Word on the Street
Debunking the Myth of “Pure” Standard English

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CHAPTER SIX

Black English

Is You Is or Is You Ain't a Language?

When a national controversy broke out over the Oakland Unified School Board’s designation of Black English as “a language” in late 1996, one of the most articulate defenders of Oakland’s resolution was the linguist John Rickford, who has spent a career studying Black English and its relationship to West Indian creole languages. Interviewed by The New Republic, he explained the logic and systematicity of Black English on the basis of twenty years of data collection and historical research.

In the ensuing article, this sober scholar found himself depicted as a disingenuous crackpot, manipulating questionable data in service of a craftily unstated Afrocentric agenda. He responded with a careful letter defending his points, but the journal published it only alongside a dismissive reply from the article’s author, accusing Rickford of having merely “gone to elaborate lengths to construct an academic superstructure that legitimates the use of slang in the classroom.”

This smear by The New Republic was a downer, but ultimately merely symptomatic of what is in fact a nationwide misimpression: namely, that Black English is a bad habit, rather than the precious national creation that it is. Indeed, from the perspective that Black English is a mere matter of expressions like *funky fresh* and *mackin’* plus a refusal to conjugate the verb “to be,” research like Rickford’s must look absurd indeed.

What strikes me most is that the message that Black English is more than this is not new to the public. J. L. Dillard’s Black English (1972) and
Geneva Smitherman's *Talkin and Testifyin* (1977) carefully outline the systematicity of Black English, and as I write, both are available in paperback. Television documentaries like the "Black on White" segment of the well-received *The Story of English* have brought this information to life even more vividly. Many undergraduate students who take a linguistics class are taught at some point that Black English is a system, not a plague.

Yet the response to the Oakland resolution, *The New Republic*’s treatment of John Rickford, and any number of conversations in which Black English comes up show that the American public continues to see only comedy in the notion that Black English is more than gutter talk—a clumsy yelp from the fringes of Afrocentrism at best, a cynical grab at bilingual education funds at worst. One suspects that the public has either missed the message or that they have not been convinced by the argument.

Black English is in fact uniquely well suited to show the application of what we have learned about language change, dialects, and language structure to real-world issues. Powerfully influential on our popular culture, spoken by a group widely distributed across the country, existing in an ever-challenging relationship with mainstream society, and adopted by an increasing number of members of other minority groups, Black English is the nonstandard dialect all Americans have the most immediate, edgy, and electric relationship with.

**JETTING TO THE HEEZEE: ISN’T BLACK ENGLISH JUST SLANG?**

To be sure, lingo is one part—a vivid one—of Black English. However, the first thing we must understand is that the slang that African Americans use is just a sliver of what is meant by the term Black English. More to the point, the slang is perhaps the least interesting aspect of Black English in terms of its relationship to standard English or its implications for education. Because the Black English dialect is so similar in most ways to other dialects of English, the common perception of "black speech" focuses on the colorful slang of African-American young people, such as "bad" for "good," "word up" for "that’s right," and "chillin'" for "relaxing." Black English certainly does have a daz-
“Proficiency in Standard English for Speakers of Black Language” program (the Sranan passage on pages 42–43 was a translation of part of this story):

It a girl name Shirley Jones live in Washington. Most everybody on her street like her, ‘cause she a nice girl. Shirley treat all of them just like they was her sister and brother, but most of all she like one boy name Charles. But Shirley keep away from Charles most of the time, ‘cause she start to liking him so much she be scared of him. So Charles, he don’t hardly say nothing to her neither. Still, that girl got to go ‘round telling everybody Charles s’posed to be liking her.

But when Valentine Day start to come ‘round, Shirley get to worrying. She worried ‘cause she know the rest of them girls all going to get Valentine cards from they boyfriends. That Shirley, she so worried, she just don’t want to be with nobody.

When Shirley get home, her mother say it a letter for her on the table. Right away Shirley start to wondering who it could be, ‘cause she know don’ nobody s’posed to be sending her no kind of letter. So Shirley, she open the envelope up. And when she do, she can see it’s a Valentine card inside, and she see it have Charles name wrote on the bottom.

So now everything going be all right for Shirley, ‘cause what she been telling everybody ‘bout Charles being her boyfriend ain’t no story after all. It done come true!

Any African American would recognize this as an accurate representation of Black English as spoken by a significant number of black Americans, especially younger people, and yet note that there is not a word of slang in it! Shirley “get home”; she does not, as black male Oakland teenagers might say at this writing (but probably not for much longer!) “jet to the heezee,” and the little girl telling this story would be unlikely to know or use such an expression. A quick look at literary representations of Black English attests equally well to the fact that Black English is not simply a matter of street corner argot. The characters in Alice Walker’s The Color Purple or Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God, for example, speak flowing and eloquent Black English, and indeed part of the value of these two books is the beauty of their language. And yet Celie and Janie do not use slang. They speak Black English.

But, the reader may object, whatever the “flavor” and “richness” of such speech, in the end isn’t it at heart just a matter of lazy diction and sleepy logic made a habit? Contrary to what some might pretend, one need not be a racist to ask this question, which represents a typical reaction to a nonstandard dialect given the average daily linguistic experience in America. Yet its answer is no. We will now see why.

JOHNNIE COCHRAN’S SLEIGHT OF HAND: THE SOUND SYSTEM OF BLACK ENGLISH

Let’s start with the sound system of Black English. One of the most prominent differences between standard and Black English is what happens to the standard sound th—specifically, not the hard th of thing or through, but the soft one of those and then. At the beginning of words, in Black English th becomes d: those becomes dose, then becomes den. At the end of words, however, it becomes f: south becomes souf, mouth becomes mouf.

In general, Black English “disprefers” clusters of consonants, especially at the beginning and ends of words. For example, test, with its two consonants s and t adjacent, becomes tes; kept becomes kep; through drops its r to become thoo.

Another Black English sound pattern substitutes ah for the vowel sound in rice. Recall that sounds like the i in rice are actually two sounds in succession, a diphthong. Black English turns this diphthong into a monophthong, that is, one sound. Thus nice is more like nahs, bride is brahd.

