

No Kinda Sense

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“She be all like, ‘What ch’all talkin’ ’bout?’ like she ain’t had no kinda sense.”

When I heard these words spoken by my eleven-year-old daughter it seemed as though a hundred conflicting scripts raced through my mind all at the same time.

My mother to her ten-year-old daughter: “Lisa, would you please speak correctly? Don’t sound so ignorant!”

Me to a group of teachers a few decades later: “All people have the right to their own language. We cannot constantly correct children and expect them to continue to want to talk like us.”

Me, arguing a point with my sister, the English teacher: “Okay, the bottom line is, if you had to choose, which would you rather your children be able to say, ‘I be rich’ or ‘I am poor!’ ”?

My sister’s response, with no hesitation: “I am poor!”

I find myself back to the present saying, “Maya, would you please speak to me in a language I can understand!” She responds, grimacing, “Aw, mom!” And, pulling her mouth into a primly taut circle, she goes through what she said to me again, this time enunciating with exaggerated, overly precise diction, “She said, ‘What are you people speaking about,’ as if she didn’t have any sense.”

I’ve carried that interchange, and others like it, around with me daily as I work in schools and other educational settings. What was my response about?

There was at once a horror at the words emanating from my daughter’s mouth, and a sense of immense shame at feeling that horror. What was it about her language that evoked such a strong response?

Maya is a middle-class, African American child whose mother is a university professor. Her first language, her mother tongue, is standard American English. This is the language she learned at home and the language she used in the predominantly White schools she attended until fifth grade. Certainly she was exposed to, and used, casual forms of what has been referred to as Black English or Ebonics, which is typical in “M-m-m g-i-r-r-r-l, that sweet potato pie is smokin’! I don’t know how you do it, but that pie is callin’ my name!”

When Maya was in the middle of the fifth grade, I became concerned with her emotional state in a small, predominantly White private school. Although the instruction was excellent, she seemed to be sinking into some sort of emotional abyss. Although her class had several African American boys, she was the only African American girl. She was often excluded by the other girls. She began to say things like, “Maybe if I were prettier I’d have more friends.” When she approached me one day and requested that she be allowed to get plastic surgery because her lips were “too big,” I knew I had to act. She transferred midyear to a new start-up public charter school with a population of about 98 percent African American children.

As she developed new friends, her self-esteem soared and once more she became the funny, creative, self-assured kid I recognized. But she also acquired new speech codes. And while my head looked on in awe at how my child could so magically acquire a second language form, at how brilliant her mind was to be able to adapt so readily to new circumstances, my heart lurched at some unexamined fear because she had done so.

As I sought to examine my reaction, I realized there were two questions lurking in my consciousness. The first, why did I react with such heart-pounding emotion to my daughter’s words? The second, if it was that easy for my child to “pick up” at school a new language clearly not her home language, then what was preventing the millions of African American children whose home language was different from the school’s from acquiring the dialect of Standard English? In attempting to answer the first, I gained insight into the second.

Initially, I wondered if I had been infected by that collective shame we African Americans have internalized about our very beings. Having come of age in a racist society, we double-think every aspect of our beings—are we good enough to be accepted by the white world? If it feels right, then it must be wrong. We have to change our natural selves to just be adequate. I used to think that our biggest communal shame was our hair. We have spent millions of hours and tens of millions of dollars to acquire the “swing hair” that white American society says is beautiful. I remember when I returned home from my first year of college with an Afro and discovered that my mother, who remained publicly stalwart through most of the tragedies of her life, was overcome by tears in restaurants, gas stations, and drug stores over what her daughter “had done to herself.” From discussions with friends, that story is in no way unique in our collective history. When the Oakland School Board gave birth to the “Ebonics debate” in 1996, I realized that language might be an even greater source of collective disgrace.

