Introduction to the Special Issues on Africanized English and Education

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This issue of *Linguistics and Education* and the next (Volume 7, Number 2) are devoted to studies and discussions of Africanized English and school education. The intent is not to be comprehensive or even to represent the range of recent studies and issues about Africanized English, which are currently being addressed by linguists, sociolinguists, and educational researchers, among others. Rather, a small number of key issues, directions, and questions are highlighted to focus attention on the changing contexts in which scholarship on Africanized English and school education is taking place.

One aspect of the changing contexts is that it is now possible to look back on an earlier body of research on what was then often called “Dialect” studies or “Black English” studies. The contribution of these studies in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s is well known. They provided a scientific and an empirical basis to the refutation of nonstandard dialects as something less than language. They provided an important part of the foundations for legal challenges to educational policies that denied African American children, and others, educational equity. Whereas the impact of these studies on actual classroom practices and school policies may be less than desired—perhaps considerably less—they changed the terminology of educational practice with regard to language variation. Children who spoke African American Vernacular English were no longer described as lacking a language, or being nonverbal, or having a language deficit; instead, they were described as speaking a different dialect or language. “Language difference” replaced “language deficit.” But, as Ogbu (1982) and others have pointed out, it is deceptive to characterize variation as “difference” when particular varieties provide access (or at least the perception of access) to economic, educational, and some social rewards, and other varieties do not. Regardless of the label, too often, language “differences” are treated as “deficits.”

A second aspect of changing contexts is the changing demographics of the student population. Where educators once perceived that the student population was predominately White and spoke Standard English, the linguistic, cultural, and racial diversity of the student population is now recognized and in some states, White students who are speakers of Standard English will soon be a minority. These changing demographics have increased an expressed need by educators to understand linguistic diversity but have also created a political
backlash characterized by "English-only" movements and California's Proposition 187. Where once the desegregation of the public schools held promise for educational equity, its implementation has been characterized by White flight, legal maneuvering to limit substantive desegregation, the defunding of public schools, and resegregation. It may indeed be the case that at least in some geographical areas and in some social arenas, American society may now be more racially and linguistically segregated than when many of the major language variation studies were conducted in the 1960s and 1970s.

A third aspect of the changing context of the study of Africanized English and Education is the awareness of the complexity involved in studying language variation. Part of that complexity involves the diversity and variation within each dialect and language. In any community, but perhaps especially in urban communities, the dialects that characterize the members of that community are diverse. For example, in a predominately African American community, although a particular dialect may be spoken by a larger number of people, many other variations may be present including Jamaican Patois, Haitian Creole, Spanish-, French-, or Portuguese-influenced dialects, Southern American dialects, and Northern American dialects, among others. It is no longer reasonable to view African American English or any other language as a homogeneous entity.

Another dimension of the complexity of the study of language variation involves the language used to discuss research on language variation. The labels and terms keep changing as the unpacking of each term reveals its inadequacy and its political and intellectual biases. For example, "Standard English" is problematic in part because it suggests that it is the "standard" by which all other varieties are/should be judged (which is, at best, only true in certain circumstances), that it is spoken by the majority (and hence the "Standard"), that it somehow unproblematically encompasses both Standard North American English and British Standard English (suggesting that the term has little to do with the description of language variation and more to do with the maintenance of a language boundary), and that it is inherently superior to other varieties of English (a fallacious link between knowledge acquisition and language). Alternatives suggested for Standard English include Dominant English, Mainstream American English, Received Pronunciation, and BBC English, among many others. Our choice of the term "Africanized English" is itself a deliberate attempt to reflect on the labels used in categorizing language diversity. First, we needed a term that would cover both African American Vernacular English and Jamaican Patois. Following the argument in Cecelia Davidson and Richard Schwartz's article in this issue, the connections between Jamaican Patois and African American Vernacular English may be greater than generally acknowledged, suggesting that the study of Jamaican Patois needs to be included in the study of African American Vernacular English. Second, we wanted to acknowledge that people do not just adopt a language, they adapt it, mold it, transform it, and use it. We
wanted to imply a sense of agency within the concept of language diversity. And third, we wanted to emphasize the dynamic nature of language diversity.