This is by no means the first time these patterns have been presented. However, other discussions have assumed that the simple regularity of these traits disproves that Black English is “bad English.” Yet with such a list alone, skeptics may suspect that linguists are merely dressing up lazy diction in fancy clothes. After all, all of these things entail simplifying a standard English sound: the prickly sound th becomes the simpler d or f; two consonants become one, two vowels become one. How legitimate could a dialect be that seems to make all of the easiest choices, when other languages we know challenge us with things like the French uvular r (pronounced back toward the throat) or the umlauted sounds ü and ö in German? (For ü, shape your mouth for
"oo" but say "ee"; for \( \delta \), shape your mouth for "oh" but say "eh.") At this point, we might suppose that Black English is indeed a system: systematically lazy diction!

What we need to see in order to get beyond such an honest mistake is that Black English sounds are complex as often as they are simple, just as the sounds in standard English are. What we have seen so far are cases in which Black English has eroded material in the varieties of English from which it was derived. As we saw, however, where dialects erode they also renew, and Black English is no exception. Many sound features in Black English, less often included in descriptions, are more complex than their standard English equivalents.

For example, in Black English, the \( i \) sound in \( bill \) is often a diphthong, pronounced roughly "ee-uh"—\( bills \) sounds more like \( Beals \), \( kill \) sounds more like \( keel \), \( kid \) sounds like \( kee-id \). Although we are accustomed to hearing this as merely part of an "accent," objectively viewed, it is also a complexification of the standard sound. Similarly, the \( e \) sound in \( bell \) is two sounds in Black English, roughly "ay-uh"—\( bells \) is more like \( bales \), Montel more like "Mon-tail."

Other Black English sounds are subtler, and cross-linguistically odder, than their equivalents in standard English. Standard English has such sounds, too: for example, as sounds in the world’s languages go, \( th \) is an odd duck. Notice that when we learn most other languages, we don’t need this sound (Castilian Spanish being one exception), and that foreigners typically have particular trouble with it. Arabic and Icelandic are among the few languages that have \( th \). Linguists call such sounds, the "odd" ones that are hard to pick up as an adult, marked sounds.

A marked sound in Black English is the \( u \) in \( but \), which is pronounced more tensely, somewhat higher in the mouth, and somewhat longer, than its standard English version. To get a sense of what this sound is, recall Rudy of \( The Cosby Show's \) teasing pronunciation of her friend \( Bud \)'s name, "Give it to me—Buuuhhd!" This is a marked vowel sound in languages, in general.

In general, despite scattered things like the fate of \( th \) and the \( i \) sound in \( rice \), the Black English sound system is actually more elaborate than the one in standard English. For linguists, this comes down to abstruse concepts like "depth of postlexical phonological derivation," but we can get a handle on it with a very simple fact: Black English is exceedingly difficult for people who haven’t grown up speaking it to imitate. Think about it: How many whites have you heard who did a really spot-on imitation of Black English? The Black English "sound" eludes even the most gifted white mimics: The stand-up comedian who can practically bring Ronald Reagan or Arnold Schwarzenegger into the room drops a stitch when attempting Mike Tyson or Jesse Jackson. When one of the white voice actors for \( The Simpsons \) attempted to imitate Bill Cosby for a brief parody sequence, it was a glaringly weak moment amidst usually brilliant work. Similarly, Tracey Ullman is the most uncanny mimic I have ever heard, and yet even she slips a bit when attempting an African-American female. Anthony Michael Hall did a near-perfect imitation of Black English in the film \( Weird Science \), which was convulsingly funny specifically because the feat is so rare. The reason the French accent is notoriously difficult to acquire as an adult is because it has a particularly complex, subtle sound system, as many of us can intuit from nightmares like trying to distinguish the vowel in "oeuf" 'egg' from the one in "œufs" 'eggs.'

The Black English accent is similarly difficult to pick up because it too has a complex, subtle sound system.

All of this is to say that Black English has a sound system that is not only systematic but complex and is unique to it. During the O. J. Simpson trial, one witness for the prosecution claimed to have heard a "black voice" shouting behind the fence around Nicole Brown Simpson’s home. The defense lawyer, Johnnie Cochran, successfully had this statement disqualified as evidence, claiming that "there is no such thing as a black voice" and that the very implication was racist.

In fact, however, Cochran got away with murder on that one—there is indeed a sound system unique to African Americans, which is why most Americans, and especially black ones, can almost always tell that a person is black even on the phone, and even when the speaker is using standard English sentence structures. Cochran’s feint tapped into a strong ambivalence in the black American community toward the idea that there might be a "black sound"; the misimpression that Black English is a mistake rather than a variation is crossracial. On the one hand, many African Americans are uncomfortable being told that their speech indicates their race. At the same time, however, African Americans are quite quick to note when a black person "sounds completely white," which implies that there is indeed a "black sound." That sound consists of the patterns we have just seen.
THE INCREDIBLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING:
SENTENCE STRUCTURE OF BLACK ENGLISH

Black English is perhaps best known, however, for its use of the verb to be. At this point, then, we will pass from Black English sounds to sentence structure. Here, too, there is more than meets the eye.

The stereotypical perception is that in Black English, the verb to be is simply not conjugated, such that I am a student becomes I be a student, you are a student becomes you be a student, etc. In fact, however, the use of to be in English is so complex that if Black English were learned in classrooms and via cassette sets, learning to use the verb to be properly would be as tricky as wrapping our heads around the distinction between the "be" verbs ser ("permanent") and estar ("temporary") in Spanish.

For example, the Black English sentence he be walkin' by does not mean the same thing as he is walking by in standard English. If a black person says, "he be walkin' by," this can only mean that the person does this on a regular basis. It cannot mean that the person is walking by right then—this would be expressed without any verb to be at all: "he walkin' by." For a black person to sit by a window and shout, "He be walkin' by!" would sound quite odd. In others words, it would be nothing less than incorrect Black English—Black English, like all speech varieties, can be spoken wrong as well as right. It is not simply a matter of random floutings of standard English rules.