Although the purpose of the now infamous Oakland Policy was to allow teachers to gain enough knowledge about the home language of children to respect it and learn to use it to build knowledge of “standard English,” African Americans in all walks of life were incensed. How dare anyone suggest that that ignorant-sounding trash was “our language,” that we couldn’t learn to speak properly? Do they think we’re all stupid? From Kweisi Mfume, head of the NAACP, to Rev. Jesse Jackson to Maya Angelou, all expressed to sensation-crazed reporters—with no knowledge of the real policy—that what Oakland was doing was a terrible, grievous mistake. Maya Angelou spoke with quiet intensity, “I am incensed. The very idea that African American language is a language separate and apart can be very threatening because it can encourage young men and women not to learn standard English.” Jesse Jackson fired out with his customary passionate oratory, “You don’t have to go to school to learn to talk garbage.”*

*Year in Review, 1996, cnn.com.

As the media created a mounting furor, never were African American linguistic experts consulted. For that matter, neither were the teachers who were implementing the program. Aileen Moffitt, a white teacher trained in the Standard English Proficiency Program (on which the Oakland policy was based), posted an open letter on the Internet in 1997 [members.tripod.com] in which she praised the effect of the program on her students’ achievement and on her own teaching. Never was this kind of information brought to the general public. The black radio stations had a field day. One parodied the televised advertisements for a mail order reading program by presenting fictional endorsements by several characters, including a white cab driver, “Hooked on Ebonics worked for me! Since I got dat stuff, I ain’t had nobody stealin’ mah money no more!” And another from a professional basketball player: “Hooked on Ebonics worked for me! Ah plays basketball and ah makes millions of dollars. If you gets Hooked on Ebonics, you can be a millionaire, too, jes’ like me!” One group, “Atlanta’s Black Professionals,” managed to get a full-page ad in the *New York Times* (October 9, 1998), without paying a penny. The ad depicts a black man in an overcoat with his back facing the reader, but clearly intended to resemble Dr. Martin Luther King. The headline, “I HAS A DREAM” is written over the image. Below the picture are two paragraphs of small print, with the words, “SPEAK OUT AGAINST EBONICS” printed in large type at the end. In apparent support of the message portrayed by the ad, the Newspaper Association of America awarded it the prestigious Annual Athena Award for 1998 (www.naa.org/display/athena98/grandprize.html).[†]

I was included in a group of linguists and scholars from all over the country who attempted unsuccessfully to get the *New York Times* to offer equal space for a rebuttal of the ad. The editors refused to publish either the ad or a letter to the editor.

Behind the humor and outrage was the shame that some group of black folks had dared to air our dirty little secret—that a lot of us didn't know how to “talk right,” and some didn't much care what other folk thought about it. The even deeper secret was that even those of us who had acquired the “standard dialect” still loved and used aspects of Ebonics all the time. From the call and response rhyming speeches of Reverend Jackson, to the perfectly rendered voices of Alice Walker's, Toni Morrison's, and Zora Neale Hurston's heart-touching characters, to the jivin' d.j.'s on all the Black radio stations, to all of our mothers, brothers, and ourselves, our language has always been a part of our very souls. When we are with our own, we revel in the rhythms and cadences of connection, in the “sho nuf”s, and “what go roun' come roun' ”s, and in the “ain' nothin' like the real thing' ”s. So what was the problem?

The real issue was our concern about what others would think. We worried how, after years and years of trying to prove ourselves good enough, we might again be dismissed as ignorant and unworthy by those in power, by “the white folks.” We worried that our children would be viewed, and subsequently treated, as “less than”—in schools now, and in the workplace later. Consequently, those of us who reach for or attempt to maintain middle-class acceptability work hard to stamp out the public expression of the language with which we enjoy such a love/hate relationship.

Our fears are not unfounded. When I searched the Internet during the Ebonics debate, I found some of the most horrendous racist comments I could have imagined. Although I cannot find the exact quote, I believe I paraphrase pretty accurately what one man wrote: “Well, the niggers have finally admitted what we all knew all along. They are just too stupid to learn to speak English like the rest of us.” Other comments echoed the same sentiments—if in slightly more polite words—that the language spoken by many African Americans was merely further evidence of their cognitive deficiency.