A fourth aspect of the changing context concerns the theoretical frames and methods used to study language variation, and in particular the study of Africanized English. Many of the early studies of African American Vernacular English were framed as a comparison with Standard English. For example, questions were asked about the absence of the copula in African American Vernacular English. Similarly, many studies of children’s language development have been based on the study of White, middle-class American children, and such studies have often formed the basis for various scales and assessment tools used both in research on African American children’s language and in educational practice. The pioneering work of Stockman and Vaughn-Cooke (1982), for example, was an early effort to study the language development of African American children eschewing comparison to the language development of White, middle-class children. By building a corpus of data based on the language of African American children, Stockman and Vaughn-Cook created the means to generate a valid framework for studying the language development of African American children. The article by Toya A. Wyatt is one of many calls for more research that builds on the directions inherent in the earlier work of Stockman and Vaughn-Cooke, that is, building a framework for exploring the language development of African American children that has internal validity.

Along with concern for the frameworks employed in research is concern for the methods used. Among the methodological concerns is “Who is the researcher?” Any attempt to gather data—whether through interviews, in an experimental setting, through observations, and so on— involves interaction between a researcher and the participants involved. The language produced in that social setting will be influenced by who is there and how they are talking. Thus, Arnetta F. Ball, in her article published here, notes that some of the differences found in her replication of an earlier study by Torrey (1972) may be due to differences in who the researcher is and the language used by the researcher. Studies of language diversity, taken as a whole, are best served by a linguistically, culturally, and racially diverse cohort of researchers. Acknowledgment of this methodological concern applies not just to data collection but also to the interpretation of data. Researchers not only bring their training and professional expertise to the study of language, they also bring their life histories and experiences, and both may inform the interpretation of data and the generation of empirical and theoretical insights.

A second methodological concern focuses on the people studied. Many of the key studies of Africanized English in the 1960s and 1970s were based on research on the language used by adolescents and men. There were few studies that included women and children, and few that specifically looked at the language of women or children as a linguistic group of their own. This is a criticism of
descriptive sociolinguistic studies in general, and not just of the study of African American Vernacular English (e.g., Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton, & Richardson, 1992). What is at issue is not just the technical adequacy of sociolinguistic descriptive studies, but the picture of language variation, use, and development provided: what is foregrounded, backgrounded, or left out completely.

The articles in this issue of the journal highlight linguistic and sociolinguistic issues. Toya Wyatt’s article, “Language Development in African American English Child Speech” focuses on language development and provides a brief review of language development studies of children who are African American Vernacular English speakers. Arnetta F. Ball’s article, “Language, Learning, and Linguistic Competence of African American Children: Torrey Revisited,” replicates Torrey’s (1972) study of African American children’s use of various forms of the /-s/ suffix, including a modified replication of the instructional component. Although there are educational implications, Ball’s study highlights the complexity involved in theorizing the use of a specific linguistic feature, such as the /-s/ suffix. Lisa Green’s article, “Study of Verb Classes in African American English” highlights two classes of verbs, auxiliaries and aspectual markers, in African American English. Her study is part of that body of research that documents the systematicity of the language. Cecila Davidson and Richard Schwartz’s article, “Semantic Boundaries in the Lexicon: Examples from Jamaican Patois” highlights two very important issues in the study of language diversity. The first is the connection between Jamaican Patois and African American Vernacular English. The second, which is foregrounded in their article, is the contribution of studies of linguistic diversity to fundamental aspects of linguistic theory. Davidson and Schwartz’s study, as well as others in this volume, contributes both to theoretical understandings about bilingualism and to theorizing about the nature of semantic boundaries. Too often, studies of linguistic diversity are only appreciated for their contribution to an understanding of a particular language or dialect. What is often overlooked is their contribution to the foundations of linguistic theorizing.

The articles in the next issue of this journal (Volume 7, Number 2) foreground educational issues related to Africanized English. Michele Foster’s article, “Talking That Talk: The Language of Control, Curriculum, and Critique” highlights teacher–student interaction. John Rickford and Angela Rickford in “Dialect Readers Revisited” reopen questions about the relationship of language diversity and the nature of the instructional materials that beginning readers are given to read in school. John Baugh’s, “The Law, Linguistics, and Educational Reform for African American Language Minority Students” discusses language policy issues at the school district and school level, raising a series of challenges to educators who are concerned about the education of African American students as well as other students who may speak a language other than the dominant variation of English. At the end of Volume 7, Number 2, we provide a select
bibliography of articles and studies of Africanized English published in the last 10 years (compiled by Ovetta Harris, Vicki Anderson, Tempii Champion, and David Bloome). The bibliography highlights studies attending to educational issues. We hope that the bibliography will be of use especially to those scholars who are unfamiliar with the more recent work on Africanized English and education. A fuller discussion of the articles in Volume 7, Number 2, of this journal will appear in the Introduction to that issue.

REFERENCES


