

## What happened to the movement to make Ebonics a language?

**Q.** I remember years ago there was a movement to make Ebonics a language for African-American children especially. What happened to that movement and do you think it should become a separate language?

**A.** My quick answer would be 'NO' because I am not a supporter of Ebonics. However, let's explore the history. According to the Linguistic Society of America, Ebonics simply means 'black speech' (a blend of the words ebony 'black' and phonics 'sounds'). The term was created in 1973 by a group of black scholars who disliked the negative connotations of terms like 'Nonstandard Negro English' that had been coined in the 1960s when the first modern large-scale linguistic studies of African American speech-communities began. However, the term Ebonics never caught on among linguists, much less the general public. That all changed with the 'Ebonics' controversy of December 1996 when the Oakland (CA) School Board recognized it as the 'primary' language of its majority African American students and resolved to take it into account in teaching them standard or academic English. Ebonics is known by other names as well; African American English, African American Vernacular English, Black speech and Black English.

## What are some examples of Ebonics?

To many people, the first examples that come to mind are slang words like *phat* 'excellent' and *bling-bling*

'glittery, expensive jewelry', words that are popular among teenagers and young adults, especially rap and hip hop fans. But words like

*kitchen*

'the especially kinky hair at the nape of one's neck' and

*ashy*

'the whitish appearance of black skin when dry, as in winter' are even more interesting. Unlike many slang terms, these 'black' words have been around for ages, they are not restricted to particular regions or age groups, and they are virtually unknown (in their 'black' meanings) outside the African American community. Ebonics pronunciation includes features like the omission of the final consonant in words like 'past' (pas' ) and 'hand' (han'), the pronunciation of the th in 'bath' as t (bat) or f (baf), and the pronunciation of the vowel in words like 'my' and 'ride' as a long ah (mah, rahd). Some of these occur in vernacular white English, too, especially in the South, but in general they occur more frequently in Ebonics. Some Ebonics pronunciations are

more unique, for instance, dropping b, d, or g at the beginning of auxiliary verbs like 'don't' and 'gonna', yielding Ah 'on know for "I don't know" and ama do it for "I'm going to do it."

## Pro and Cons and Views of Ebonics

In his article, "Black Voice of the Streets Is Defended and Criticized," author Steven A. Holmes gave opinions of persons who stand on both sides of the argument. He reported the reasons Ebonics should be implemented and reasons it should not. In his article he talked about Toni Cook, a member of the Oakland, CA board of education. He stated some of her reasoning as to why teaching Ebonics would be helpful at that time. She believed that teaching Ebonics would "make better use of idiosyncratic speech patterns of many black children to help improve their reading, writing and speaking of Standard English. "She also believed that instructing teachers in Ebonics would bridge the gap between teachers and Black American students. Programs were implemented in Los Angeles and Oakland to instruct teachers in Ebonics and Toni Cook reported that there were improvements in black students' test scores. Although Toni Cook said that improvements were made there was no statistical study to back that claim. Also, by treating Ebonics as another language and not just a dialect, the school board would try to get funding for a dual language program. This program would allow schools more funding and the end result would be an improvement of black children's Standard English. Unfortunately the bilingual program was not passed, and Ebonics was thought to be a dialect not a language. Critics of the Oakland school board argue that teaching Ebonics "legitimizes" what is grammatically deficient English and will hamper Black children in their mastery of Standard English. Like affirmative action, Ebonics was attacked because it supported the argument of those who said that "Blacks are seeking to lower the accepted standard of being qualified." Linda Chavez, president of the Center for Equal Opportunity, argued that Ebonics stems from the need for administrators to experiment on Black children. She felt that Black children were treated as subjects on pitri dishes. She believed that teaching Ebonics would not reinforce the need for African American children to succeed in school.

Marcia L. McNair, Associate Professor of English at Nassau Community College in New York states, "There's the recognition now in the field of linguistics that all ethnic groups have a vernacular form of English. The African American way of speaking is no better or worse than, let's say, the Brooklyn dialect! Did you ever see the film *My Cousin Vinny*? The judge has a hard time understanding Vinny not only because of his pronunciation, but the vocabulary he uses as well. My perspective is there is formal English, which should be used when writing, and informal English, which is appropriate for most other forms of communication outside of a

professional setting. My advice to my African American, Caribbean American and English As A Second Language speakers is to watch out for a tendency to drop the verb ending i.e. forgetting to conjugate verbs. This is a common way of speaking for these groups, and so it has a tendency to creep into their writing.”

High school and middle school teacher, MacArthur Kelley’s concern about Ebonics is “Where else can students speak Ebonics and be understood outside of their peer group?” If students can’t ‘switch’ from Ebonics to Standard English depending on their setting, their efforts at gaining certain employment opportunities and climbing the corporate ladder will be in vain.” I agree! Some potential employers will tolerate and overlook accents, dialects and grammatical errors caused by being a second language learner and being from another country. Most will not appreciate nonstandard speaking from an African-American youth born in this country even if we call Ebonics a language. That’s probably unfair but definitely a reality.

In his book, ***Beyond Ebonics: Linguistic Pride and Racial Prejudice***, John Baugh states, "Returning to the language of African American slave descendants, there are two ways to handle revising linguistic classifications for minority students: One might argue (as I have) that current classifications are too restrictive (Baugh 1998), or one might argue (as Oakland did) that African Americans, by way of their Ebonic linguistic inheritance, already meet existing criteria for LEP (Limited English Proficiency). Neither approach has made any real headway because the prevailing political climate is such that most citizens link Standard English to intelligence and personal discipline.

Here is a link to the time line of Ebonics <http://www.pbs.org/speak/seatosea/americanvarieties/AAVE/timeline/>

There were several hearings held in the senate in 1997 concerning Ebonics. There were many examples of racist reactions and political satire which followed the hearings and Ebonics continues to be a topic under national discussion. However, as media attention began to diminish after the hearings, so too did the political fireworks that had been ignited. To this day, the Senate hearings have not been reconvened, and no new legislation has been passed to significantly address the problems facing African American students in schools today. This is the greater disappointment I think. There has been no significant improvement in the academic achievement of African-American youth especially males and little improvement in economic

growth for African-Americans that could improve future academic and occupational endeavors. We know that more education and financial stability improves student outcome and performance.

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