Recently, a friend who is a speech pathologist told me about one of her current clients. A major national consulting firm contacted my friend and asked if she could work with one of their employees on language improvement. Apparently, the employee was absolutely brilliant in computer technology, but problems arose each time she was sent out on a job. The hiring company invariably called the consulting firm and requested they send someone more knowledgeable. Even after the consulting firm assured the company representatives that this woman was absolutely the

best in the country for what they wanted, they still balked. The consultant in question is an African American woman whose speech patterns reflect her Southern, rural roots. None of the companies that hired her could move past her language to appreciate her expertise. Indeed, just before the consulting firm contacted the speech pathologist, one company had sent the firm a long, insulting letter listing every word the consultant had “mispronounced” and every grammatical “mistake” she had made. The consulting firm desperately wanted her expertise, but needed it to be packaged in a form that was acceptable to its clients. Perhaps we have in our country’s development reached a stage in which some of the American populace is willing to see beyond skin color to access intellectual competence, but there are as yet few pockets which can “listen beyond” language form.

So, when my child’s language reflects that of some of her peers, I feel the eyes of “the other” negatively assessing her intelligence, her competence, her potential, and yes, even her moral fiber. So, I forgive myself for my perhaps overly emotional reaction, my painful ambivalence, for I know that it is less a rejection of the language form created by my people, and more a mother’s protective instinct to insure that her child’s camouflage is in order when she must encounter potential enemy forces.

But my child has other thoughts on the matter. I ask her if she knows why I critique her language, if she understands that there will be people who judge her on the basis of the words that she speaks. She answers, without hesitation, “Well, that’s their problem!” And I hear my own words spoken back to me: “It doesn’t matter what other people think about you, you have to be who you are. It’s their problem if they can’t appreciate how wonderful you are.” I try another tack. “You’re right, it is their problem. But suppose they are in charge of whether you get the job you want or the college you want to attend?” “Mom,” she grins back at me, “you don’t have to worry about me.” “And just why is that?” She answers with a cheery nonchalance, “ ’Cause I know how to code switch!” “Code switch,” I repeat in astonishment. “Where did you hear that term?” The eleven year-old who has accompanied me to conferences and speaking engagements since she was an infant answered, “You know, I do listen to you sometimes!” as she bolts out of the door to ride her new scooter.

This code-switching business pushes my thinking. She is, of course, absolutely right. She and many of her friends do know how to code switch. Indeed, after further questioning, I learn that they even have names for the various codes they easily switch to and from, two of my favorites being “ghetto” and “chetto” (pronounced “ketto”). The first is probably self-explanatory, the

second, they tell me—being Southern children, after all—is “a combination of ‘country’ and ‘ghetto’.”

This metalinguistic facility is amazing, and brings me to my second question. How is it that we spend upwards of twelve years trying to get the standard English dialect into the heads of African American children, when my daughter, and many more like her (including some middle-class White children who go to school with African American children) acquire additional dialects almost as quickly and easily as they change sneaker brand allegiances. Clearly it is not due to a high number of “contact hours” with the new dialect. The only contact is really in school and most of school time is devoted to listening to teachers talk. No, there must be another explanation. I have come to realize that acquiring an additional code comes from identifying with the people who speak it, from connecting the language form with all that is self-affirming and esteem-building, inviting and fun. When we’re relaxed and enjoying ourselves on a long-awaited vacation, many of us tend to take on aspects of the lilt of the Irish or the rhythm of Caribbean speech patterns. We do it subconsciously because we associate the language with good times.

Through his study of second-language acquisition, Stephen Krashen distinguishes the processes of conscious learning (rule-based instruction) from unconscious acquisition (“picking up” a language in a social setting). Krashen found unconscious acquisition to be much more effective. In further studies, however, he found that in some cases people did not easily acquire the new language form. This led him to suggest what he called an affective filter. The filter operates “when affective conditions are not optimal, when the student is not motivated, does not identify with the speakers of the second language, or is overanxious about his performance, . . . [creating] a mental block . . . [which] will prevent the input from reaching those parts of the brain responsible for language acquisition.”* In other words, the less stress and the more fun connected to the process, the more easily it is accomplished. When she left her previous school, Maya’s self-esteem was low. She considered herself an outcast, once even referring to herself as among the “dregs” of the school. When she arrived at her new school, she was embraced by the children there. She was invited into the group, appreciated for what she brought, and she found that her interests were a vital part of these children’s culture. In Krashen’s words, her affective filter was lowered and she subconsciously embraced the language of her new friends, as she felt embraced by them.

