. Research on how all children learn to speak has repeatedly shown that they tend simply not to heed correction, insisting on saying “feet” or, as I did when I was little, “I goes,” until they eventually match their speech with what they hear around them on their own.

2. When it comes to “correcting” African-American children into standard English, one often makes demands the children can barely meet yet. Small black children can barely manage some consonant clusters or a perfect th (see page 131). They will only be able to produce such sounds after constant exposure—after all, we didn’t learn to produce the sound th by watching someone stick their tongue between their teeth (imagine trying to learn *anything* while having to watch someone stick their tongue between their teeth!). In the meantime, they will not be able to produce the correction to teachers’ complete satisfaction, which will only contribute to general demoralization.

3. The Piestrup study (page 219) explicitly documented that, indeed, constant correction of this kind depresses Black students’ reading scores.

The way African-American students will learn to speak standard English is by being immersed in it day after day, week after week, year after year in school. As we have seen, children are miraculous language sponges. To be sure, it will take black children time to begin speaking standard English fluently, especially because in most cases the teacher will be one of the only people in a classroom speaking it. What this means is that in early years, African-American children should not be corrected for reading out a standard English passage in Black English. Reading standard English with the Black English sound system shows the same successful linkage between written symbol and speech as a white child reading out the passage in standard English would. Then the study showing that black teenagers could hear *ed’s* that they did not always pronounce shows that a black child who sees *desk* and says *des* has not somehow missed the fact that the teacher, and often many black people they know, say *desk*. When they become comfortable in standard English, their recitation will mirror standard English more precisely.

More generally, when called on to comment on a story or a lesson or to answer questions, young African-American students should be allowed to speak in their home dialect freely. The important thing in literature, history, and math lessons is the content. If we know that Black English is a legitimate dialect that we hope these people will possess all of their lives, then an answer delivered in eloquent Black English is obviously as valuable as the same point made in standard English.

It should be nothing less than ordinary for African-American schoolchildren to begin by being allowed to jingle along joyously in their home dialect, acquiring a basic confidence in self-expression and
engage with new material that is vital to their later functioning in school and beyond. The goal should be for them to gradually begin speaking standard English in the classroom over time, having learned it the best and only way, through immersion, willing imitation based on listening to the teacher, and language arts lessons in standard English. This is exactly what happens in Stuttgart and Switzerland: Younger kids speak dialect in school with no stigma attached and no correction and acquire standard German over time through constant exposure and good old-fashioned grammar lessons in the standard dialect.

The fact that schoolteachers will be most black students’ only source of live, uninterrupted standard English makes it particularly clear, however, that the language of classroom teaching and lessons must be standard English exclusively. Television helps to reinforce standard English, but it can never have the powerful impact of a real person in the same room communicating vital information, issuing commands, making requests, and encouraging exchange. In the classroom, African-American students will already be surrounded by Black English speakers. As tempting as it might seem to add translation exercises, dialect readers, and tapes of Black English to this setting for purposes of validation, these methods only cut into the already rationed exposure the children get to standard English. Validation is an important issue, but in the crucial setting of the classroom, it is better left to subjects other than language, via Afrocentric curriculum materials.

One additional issue here: When we say we want black children to speak “standard English,” what exactly do we mean? The goal should not be to teach all African-American children to speak like Dan Rather. In fact, very few black people who speak standard English talk like Dan Rather—they speak an identifiably African-American standard English.

The Black English sound system is the near-universal linguistic unifier of the African-American community. It has the effect that even when using the sentence structure of standard English, most African Americans have what is often called a black sound. Experiments have shown that whites and blacks alike can tell a person’s color even on the telephone (blacks being slightly better at it than whites), even when the person is using no Black English sentence structures. I remember observing to my mother as a child that one can often hear that an announcer on the radio is African American even when they are reading quite formally from sterile standard English news reports. This is because most African Americans are capable of using at least the Black English sound system to some degree, and almost all African Americans use it to at least a very light, but perceptible, extent. Most scripts for The Cosby Show contained very little Black English sentence structure, if any, and yet one could listen to an episode without the picture and tell that the actors were black without having ever seen the show or heard of the actors elsewhere. (This show loses much of its heart, therefore, when dubbed into French or German in Europe, where the voice actors’ speech is identical to mainstream white speech.) Of course, there are occasional exceptions—on Cosby, for example, Lisa Bonet had no perceptible black sound in her speech. However, all of the other actors did; in general, cases such as Bonet are few and far between (for example, all of the black actors on The Jeffersons, 227, and Family Matters would be identifiably African American on the telephone, especially to other African Americans).