Furthermore, where to be is not used where it would be in standard English, we must not be misled into thinking that its absence is a matter of "dropping" it. In the 1960s, there were educators who sincerely believed that the absence of to be in some Black English constructions suggested that African-American children had no concept of being or of linkage between two things. What these people missed is that, in fact, as many of the world's languages do without a verb to be as do not in the same sentence types as Black English does, and express linkage between two words simply by their being next to one another. Furthermore, this is by no means a trait found only in "exotic" or unwritten languages: Russian itself is one of them.

Ja twoj ojekt.
1 your father
I am your father.

Surely, Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Anton Chekhov were not cognitively deficient men, and yet they used be-less sentences all day long every day of their lives. Only from the vantage point of English, and the Western European languages we learn most often, does the absence of a verb to be look "primitive," because these languages happen to require the usage of a verb to be. Hungarian, Tagalog, and countless other languages happily do without.

The specific meaning of be in Black English is also a typical feature of languages around the world. Linguists would say that he is a marker of habituality. Many languages worldwide have markers of habituality. Standard English is not one of them, but Black English is. To take a random example, in Niuene, a language spoken in the South Pacific, the habitual marker fa expresses the fact that something happens on a regular basis (this is a language where the verb comes first in a sentence):

Fā totou he-tau-faioga e-tau-tohi
HABITUAL read books teachers

The teachers read books often.

Yet, one might legitimately ask, what about the fact that Black English uses only the form be instead of the lovely conjugated forms like am and are? There is certainly no reason to deny that the use of sets of endings that vary with person and number (Latin amo, amas, amat 'I love, you love, he loves'), or completely different words for each person and number (Latin sum, es, est 'I am, you are, he is') is more complex than using a single word in all persons and numbers. Chalk one up for standard English there. On the other hand, however, standard English endings are actually a pretty skimpy lot compared to the ones in other languages like Spanish or Russian. Here, for example, we can compare the verb to be in Spanish and English:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I/yo</td>
<td>am</td>
<td>soy</td>
<td>was</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you/tú</td>
<td>are</td>
<td>eres</td>
<td>were</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he/el</td>
<td>is</td>
<td>es</td>
<td>was</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we/nosotros</td>
<td>are</td>
<td>somos</td>
<td>were</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you/vosotros</td>
<td>are</td>
<td>sois</td>
<td>were</td>
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<tr>
<td>they/ellos</td>
<td>are</td>
<td>son</td>
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<td>fueron</td>
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</tbody>
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Standard English comes out looking a little tired here—where it uses the same form with four pronouns at once (are, were), Spanish never repeats itself. As those of you who know Spanish will notice, even this chart oversimplifies Spanish’s verb to be: There is a completely separate verb, estar, used for “temporary” being (such as being on a bus) as opposed to the one conjugated here, which is only used for “permanent” being (such as being a bus driver). In addition, both verbs have full conjugations in the imperfect, future, conditional, present subjunctive, imperfect subjunctive, etc.

In any case, however, it is true that the forms of to be in Black English are even fewer than in standard English. However, in Black English, as in all dialects, where there is erosion there is also renewal, and the way to be is used in Black English is actually more complex than it is in standard English.

Specifically, its sensitivity to habituality actually makes Black English more complex in this area than standard English. A Martian learning how to express the present tense and habituality in standard English would be confronted with two sentence structures:

Present tense: He is walking by right now.

Habitual: He is walking by every day to give her bread lately, so she shouldn’t worry.

Habitual (another way): He walks by every day to give her bread.

Thus of the following Black English is the thornier dialect:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>Black</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Habitual (bare)</td>
<td>he walks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habitual (compound)</td>
<td>he is walking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present</td>
<td>he is walking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To demonstrate this in actual usage, in the passage of Black English from California’s language proficiency program (see p. 130), in one sentence we see both the bare and the compound habitual used:

But Shirley keep away from Charles most of the time, ’cause she start to liking him so much she be scared of him.

This sentence describes on-going, repeated, established events, and thus the habitual is used. But later, we see the be-less present tense:

That Shirley, she so worried, she just don’t want to be with nobody.

This sentence describes Shirley at one point, in the present tense, before the climax of the story when things resolve themselves.

To be sure, African Americans themselves are not consciously aware of the complexity of the usage of be versus the absence of be and are often as surprised as whites to be shown this underlying systematicity. As often as not, even blacks will give I be a student as an example of Black English, when this is not a correct sentence in the dialect. However, this by no means indicates that the usage of be in Black English is indeed a matter of linguistic messiness. There are fine, systematic distinctions in all speech varieties, including standard English, that speakers themselves rarely think about and cannot explain.

After all, how many of us have ever thought about the fact that he walks does not mean that he is walking right now, but can only mean that he walks every day? Or—grammarians teach us that the is used with a noun that has already been identified (the man I saw yesterday).
and a is used with a noun that is new information (I bought a cat last week). Yet when I wrote my Russian friend last year about the cat I had just bought, she made an error when she wrote back “The black cat! Congratulations!” Since I had indeed already identified the cat, how would you have explained to her why “The black cat” was wrong in this case? Another one: Exactly what would you say the difference in meaning is between He doesn’t walk and He isn’t walking is? (It’s the habitual/present distinction again.) Well, Black English is just as subtle, and in the case of be, more so than standard English.

Thus, to be sure, there are aspects of Black English structure that are simpler than their equivalent in standard English, such as the absence of that before relative clauses:

It a girl name Shirley Jones live in Washington.

However, there are two things about each such case. First, in sentence structures in which Black English happens to be the simpler dialect, other languages of the world considered quite complex and respectable have the same construction. For example, although the absence of be with verbs in Black English is merely one component of a complex system playing present tense and habituality off of one another, with other parts of speech the absence of be is a less complex affair, and such sentences are indeed simpler than their standard English equivalents. He your father, He in the garden, and He tall are all default sentences in Black English. Again, however, as we have seen, absence of the verb to be is not a flaw. It is actually a typical situation in languages around the world. It’s standard English that is a tad odd in insisting on using to be so widely.