*Stephen D. Krashen, *Principles and Practices in Second Language Acquisition* (New York: Pergamon, 1982).

How does this differ from schools' attempts to produce standard English speakers? First of all, students rarely get to talk in classrooms. The percentage of talk by the teacher far outweighs that by all the students put together. When students do get a chance to speak, if anyone uses what the teacher considers to be "bad English," the transgressor is told that he or she is speaking incorrectly and must "fix" the language in order to gain a response: "Say it right or don't say it at all," or an even harsher equivalent. Secondly, the standard dialect is embedded in instruction that has little connection to children's cultural lives and personal interests. Children are taught through worksheets or textbooks that make no reference to their lived experiences. Teachers seldom know much about the children's lives and communities outside of the classroom and either don't know how to or aren't willing to connect instruction to issues that matter to students, their families, and their community. Nowhere is the student's very personhood acknowledged or celebrated. Thirdly, the children whose language is considered defective are themselves viewed as defective. Spoken language has been shown to be one of the key means that teachers, like the corporate world, use to assess the intellect of individuals (Ray Rist). There are doubts in the school adults' minds about some children's cognitive competence since they don't "sound" intelligent.

Finally, there is little in the curriculum that apprises the students of their intellectual legacy—of the fact that people who look like them created much of the knowledge base of today's world. When instruction is stripped of children's cultural legacies, then they are forced to believe that the world and all the good things in it were created by others. This leaves students further alienated from the school and its instructional goals, and more likely to view themselves as inadequate. In short, it would appear that every feature of Krashen's affective filter is in place in the school's attempt to "teach" the standard dialect. The students don't identify with the teachers who question their intelligence or with a curriculum that ignores their existence. They have little opportunity to speak, and become overanxious about being corrected when they do. Subsequently, even when given teacher-sanctioned speaking opportunities, they opt not to. And they are not motivated to learn the new dialect because nothing presented within it connects to their own interests.

I, however, don't believe this need to be the case. Watching Maya and her friends skillfully and easily acquire a second code, I am compelled to look for ways that their accomplishment might be replicated in a classroom context. One of the first measures that must be addressed is connected to the Ebonics debate and the Oakland policy which precipitated it. The Oakland School Board

realized that as long as teachers viewed children who spoke a particular language form as deficient, then no amount of instructional modification would make much difference. Therefore, they sought to help teachers understand that no language form was better than another from a linguistic or cognitive standpoint. Further, they wanted teachers to understand that Ebonics was rule-based, just like the standard dialect, and that those rules had an historic basis in West African languages. Once teachers really internalize these facts, then it is much more difficult for them to judge their students' abilities solely on the basis of their language form. If the students feel the linguistic equivalent of Maya's feeling the need to be prettier in order to have friends, or having to have lip reduction plastic surgery in order to be acceptable, then they will eventually reject those who make them feel inferior and unacceptable. Just as Maya's new friends made her feel beautiful, brilliant, and "part of the club," teachers have to create similar conditions for their students. If students are to acquire a second language form in school, teachers must not only see their students as nondeficient, they must understand their brilliance, and the brilliance of their home language. To quote Aileen Moffitt, the White teacher in Oakland who published the open letter on the Internet during the Ebonics mania: "[As a result of studying Ebonics through the Oakland Standard English Proficiency Project] I have also developed an appreciation of the language. Ebonics has a richness that goes beyond the obvious features (of grammar, syntax, phonology, phonetics, morphology, and semantics). There are also characteristics of the non-verbal, the gestural, the rhythmic, and the emotional quality of the speech. I may be fluent in the grammatical rules of Ebonics, but I am definitely NOT proficient in these other qualities. Yet I can appreciate and admire them for the richness of expression that they provide. Poetry in Ebonics (including Maya Angelou's) can be music to my ears".*

*January 26, 1997, <http://members.tripod.com~cdorsett/aileen.htm>.

Secondly, if we are to invite children into the language of school, we must make school inviting to them. In almost every school I have visited, private conversations with children will elicit the same response: Almost no one in the school ever listens to them. There is no more certain a way to insure that people do not listen to you as to not listen to them. Furthermore, by not listening, teachers cannot know what students are concerned about, what interests them, or what is happening in their lives. Without that knowledge it is difficult to connect the curriculum to anything students find meaningful. And just how do we do that, even if we want to connect

children's lives to the curriculum? After all, isn't school about what kids need to know, not what interests them? There are many possible examples, but I will proffer only a few.