There is no reason that standard English should not be allowed to come in a range of flavors when it comes to sound system. It already does: Bill Clinton speaks standard English with a noticeable Southern inflection, while characters in the film Fargo speak it with a Minnesota inflection, etc. Standard dialects elsewhere are similar: For example, most Stuttgarters speak standard German with an easily perceptible Stuttgart accent. There is nothing remotely slovenly or degraded about the sound system of Black English—it is simply different from standard English. Therefore, the standard English of black people (or, as linguist Arthur Spears has called it, Standard African-American English) will have an African-American flavor, reflecting the identity of African Americans as a group, despite the variety among them.

Dialect readers would be antithetical to the goal of giving black children active competence in the standard English dialect. Because so very much evidence suggests that Black English is not necessary as a bridge to standard English, reading materials should be in standard English (although there is of course nothing exceptional about occasional passages in Black English in African-American literature). My fourth suggestion then is:

Teach African-American children to read in standard English.

Some might argue that dialect readers will give black children a sense of inclusion, but this must be viewed against the fact that seeing only standard English on the page will be another facet of the immer-
sion necessary for black children to achieve complete comfort in the
dialect. There is no value judgment against Black English implied in
this. Black children acquire Black English through an immersion that
comes naturally from their home environment. Immersing them in
standard English requires a more deliberate approach because most of
their classmates will be speaking Black English around them in school.
The teacher will be one source of this immersion; another source will be
the printed page. Furthermore, these two sources will reinforce one
another. There is a strong correlation between reading and speaking
skills in learning languages: One achieves speaking fluency much faster
if one has already achieved reading fluency.

Dialect readers, in themselves, are hardly evil. Such sources might
be made available to interested parents to supplement their children’s
education at home. Along these lines, Patricia Nolen, author of one of
the studies showing that bridging is unnecessary, suggested that dialect
readers would be more appropriate after children have passed from the
stage of acquiring reading as a skill to the stage where they are capable
of reading for reflection. To be sure, many African-American parents,
especially disadvantaged ones, would be unlikely to make use of this
resource. However, for all black children to acquire standard English
skills, each must be assured at least a grade one-to-twelve education’s
worth of immersion in that dialect. Materials in Black English, in the
strict sense, are only incidental to this.

This brings me to my fifth suggestion:

Only older students should be taught to “translate” into standard English in
writing, as a remedial approach.

The various kinds of evidence we have seen suggests that black
students will learn to write in standard English by using with standard
English materials from the outset. Black English and standard English
are simply not different enough for this to be characterizable as ar-
duous, confusing translation. Black children are capable of internalizing
a basic sense that certain forms in their in-group speech are not for
writing; they have done so for a long, long time.

It is well known that African-American students often include
Black English features in their writing, especially when young. This
is no more a cause for alarm than the use of Black English sound
features in reading aloud at early stages. What is important is that
the child has made the crucial link between speech and the written sym-
bol. Ideally, as such children get older, through immersion—hearing
the teacher, digesting printed materials—they will acquire a sense of
what is written and what is not, and such features will gradually dis-
appear.

On the other hand, in the present tense, there are a great many
African-American students who have not progressed to this stage even
by their late teens. It is difficult to attribute this to the gap between Black
and standard English, given that such students typically suffer from the
wide range of sociocultural burdens that would depress the school
performance of a standard English-speaking white child from Scars-
dale. It is clear that education has not worked for them.