Second, we can match every one of these cases with one in which Black English is the more complex dialect. The fact that Black English has a number of constructions simpler than the equivalent ones in standard English no more makes Black English lazy than the absence of articles a and the in Russian makes Russian a lazy language (try learning it). Only if Black English were simpler than standard English most or all of the time would we have a degraded dialect, but this is not the case.

For example, another instance where the renewal balances out the erosion is the use of done to encode past tense, as in “It done come true!” at the end of our Black English passage. Because done is often used with a verb with no past tense marking (she done come, they done finish), it may appear to be a less “sophisticated” way of expressing the past tense than using an elegant little ending (walked) or an internal past marking (came). In addition, done, like habitual be, is an unconjugated form in standard English (What have you done?), and its use with all persons and numbers in Black English thus further the degraded impression.

Just as habitual be, however, done is as complex as it is simple. It is used to express the recent past, but not the distant past. “I done seen her today” is legal, as is “I done seen her yesterday.” But “I done seen her a year ago” immediately gives a speaker away as inauthentic. This is more or less how the perfect have is used in standard English, but done has another usage where standard have is not used, to intensify a past action: “After you knock the guy down, he done got the works.”

In addition, done is used in a future perfect expression (those of us who took Latin will remember this as the “I will have talked” construction). The Black English form is be done, as in I be done washed the car by the time Jojo gets back with the sodas, which means that I will have finished washing the car when Jojo gets back. What is important about this expression is that it is quite current in Black English, used in the most casual conversations all day long, every day, while in standard English, its equivalent is rather marginal except in writing. Standard English prefers substituting the simple “will” future whenever it can: I will have washed the car by the time Jojo gets back would be more likely put as I will be finished washing the car by the time Jojo gets back. In this area, then, Black English preserves the persnickety future perfect tense, just the sort of thing that is considered to make Latin so noble (moneris “you will have warned”), while standard English is gradually doing without. Clearly Black English is not a lazy speech variety—it’s just a different speech variety from standard English.

Black English also gets an undeservedly bad rap from its famous use of multiple negation: Ain’t no man nobody knows who can tell me nothing about nobody like that means “There isn’t a man known to anyone who could tell me anything about anyone like that.” In our passage, recall the following sentence:

Shirley start to wondering who it could be from, ’cause she know don’t nobody s’posed to be sending her no kind of letter.

We are brainwashed by educators, language usage columnists, and our Aunt Lucy that double negatives are a “bad habit” because two negatives supposedly equal a positive. Indeed, this is true—in mathematics
and formal logic. However, nowhere is it written that language and mathematics walk in lockstep. Maybe it would be nice if they did, just as it would be nice if it really took exactly 365 periods of twenty-four hours for the earth to revolve around the sun. But just as in real life we need leap years, in real life language can be gorgeously precise and yet not reduce to an equation.

What is important is that no language allows itself to develop constructions that impede rapid comprehension, and therefore all languages maintain basic logic. Can any of us truly say that when they hear someone say “I ain’t got nothing” that they have to work to avoid interpreting this as meaning “I have something”? On the contrary, one has to work to read the sentence this way—it’s an interpretation Aunt Lucy has to carefully teach us. If the everyday sentence structures of our language always make sense to us, then when they fail to hew to the lines of mathematical logic, the response cannot be to assume that the language is at fault. On the contrary, our assumption that language is a direct outgrowth of mathematical logic must be flawed. After all, in the language that we speak, it is as clear as day that double negatives simply do not equal a positive.

Now, many might answer that the reason we understand double negatives as positive so easily is because we have all fallen into a bad habit. Instead of falling into a hopeless philosophical debate about the nature of right and wrong, we can quickly see the error in the “bad habit” analysis from the simple fact that countless languages around the world use only double and multiple negation. We need not travel to distant corners to find this, either: in French, I do not see anything is: 

**Je ne vois rien.**

I not see nothing

Yet we can be sure that the French, notoriously proud of their tongue, would be quite amused to be told that their language lacks clarity or style on this, or any other, score. At no point in French history has anyone heard this French sentence and gone away assuming that somebody had seen something, tricked by the sloppy logic of that pesky multiple negation. Any charge that the Black English double and multiple negatives are illogical is oddly incomplete without a similar condemnation of French, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Hebrew, and most other languages on earth. And, of course (as noted previously), even Old English itself had double negatives.

There are other features of Black English that are neither simpler nor more complex than the standard forms, just different. Where standard English uses there is, Black English uses it or its:

**It a girl name Shirley Jones live in Washington.... And when she do, she can see it’s a Valentine card inside.**

Black English often omits the -s ending in the third person singular, as in he talk to me all the time. However, at the same time, it also often marks the first person singular with -s, as in He don't even know how much I makes. Thus Black English is neither simpler nor more complex here, just different. If we think about it, there is no logical reason why we mark the third person singular in particular with an ending like this; marking the first person instead is a similarly random structural tic.

There are other features of Black English that I have not mentioned. My purpose has not been to provide a complete outline of Black English grammar, which the interested reader can find in sources such as J. L. Dillard’s *Black English*, Geneva Smitherman’s *Talkin and Testifyin*, and John Rickford and Lisa Green’s *African-American Vernacular English*. The aim has been to show what linguists and educators mean by Black English other than passing slang expressions, and to show that this Black English is a nuanced and coherent system of grammar, no more but no less complex than standard English.

One way to get a real handle on the fact that there is nothing deficient in any way about Black English is to realize that just as one can be articulate in standard English, one can be articulate in Black English as well. We commonly associate the word articulate with standard English speakers. However, to the extent that articulateness is defined as a highly developed ability to communicate both fact and nuance, we can see that one can be articulate in the deepest of Black English.
For example, William F. Buckley is a prime example of someone who is articulate in standard English. Although many of us might bemoan the frigid paleoconservatism of his utterances themselves, there is no denying his enviable agility in wielding vocabulary, syntax, and allusion for all they're worth.