I have spent a great deal of time in schools, most recently in one middle school that is 98 percent African American. I was often at the school during its weekly assembly, and at every assembly the teachers spent a good chunk of time berating the students for engaging in grooming during school or class time. "You don't comb your hair at school. You comb it in the morning and you leave it alone. You are not here for a beauty pageant, you are here to learn." Etc., etc., etc. I knew the kids were pretty much ignoring the lectures because even I was tired of hearing it. Furthermore, I had seen little or no change in their behavior—the hair combing continued. Of course anyone who has been anywhere near a middle school knows that there are few things of more interest to eighth-grade girls (and nowadays boys) than hair. Indeed, many African American girls will tell you that they want to be hairdressers. Although it had not apparently dawned on the teachers, it was clear that nothing they said was going to change the students' behavior. I had been thinking about all this for a few days when I woke up in the middle of one night with the thought, "Okay, if those kids want to do hair, we're going to do hair!"

A staple in most twelve-year-old African American girls' book-bag is a bottle of "Luster's Pink Oil Lotion Moisturizer." The first step was to give a bottle of this to the science teacher. His job was to develop a unit on the chemical content of the hair dressing (and other popular hair and makeup products). Students could learn the names and properties of the chemicals and what other purposes they served. They would also learn the effects of these chemicals on human beings. The teacher could further have students explore the processes for testing the products by contacting the pertinent companies. Next was a trip to the Internet, where I found the work of Dr. Gloria Gilmer. Dr. Gilmer is an ethnomathematician (one who looks at mathematics through a cultural lens), and founding President of the International Study Group on Ethnomathematics.* Dr. Gilmer created a unit on patterns and tessellations (filling up a two-dimensional space by congruent copies of a figure that do not overlap) by studying African braiding. She interviewed braiders, along with students and teachers, and then developed several classroom activities as a result of the interviews, including 1) Draw a tessellation using an octagon and square connected along a side as a fundamental shape, and 2) Have a hairstyle show featuring different tessellations. As I read Dr. Gilmer's ideas, I thought of other ideas that would use braiding as a basis for academic studies:

*www.math.buffalo.edu/mad/special/gilmer-gloria_HAIRSTYLES.html.

Have students interview braiders as to the cultural significance of the patterns.

Study symmetry and asymmetry in corn rows.

Since most braiders are from Africa, interview the braiders as to what is going on in their home countries and why they decided to leave.

Create a linguistic map of Africa based on the interviews.

I also found a Web site that traced hairstyles through history (www.queensnewyork.com/history/hair.html) and found wonderful tidbits about a subject that has apparently interested humankind since the dawn of history. For instance, Sumerian noblewomen dressed their hair in a heavy, netted chignon, rolls and plaits, powdered it with gold dust or scented yellow starch, and adorned it with gold hairpins and other ornaments; Babylonian and Assyrian men dyed their long hair and square beards black, and crimped and curled them with curling irons; and in classical Greece the upper classes used curling irons, and some women dyed their hair red (or in Athens, even blue, dusted with gold, white, or red powder). The site referred to the hairstyles of many other cultures and time periods, and could provide the perfect entrée into the study of history for the girls in question.

Since so many of these girls say that they want to be hairdressers when they grow up, I decided to look into what is entailed in being a successful cosmetologist. I found that it was ideal to have a working knowledge of bookkeeping/record keeping; marketing; small business operation and entrepreneurship; chemistry; anatomy; physiology; basic psychology; public speaking; interpersonal communication; and computer operations. Furthermore, they would have to use math to formulate chemicals for different hair types; study angles so as to achieve the right amount of layers or volume; study biology, anatomy, and chemistry to obtain the knowledge to give proper facial treatments for a particular skin type or structure and to maintain proper hygiene. Finally, in order to use the various kinds of electrical apparatus needed in their trade, cosmetologists need to understand galvanic and faradic currents.