Such children are past the stage where they can easily learn a
speech variety by simple immersion, and their participation in com-
pulsory education will soon end in any case. Thus the time is past when
standard English could reach them in the most effective way, through
their subconscious. As such, at this stage, it is appropriate to resort to
teaching processes that appeal to the conscious mind. In the case of
writing, this means that it will be useful to train older black students out
of using Black English patterns in writing by using the contrastive
analysis approach. This approach is particularly appropriate in writing
because writing is basically a conscious process even when done flu-
ently, as opposed to speaking and reading, which are automatic, effort-
less processes when done fluently.

The Taylor study (page 219) has shown that this approach is effec-
tive with older African-American students; its results will surely be
confirmed in future experiments.

The goal of these recommendations is to create classroom settings
in which Black English and African-American culture are accepted as
legitimate, while preserving the conditions for optimum acquisition of
standard English skills. This model is similar to that used in many
bidialectal settings worldwide. This approach has several advantages
over the bridging approach.

1. It does not put the intelligence of African-American children
   into question.
2. It allows for the acquisition of a new dialect in the most effective
   way possible—willing imitation amidst regular immersion—
instead of the bridging method that testing has shown not to work.

3. In an era in which money for education is so scarce, it costs less than formulating, testing, and printing dialect readers, translation workbooks, and teachers’ guides for bridging programs.

4. In allowing African-American children to incorporate standard English as a part of themselves rather than as a separate “tool,” it will promote the fluently bicultural identity necessary for African-Americans to succeed in this country.

Insisting on teaching black children standard English with translation exercises when the dialect gap is not the problem is a lot like trying to teach a child to paint with a paint-by-numbers set. It might be fun for a little while but the result is a trick, not the real thing. We all know that the only way to learn to paint is to paint. Some might argue that a paint-by-numbers set was a good way to introduce children to painting (this was often said in the 1950s). But on the other hand, neither Vermeer nor even Aunt Lucy—who when not correcting us about Billy and me does watercolors in her spare time—started with paint-by-numbers sets. We also suspect that such kits merely take time away from, and possibly even impede, the development of natural talents. Why saddle the African-American child with a paint-by-numbers set, when we could give them an easel, a paintbrush, and some paints, praise them in their first bold splashes, make sure they see lots of our own paintings, and over time gently guide them into the joy of making their own pictures?

**POSTSCRIPT: THE BIG PICTURE**

During the controversy over the Oakland resolution during the Christmas season of 1996, I was the only linguist the media could find to present as a con position, appearing in dozens of print and broadcast outlets against an ocean of pros. If all of what we have seen follows naturally from the basic ways that languages and dialects are used and learned, then why is it that so many linguists, as well as educators, disagree with my viewpoint?

Many in my profession have considered me to simply not “get it”—some have spoken of hoping to get me into a corner to set me straight. I think, however, that the divergence of opinion—or better put, my divergence of opinion—has much to do with how vastly our perspectives on an apparently simple issue can differ according to personal circumstances, academic focus, and sociopolitical ideology.

I happen to have spent my career thus far studying the truly exotic Englishes of the Caribbean, South America, and West Africa—where “Right away, Shirley starts to ask herself who could have sent it” is Wantewante Shirley bugin aksi ensrefi taki, suma na a suma di seni en. Having seen that children in Jamaica suffer because of huge gaps such as the one between oonoo see dat teeda girl a-come here, no take none gi’ im and “If you see that other girl coming here, don’t give her any,” I cannot help questioning the degree to which black children are burdened by If you see dat othu gal comin’ here, don’t give her none.

As the child of a social worker, I grew up with an acute awareness of the link between black children’s school performance and the ills of poverty, drug abuse, and societal alienation. Like any African American, I have relatives much less fortunate than me, and seeing many of their lives follow well-known pathways has made it even clearer how little their poor grades have had to do with multiple negation and the verb to be. Finally, having been lucky enough to grow up in the middle-class circumstances made possible by African Americans before me, I have seen at close hand how echoes of these same underclass pathologies so often turn even more fortunate black children away from school.

Those who attribute the poor performance of African-American children in school to Black English bring quite different frames of reference to the issue. One can trace two main currents among these advocates.

One is a group of linguists and education specialists, white and black, who began studying Black English in the 1960s. These scholars were invaluable in demonstrating the systematicity of Black English at a time when many thinkers were depicting the dialect as a badge of cognitive deficiency.