In the same way, however, Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy are highly articulate speakers of Black English. Richard Pryor’s old comedy albums are feasts of perfectly rendered phrases, stunning word choices, and masterful allusions—in Black English. Eddie Murphy mines similar riches in films such as *Trading Places*, *Beverly Hills Cop*, and *The Distinguished Gentleman*. The verbal dexterity of their performances is no less intricate and no less indicative of high intelligence than the elegant tapeworm phraseology of Buckley. Pryor and Murphy’s talent is not simply a matter of being funny—these men, like black preachers, are masters of language.

Of course, this is not to pretend that every African American is a linguistic wizard, any more than every white person is. The distribution of word-meisters is about equal across the cultures. In the standard English realm, for example, George Bush was notorious for being barely able to rub a noun and a verb together. Dwight D. Eisenhower, despite the old song’s claim that “Ike is good on a mike,” was similarly handicapped. Along the same lines, as Black English goes, one does not sense that Mike Tyson is the most articulate of men, nor has Marion Barry ever appeared blessed with the gift of gab in any dialect. The point, however, is that Black English can be the vehicle of articulateness just as standard English can. We can take this in easily after we get rid of the veil of misperceptions attached to the dialect over the centuries.

"BUT I DON’T TALK LIKE THAT!":
AFRICAN AMERICANS AND CODE SWITCHING

Many readers may still have a lingering sense that there is a certain lack of fit between what I have just described and the reality of what African Americans speak. Specifically, many people, white and black, sense that passages and sentences such as those discussed earlier are exaggerations of how black people actually talk. And in a sense, they are right. This is because in modern America, Black English is not usually spoken as a discretely separate code like French or Japanese. African Americans, especially middle-class ones, typically speak both Black English and standard English, switching constantly between the two, often in the same sentence. It is rare to hear unadulterated streams of Black English for minutes running, and, for linguists, passages like the Shirley story are elusive prizes.

This switching between dialects is not a sign that black people do not have a firm handle of standard English. Like habitual marking, double negation, and absence of verbs to be, this switching between speech varieties is typical of a practice found worldwide called code-switching. In America, the most commonly observed example of code-switching is between English and Spanish, by Latinos in cities like New York, Philadelphia, and Miami. Here is an example of code-switching between English and Spanish by a Mexican:

And they tell me, “How did you quit, Mary?” I didn’t quit. I just stopped. I mean it wasn’t an effort that I made. Que voy a dejar de fumar porque me hace daño [that I’m going to stop smoking because it’s bad for me or] this or that, uh-uh. It’s just that ... I used to pull butts out of the wastepaper basket, yeah. Se me acababan los cigarros [I would run out of cigarettes] en la noche [in the middle of the night]. I’d get desperate, y ahí voy al basurero a buscar, a sacar, [and I’d go there to the trashcan to look, to get some] you know? No trago cigarros Camille, [Camille didn’t have any cigarettes], no trago Helen, no trago yo, el Sr. de León [Helen didn’t have any, I didn’t, Mr. Leon didn’t] and I saw Dixie’s bag crumpled up, so I figures she didn’t have any, y ahí ando en los ceniceros buscando a ver donde estaba la [and I’m going there into the ashtrays looking to see where the] ... I didn’t care whose they were. [where were the]
dillas for dinner, reaching for a Snapple, and having Ben & Jerry’s Chunky Monkey ice cream for dessert.

People switch between languages like this all over the world: between English and French in Canada, between French and Wolof in Senegal, between Russian and Armenian in Armenia, between Swahili and English in Kenya, between German and French in Alsace-Lorraine, and in bygone days, between French and Russian among the elites in Czarist Russia. Just as often, people switch between standard and non-standard dialects in the same way: educated Tunisians, for example, code-switch between the standard Arabic of newspapers and the colloquial Arabic of Tunisia in the same way as “Nuyorican” switch between English and Spanish, and educated Haitians code-switch between French and Haitian Creole French. Generally, the speech variety that most intimately expresses the speakers’ culture is used when the topic is informal or intimate.

In the earlier sample, for example, the speaker uses Spanish when discussing the most dramatic aspects of her smoking addiction, and English for more neutral statements. In Haiti, it is creole that plays the intimate role, Wolof in Senegal, Tunisian Arabic in Tunisia, etc. In this way, code-switching closely reflects the flow and content of the conversation.

African Americans code-switch between standard and Black English in this fashion, yielding passages such as this one from Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*:

“We ain’t staying long,” Ruby says, pulling up a chair. “But I thought it would be nice for us to meet Cocoa’s new husband.”

“It’s a pleasure,” George says.

“Doubly mine,” says Ruby. “And this here is my new husband, Junior Lee.”

“Pleasssurre.” Junior Lee manages a nod. “Hear you a big railroad man.”

“No, I’m an engineer.”

“That’s what I hear. Ain’t never been on the railroad myself, except hopping a few freights.”

“No, baby, he’s an engineer.” Ruby pats Junior Lee’s arm.

“That’s telling him.” Ruby smiles. “It’s good you ain’t lost your tongue—like some done lost their manners.”

“I ain’t wanted to come anyway.” Junior Lee sulks. “And I got business if you throughhh.”

“Just a few more minutes, baby.” Ruby pats his arm again, but Junior Lee snatches it away and gets up.

In these passages, Ruby uses Black English constructions such as “It’s good you ain’t lost your tongue,” “like some done lost their manners,” and “them peaches is for you,” but also uses the standard verb form in “My boy loves to tease” (rather than the Black English “My boy love to tease”) and “This here is my new husband” rather than “This here my husband.” Junior Lee does not use a verb to be in “Hear you a big railroad man” and “I got business if you throughhh,” but does in “If you stay, you’re walkinng home.” As is typical of the use of nonstandard dialects in code-switching, the use of Black English is tied to degree of informality or intimacy. Ruby uses Black English most consistently when getting a dig in at her husband, which involves getting down to “heart matters.” (“It’s good you ain’t lost your tongue—like some done lost their manners.”) Junior Lee uses more Black English in general, in reflection of his joking, rascally, informal character. In general, the environment is one in which standard and Black English compose an expressive tonal palette richer than is typical of many more monodialectal white Americans.