With some attention and thought, any teacher should be able to create a curriculum for many school-based subjects from that spectrum of topics. The object is not to lower standards or just teach what is interesting to the students, but to find the students' interests and build an academic program around them. Learning a new language form is not just a matter of teaching language. It is teaching, period. How we do it affects how children choose to talk. When students' interests are addressed in school, they are more likely to connect with the school, with the teacher,

with the academic knowledge, and with the school's language form. Just as Maya found her interests reflected by her new schoolmates and subsequently adopted their language form, so students who find their interests reflected in their school would likely do the same.

The final aspect of my thinking on how schools can change their modus operandi to better enable students to reduce their affective filter and gain access to the standard dialect also stems from Maya's example. Just as she felt inadequate—"less than," one of the "dregs"—before leaving her former school, so many African American children feel upon entering any school. We have not fully realized the extent to which the media and general American belief systems have permeated the consciousness of African American children. Many have internalized the beliefs of the larger society that they and people who look like them are less than the intellectual norm. From media portrayals of African American criminals, to news broadcasts which ignore the positive models of African American maleness, to a focus in schools on slavery rather than on the brilliance of the African intellectual legacy, children come to believe that there is nothing in their heritage to connect to schooling and academic success.

Recently, a young student teacher confessed to me that she did not know what to say when an African American middle-school boy said to her, "So, Ms. Summers, they made us the slaves because we're dumb, huh?" I have spoken often of the young teenager who wondered why I was trying to teach her multiplication because "Black people don't multiply, they just add and subtract. White people multiply!" And then there was the young man whose teacher asked him to look in a mirror and tell her what he saw. His response, "I don't see nothin'." Those of us who teach must first make our students recognize their potential brilliance. When we know the real history of Africa—the Egyptian wonders of technology and mathematics, the astronomical genius of the Mali Dogon, the libraries of Timbuktu—then we can teach our children that if they do not feel they are brilliant, then it is only because they do not know whence they came. Their not achieving is not the way things should be, but a serious break in the history of the world.

What happens when we do so, when we convince them that they come from brilliance, when we encourage them to understand their amazing potential? When they recognize that we believe in them, then they come to trust us, to accept us, to identify with us, and to emulate us. They will come, as Maya came, to adopt aspects of who we are, including our language. If we were to put all of these classroom techniques to work, we would create schools in which children would more readily learn the standard dialect. Moreover, we would create settings in which children

would learn all that we wish to teach them. Language form, after all, is merely one small part of a desired curriculum.

So, how do my two initial questions intersect? What is the connection between my emotional response to Maya's new-found language and the fact that schools fare so dismally in teaching the standard dialect? I propose that the negative responses to the children's home language on the part of the adults around them insures that they will reject the school's language and everything else the school has to offer. What can it mean to a child who encounters an adult whose goal is to "Speak Out Against Ebonics"? It can only represent the desire to speak out against those who are speakers of Ebonics—to stamp out not only the child, but those from whom the child first received nurturance, from whom she first felt love, for whom she first smiled. There is a reason our first language is called our mother tongue. To speak out against the language that children bring to school means that we are speaking out against their mothers, that their mothers are not good enough to be a part of the school world. And in the African American community, talking about someone's mother is the worst form of insult!

Ironically, the more determined we are to rid the school of children's home language, the more determined they must become to preserve it. Since language is one of the most intimate expressions of identity, indeed, "the skin that we speak," then to reject a person's language can only feel as if we are rejecting him. But what if we really do want what is good for the African American children in our care? What if we only want to protect them from the deprecating opinions of the larger society? What if we only want to provide them with the tools needed for success in the mainstream? Despite any good intentions, if we cannot understand and even celebrate the wonders of the language these children bring with them to the school—the language forged on African soil, tempered by two hundred years of love, laughter, and survival in the harshest of conditions—then we have little hope of convincing them that we hold their best interests at heart. If we are truly to add another language form to the repertoire of African American children, we must embrace the children, their interests, their mothers, and their language. We must treat all with love, care, and respect. We must make them feel welcomed and invited by allowing their interests, culture, and history into the classroom. We must reconnect them to their own brilliance and gain their trust so that they will learn from us. We must respect them, so that they feel connected to us. Then, and only then, might they be willing to adopt our language form as one to be added to their own.

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