Because this work has necessarily focused on the differences between black and standard English, the overall similarities have naturally been of lesser interest. As a result, decades of books, articles, presentations, and classes informed by this perspective have led Black English to be defined by these differences when the similarities are in
fact dominant. In itself, this is inevitable—there would be no reason to dedicate decades of scholarship to the ways in which two dialects are the same! However, the fact remains that in this light, the idea of Black English as a "different system" barring its speakers from acquiring standard English appears more plausible than it would if it had not been necessary, for separate reasons, to focus so closely on these small differences.

These scholars have only the best of intentions and their work has been overwhelmingly beneficial. However, it is difficult to avoid suspecting that their concentration on Black English's differences from standard English and the absence of truly divergent English dialects in this country make Black English look more like a hothouse bloom to them than the mild departure from standard English that it is. Among the white scholars, in particular, being enthusiastic spectators of the dialect rather than native speakers possibly furthers this tendency. These scholars are certainly intellectually aware of the range of dialectal variations worldwide, but they often seem to address Black English separately from that awareness.

The other current stems from a powerful stream of African-American thought that has perverted the glorious revolution of the Civil Rights movement into a frozen, incoherently hostile battle-siege posture that current events no longer justify.

None of us are under the impression that racism has disappeared in the United States. Housing discrimination, criminal sentencing bias, and police brutality are among the most persistent problems. However, it is melodramatic and ahistorical to neglect the fact that just forty years ago, these things and much worse were accepted practice rarely discussed, while today they are widely publicized and condemned and diminish by the year. Also useful to realize: The idea that the black middle class is a lucky sliver dwarfed by a massive black underclass is long obsolete. Today, only about one quarter of the African-American population is poor. The increasingly occasional and subtle role that racism plays in the lives of most black Americans stands in striking contrast to the daily, institutionalized presence of racism in the lives of all African Americans just forty years ago. Our main task is to rescue the underclass, but even here, racism dealt its active hands decades ago. Today, the inner city is the product of a neglect that, while criminal in itself, is based more on class than racial bias. The federal government caters to those with the wherewithal to pay; it is no more responsive to the white working poor than to inner-city blacks.

We must remain vigilant; our work is not done. However, to give any quarter whatsoever to the self-indulgent fantasy that the Civil Rights movement accomplished nothing substantial is an insult—to the intelligence of blacks and whites alike, to those whose lives are truly stunted by active racism (South African blacks, the Haitian poor), and to the African Americans who made our lives possible.

To be sure, there are a great many constructively engaged African Americans dedicated to healing, moving ahead, and creating dynamic new African-American identities. They share space, however, with an increasingly influential mindset dedicated to perpetuating the cheap thrills of eternal self-righteous indignation at all costs. Contrary to popular belief, this viewpoint is by no means restricted to the "lunatic fringe" of certain Black Muslims and street-corner opportunists like Al Sharpton. On the contrary, it is particularly fashionable among black academics, educators, and policymakers, who are uniquely positioned to influence African-American thought.

We all know this line of thinking. Washington deliberately created the inner city and later may well have deliberately infected the black population with AIDS. Despite the flood of television shows and films about middle-class African Americans as I write, "middle class blacks don't see their lives depicted in the media," and if they do, then the media is "downplaying the unpleasant side of the African-American experience." Never mind Oprah Winfrey, Colin Powell, Bill Cosby, Toni Morrison, or dozens of others—there is a "dearth of black role models for African-American children." If the percentage of blacks on a university's faculty is less than the percentage of blacks in the American population, then this is due not to a low number of qualified candidates (unsurprising just thirty-five years past legalized segregation), but to racism in the administration. As to the fact that white administrators have spent thirty years nurturing Affirmative Action programs, this has all been a mere smokescreen. And so on.

For those who work from this victimologist perspective, the idea that black children speak a separate tongue and have been denied their due in not being taught to translate into standard English takes its place as yet another indication that African Americans are engaged in an interminable war against a white America frozen in naked antagonism
tune at a funeral. The indignant dismissal reveals gut impulse rather than considered opinion.