This code-switching is the way most African Americans use Black English. Only small children, who have yet to hear much but the home dialect, speak a pure Black English virtually unadulterated by third person singular -s; the verb to be used for the present tense and before nouns, adjectives, etc.; or “standard” negation. In the same way as small white children use more nonstandard features than their parents—the world over, home dialects are learned first. Note that when African-American comedians like Eddie Murphy imitate black children, they immediately go into charmingly unmitigated Black dialect; meanwhile, Dennis the Menace’s speech is full of -in’ for -ing and ain’t for isn’t.

Therefore, most African Americans do not say things like kep for kept, I be tellin’ her, and Ain’t nothing we can do about dat all the time, but most African Americans do say things like this at least some of the time, usually with other African Americans, while switching back and forth between standard and African-American English, and usually when the topic or tone is in the informal, jocular, or intimate mode.

This kind of switching is not completely alien even to white Americans who usually dwell in standard English. For example, *The New York*
Tom Brokaw. Nothing would be sadder than an America where everybody spoke like

Around the world, bidialectalism is not a quirk, but commonplace: dialects: they are bidialectal. This is a precious attribute in comparison to most white Americans, who usually speak only American English with minor contextual variation—a notoriously bland linguistic palette. The air of eternal wisdom conveyed by the vernacular idiom of country and folk music comes from a similar place, appealing to bedrock, front-stoop sentiments that bond us all. Black English is a tool that allows African Americans to strike this note through speech more explicitly and regularly than many white Americans, which is why it conveys such an air of warmth and continuity as used in the works of Zora Neale Hurston or Langston Hughes.

In other words, Black English is not a symptom of inability to master standard English, anymore than code-switching between English and Spanish indicates an inability to master either language. On the contrary, African Americans are competent in not just one but two dialects: they are bidialectal. This is a precious attribute in comparison to most white Americans, who usually speak only American English with minor contextual variation—a notoriously bland linguistic palette. Around the world, bidialectalism is not a quirk, but commonplace: Swiss Germans speak both High and Swiss German; the Egyptian you meet most likely speaks both standard and Egyptian Arabic; Jamaicans often speak both standard English and Jamaican patois; Congolese often speak standard Swahili and a local Shaba Swahili; Chinese often speak both standard Mandarin and a local dialect of it; Singaporeans often speak both formal Indonesian and its colloquial relative Bazaar Malay; and on and on. The African-American bidialectal competence is not a scourge or a problem, then—it is something to be treasured. Nothing would be sadder than an America where everybody spoke like Henry W. Brown.

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Times Magazine once quoted a white neurobiologist describing a conference on the development of a memory-enhancing drug as being about "what's going to happen if and when somebody hits it big, because it ain't just going to be Alzheimer's patients who are going to want these drugs." The article discussed the implications the use of such drugs would have as people sought them for such things as improving their test scores and job performance. The scientist's dip into strikingly six-pack English was a way of colorfully pointing up the fact that this rather clinical drug could hit us all right where we live, at the level of our ordinary lives, a realm deftly, even poetically, evoked by casual rather than network speech. The phrase "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" has a similar feel and purpose, conveying a down-to-cases unassailable common sense that unites all of us, apart from the dicey nuances that might concern certain people at certain times under certain conditions.

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Another aspect of Black English that often makes African Americans say "I don't talk like that!" when they see written passages like the Shirley story is that Black English can be spoken not only to varying extent, but also on different levels. There is a continuum from what we could call a "deep" Black English through "light" Black English to standard English, and African Americans' use of Black English falls at different points along this continuum.

As a rule of thumb, the depth of one's Black English correlates with level of education: Black English gets diluted among African Americans with more education and thus more face-to-face contact with whites. This, of course, is only a rule of thumb. Some highly educated African Americans are comfortable using all levels of Black English with other African Americans to signal racial solidarity. On the other hand, the crisp, buttoned-down African-American postal clerk may speak only the lightest Black English with other blacks, even without having had much education. However, even rules of thumb have a general validity.

There are features of "deep" Black English that I did not mention earlier, because many African Americans tend to feel misrepresented by having such features presented as "Black speech." A classic example is bees as opposed to simply be, as in That's the way it bees sometime and That's how it happens when you bees late all the time. This is a feature infrequently used by most middle-class African Americans today, except in a quick joke or imitation. Many blacks would classify bees as "Southern," but even most middle-class blacks in the South would have a hard time seeing themselves in bees, and would classify it as "country." In general, one hears bees most frequently in inner-city and isolated rural communities, those with the least contact with whites and the least access to education.

Another example is the pronunciation of thing as "thang," sing as "sang," ring as "rang," etc. Again, this is a deep Black English feature, which most middle-class blacks usually only dip into for humorous or emotive effect. Many middle-class blacks will often quip, even around whites, that something is "a black thang," but would be much less likely, even around blacks, to casually say that they just got finished sangin' with a choir.
Thus there are African Americans whose default variety of Black English is this deep variety, usually those with the least contact with whites. For perhaps more African Americans, however, the variety of Black English they dwell in most spontaneously would include features such as habitual be, done, and double negatives, but they would only use features like bees and thang in passing, for humorous effect or to underline a black culture-specific point, aphorism, or comment.

On the other hand, for other African Americans, even be, done, and multiple negation are sometime things, rather than features they spontaneously use in most conversations with other blacks. However, even though Black English sentence structure is not default speech for them, they are quite at home in Black English sound structure.

With these speakers, the sound system is not used as purely as among speakers of deeper varieties; they are unlikely to say "mouf" or "ras" for rice except, again, "on the fly." However, they are in touch enough with the Black English sound system that certain features are present, even if somewhat intermediate between Black and standard English. The i in bill is not truly pronounced "ee-uh," but is slightly more prolonged, with a bit more of hint of the "uh" glide-off, than it would from most white speakers. The u in but is not like Rudy's "Buuhhd!," but detectably closer to it than most whites' usage. Initial th is not pronounced simply as d, but is slightly closer to d than many whites would pronounce it.

Just as important are intonation patterns, the unmistakable melody specific to the dialect, impossible to represent on the page but immediately recognizable to African Americans and most whites as well. All dialects of all languages have their specific "melody patterns." In a French sentence, for instance, each syllable is given roughly the same timing and emphasis until the one at the end of a phrase, which gets stress as well as a higher pitch than the preceding ones. Part of acquiring a good French accent is mastering this melody; applying the rising and falling contour of English to French sentences is part of what "having an American accent" consists of in French. Black English has an equally specific melody.

Thus for many African Americans, it is features like be, done, and multiple negation (as well as bees and thang) that are generally used to briefly underline a point, make a joke, or in imitation. Their "neutral" use of Black English consists mostly of the sound system alone, including the intonation patterns. This type of usage could be called light Black English; it shows that one can speak Black English without necessarily using its sentence structures. Indeed, the sound system of Black English is the great unifier of the African-American community and could be said to be its linguistic soul. For example, although there are African Americans who use the sounds of Black English without its sentence structure, there are none who use the sentence structures without the sound system. This is why the notion of, say, Dan Rather learning Black English from a book and dutifully uttering a phrase like "Ain't nobody done seen nothing like that" is so comical: The sound system is missing. In the 1970s, a stock sitcom joke entailed earnest white people signaling their racial tolerance by uttering Black English expressions, attempting the "short-drop" walk, and most of all, dancing. When Tom Willis on The Jeffersons tried to "boogie," the result was an exquisite catastrophe. Even if he had carefully imitated the body movements of a good African-American dancer, something would still have been missing—the "soul" of the thing. The sound system of Black English plays the same role in African American speech.

It must be emphasized that whatever their Black English repertoire, most African Americans use standard English alongside Black English. This is especially true of sentence structure: There are few blacks for whom a sentence like There isn't anything I can do would be a hurdle. African Americans do differ somewhat in their use of the standard dialect's sound system. Users of deeper Black English generally adapt the standard sound system more toward Black English than users of lighter varieties, whose use of the standard English sound system is often nearly indistinguishable from that of white speakers and sometimes completely so.

Dramatic and literary representations of Black English by whites often neglect the fact that African Americans code-switch in and out of standard English, and that Black English can be spoken on many levels. It is for this reason that, for example, in the 1930s and 1940s many black performers in Hollywood took offense at being forced to speak exclusively in dialect in movies, a criticism continued by black cultural analysts such as Donald Bogle today. Early black actors in Hollywood were surely aware that there was a way of speaking unique to African Americans. What offended them was that the script depictions left out the code-switching and nuances of level and instead portrayed all
blacks as speaking a uniform deep Black English at all times. Hall
Johnson, black composer and choir director, nailed this when asked to
comment on an early draft of the film musical Cabin in the Sky in 1942:

The dialect in your script is a weird but priceless conglomeration of
pre-Civil War constructions mixed with up-to-the-minute Harlem
slang and heavily sprinkled with a type of verb which Amos and
Andy purloined from Miller and Lyles, the Negro comedians; all of
which has never been heard or spoken on land and sea by any
human being.

Particularly inaccurate was the old Hollywood depiction of blacks
speaking in this fashion not only to other blacks but also to whites,
when in fact Black English is primarily an in-group speech style. Afri­
can Americans by no means leave Black English at the door the minute
they enter into conversation with a white person, but deeper, more
consistent use of it is generally reserved for use with other blacks.

Hattie McDaniel, best known to us today for her portrait of
Mammy in Gone With the Wind, was equally prominent later in her
lifetime for portraying the maid Beulah on a radio sitcom (older readers
will recall her catchphrases “Somebody bawl fo’ Beulah?” and “Love
dat man!”). McDaniel had it written into her contract for Beulah
that she
not be required to speak in dialect and indeed did not on the show,
except for sound patterns we can see even in the catchphrases. Yet
McDaniel herself was quite comfortable in Black English; she had even
spent her early career in vaudeville singing blues and “hollers” couched
in classic Southern black dialect. What McDaniel used her clout to
escape was having to utter entire paragraphs of socially implausible
sentences like, ‘Tse yo bestes’ frien, Massa Tommy, an’ when you goes
off to de univir~rsity don’ you never forget who done take care of you and
who it is can make de bes’ peach cobbler dis side of de Mississippi’” in
the role of a suburban maid in a middle-class family. Indeed one cringes
to listen to McDaniel, and Hollywood’s other black maid-on-call,
Louise Beavers (Imitation of Life), having to lope through scenes like this.

Thus a complete grammar of Black English would by no means
represent the sum total of African-American speech, the way a Greek
grammar is the sum total of most Greeks’ speech. Black English is a
repertoire of features and systematic structures that African Americans
use generally in tandem with standard English, use more with each
other than with whites, and use to differing degrees depending on level
of education and identity with the African-American community.

ITS OWN THING: BLACK ENGLISH IN RELATION
TO THE BIRTH OF STANDARD ENGLISH

Some basic facts about the history of Black English make even
clearer the fallacy of hearing this dialect as an improper version of
standard English. As we saw in a previous chapter, standard American
English was once the dialect of the upper class of Northeastern cities
and has since shifted to a meat-and-potatoes Midwestern dialect. What­
ever we think of the inherent “correctness” of either American stan­
dard, since both developed from random mixtures of dialects from
Great Britain, Black English emerged quite independently of either of
them.

Black English arose among slaves in the plantation South and as
such was mainly the product of three sources. First was the speech of
the white plantation owners. As one might imagine, wresting a planta­
tion out of untamed land in a hot place was not the first lifestyle choice
for a seventeenth-century Englishman. Accordingly, founding planta­
tion owners tended not be to be members of the ruling elite, and
therefore often spoke nonstandard dialects of English and passed it on
to their descendants. Many of these people traced to Irish or Scotch­
Irish ancestry.