Dr. Ernie Smith, for example, was so incensed by my position during the Oakland controversy that he wrote an article surmising that I must suffer from a brain injury and that my appointment at Berkeley must surely be an Affirmative Action gesture. After it was rejected by The Black Scholar, he sent a copy to each member of the Berkeley linguistics department. He followed this up with a stream of furious letters to me laced with colorful epithets including particularly colorful ones referring to my mother.

What is most alarming about this is that it silences reasonable voices. Specifically, I am not the only scholar who sees the implications of the linguistic facts in this way. Reviewing the literature on Black English and education over the past thirty years, one finds not only that the bridging approach has been proven ineffective in study after study, but that a number of prominent linguists and education specialists have explicitly criticized the identification of Black English as the culprit in African-American children’s scholastic performance. Yet while they have been willing to say this in the exclusion of academic conferences and journals, when the issue comes up for public debate, the same people have been either silent or have dutifully supported the bridging approach in the name of “serving the needs of African-American children.”

Granted, these scholars may not find themselves as directly opposed to the bridging approach as myself. Their complete silence on any perspective but assent gives pause nonetheless. African-American critic and essayist Stanley Crouch has some thoughts to live by on this:

We need to move toward a freedom that steps beyond the lightweight vision of racial solidarity that discourages the insights expected of serious writers and intellectuals.... So many of us are afraid of being called self-hating or neoconservative that we function too often like espionage operatives who cannot be expected to tell the truth publicly for fear of being castigated unto unemployment or ostracized as traitors.

I doubt that the scholars who have refrained from airing their true feelings about the bridging approach are under the sway of extremist ideologies. Rather, I suspect that the politicalization connected to the
bridging issue leads them to reflexively defer their expertise. Exchanges I have had with some linguists support this.

In the aftermath of the Oakland controversy, many teachers told me that in the end they were thankful that the media discussion had revealed that Black English is not bad English. Many say that for the first time in their lives, they, parents, and many of their friends feel good about something that they had regarded as a dear but embarrassing community blunder, rather like the town drunk. One teacher told me of someone who, once quiet, now talks up a storm, comfortable in a dialect that they now know is as legitimate as any speech variety.

What it comes down to is that African Americans are nothing less than lucky to speak Black English. Most white Americans speak a variety of standard English, and then have a home variety only slightly different from this (“Ya got anything in th’ fridge over there?”). On the other hand, many Jamaicans speak not only standard English, but can also go from She’s my mother to she me mama to the patois sentence I'm a fee me mama (which would sound like Turkish to us) as fast as a Lambergini goes from zero to sixty. Jamaicans slide into, out of, and around these varieties all the time without a thought—there are no discrete boundaries between standard English, “Jamaican English,” and patois any more than there are between water, snow, and ice. Only creolists think of patois as a separate tongue—to a Jamaican they are all types of English, and they are correct in that categorization. African Americans are in between white Americans and Jamaicans, being able to juggle Nobody told her anyway and Ain’t nobody done tol’ huh nohow like a Broadway pit musician can double on the alto saxophone and the flute in the same show. African Americans labor under no linguistic handicap—on the contrary, the ironic result of those centuries of slavery and oppression is a blessing. Like Jamaicans, African Americans speak a larger English than white Americans. With their control of standard English, Black English, everything in between, and sometimes even Gullah, African Americans speak nothing less than the largest English in the United States.

I often confuse media interviewers and scholars alike in firmly believing this and yet at the same time being equally convinced that Black English, in all its glory, has been misidentified as the culprit in black children’s poor school performance. We must definitely adjust our perceptions of Black English in order to create an environment optimally suited to opening the minds of these children to the wonders and benefits of education. However, to create true African Americans, this environment must be one in which the children are immersed in the coin of the realm in American life, standard English.

If this is done, then I predict that in one hundred years, with the inevitability of interracial mixture and—dare we ask?—a direct address of the state of our schools and the tragedy of the black underclass, the late twentieth century flap over a language called “Ebonics” will appear as a quaint blip on the historical radar screen.