Second, earlier American plantations often depended as much on
the labor of indentured whites from Great Britain as on black slaves.
Whites and blacks often worked side-by-side under similar conditions,
and thus the whites’ speech was a prime component in what would
become Black English. These whites certainly did not speak the stan­
dard American English of their time—Boston Brahmins were not in the
habit of sending their sons and daughters south to harvest tobacco with
slaves. The indentured servants were British, and thus spoke various
British dialects. As indenture was a fate mostly reserved for those
on the lower rungs of the socioeconomic totem pole, these people spoke
nonstandard British dialects. Many, for example, hailed from south­
eastern regions like Cornwall, where local English was along the lines of
Aw bain't gwine for tell ee for "He isn't going to tell you" (yes, aw was "he," not "I"!). Others emigrated from Ireland, where other nonstandard British dialects were spoken, many of them offshoots of Northern British dialects spoken by the Scotch-Irish. We must recall that neither Cornwall English nor any other nonstandard British dialect was deficient: My aim is not to bolster the claim often made by African Americans that blacks' speech is due to having had only the "incorrect" English of the white servants as a model. What varieties like the Cornwall dialect and the Irish ones were is different from anything we know as standard English.

The third source was creole English. For example, many of the first slaves brought to Charleston, South Carolina, were not brought directly from Africa, but from another English plantation colony, Barbados, where they had long served as slaves already. These slaves spoke a form of West Indian English similar to Jamaican patois, and as what were called "seasoned" slaves in South Carolina and elsewhere, they would have had a major impact on the English learned by slaves brought directly from Africa later. West Indian patois is, like Black English, a full and systematic speech variety, but it is so heavily influenced by the African languages spoken by slaves that it is essentially a new language. On the Sea Islands off of South Carolina, where slaves worked in large gangs with little contact with whites, this patois evolved into what is today Gullah, or "Geechee Talk." Elsewhere, this patois coexisted with nonstandard British dialects and mixed with them, the result being Black English.

We must note, then, that Black English can hardly be a degraded form of standard American English when it evolved independently of any forms of standard American English. Furthermore, we cannot even say that the slaves were exposed to dialects that were themselves degradations of American standard English, a misimpression particularly common in the black community. What slaves were exposed to was the often nonstandard speech of Southern white planters, nonstandard British dialects of indentured servants, and West Indian patois, all of which were nonstandard but not substandard. The nonstandard British dialects evolved independently of standard British English. West Indian patois is no more deficient than Black English—all of the same types of arguments we have seen for Black English as a coherent dialect apply to patois, as well as to any speech variety used by human beings. If slaves had been exposed to the English of Herman Melville and Horace Greeley but had come out speaking Black English, the notion of Black English as bad standard English would perhaps start to make sense—but only start, because Melville and Greeley's Engishes were themselves random, bastard mixtures of British dialects of all stripes.

TO LEARN MORE:
BLACK ENGLISH AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN CULTURE

I have deliberately refrained from discussing the language-centered cultural traditions in which Black English plays a part. The call-and-response pattern of African-American church services, the verbally dexterous insult-trading game "playing the dozens," the savory folktales and songs, and other folkways are vital traditions that beg attention and preservation. As such, they are covered beautifully elsewhere (Smitherman's Talkin and Testifyin is a particularly readable and useful treatment). However, my intention has been specifically to show that Black English is a nuanced and coherent linguistic system. I suspect that when making such an argument, referring to call-and-response, playing the dozens, and the folk character Stag-o-Lee would preach to the converted more than change many minds.

This is because in truth, we all know that these cultural traditions could exist in all their glory even if the dialect they were conducted in did happen to be a degraded and semilogical one (though as we have seen, such a thing in fact does not exist). One can get a lot of music out of a piano with a few dead keys, but no one would ever be under the illusion that the piano did not ultimately need to be fixed. In the same way, call-and-response patterns have a marvelous rhythmic tang, but we could theoretically conduct a stirring call-and-response church service using the language of The Lone Ranger's Tonto (Me see-um big fire). Playing the dozens obviously requires on-the-spot verbal dexterity, but one could nimbly trade insults in a lazy, semilogical dialect as well as a coherent one. Stag-o-Lee is a joy forever, but even a child who hasn't finished learning to talk yet can tell a charming story.

Thus while African-American verbal folk traditions are indeed founded on a coherent and complex speech variety, these traditions do
not in themselves prove this, and I suspect that many whites and blacks 
have quietly felt skeptical when told, for example, that the vitality and 
creativity of rap lyrics prove that Black English is complex. In them­
selves, they do not. Taken alone, colorful uses of Black English such as 
this are a brilliant celebration of the dialect but not truly a legitimization. 
Only after a direct examination of the structure of the dialect itself, are 
we in a position to appreciate how its use in wordplay and narrative are 
even further demonstration of its bounty. I hope that the reader will 
now take advantage of the opportunity to view African-American mu­
sic, folklore, and discourse styles in a new light. 
In that light, we can see that the impression Black English has given 
many, of being an often cute, sometimes even thrilling, but ultimately 
primitive bad habit is just that, an impression, which falls like a house of 
cards on scrutiny. The truth is that Black English is every bit as complex 
and subtle as standard English and is nothing less than a national 
treasure.

CHAPTER SEVEN

An African Language in North Philadelphia?

Black English and the Mother Continent

While Sranan and Media Lengua are unlikely to come much closer to 
most our lives than their margins, what we have learned about lan­
guage mixture applies directly to a public controversy that was one of 
the inspirations for this book. Namely, we are now in a position to 
evaluate the claim often made over the past thirty years that Black 
English is an African language rather than a dialect of English. 
This idea was most recently put forth by the Oakland Unified 
School Board in December 1996 in a resolution announcing that as a 
remedy for the poor reading scores of African-American children in the 
school district, African-American children were to be presented with 
standard English as a foreign language, with Black English brought to 
the classroom and treated as their native language. The board’s position 
on the nature of Black English was outlined in passages such as the 
following:

"WHEREAS, numerous validated scholarly studies demonstrate 
that African-American students as a part of their culture and his­
tory as African people possess and utilize a language described in 
various scholarly approaches as “Ebonics” (literally “Black 
sounds”) or “Pan-African Communication Behavior” or “African 
Language Systems”; and

WHEREAS, these studies have also demonstrated that African 
Language Systems are genetically based and not a dialect of En­
glish;