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From Home Speech to School Speech:
Vantages on Reducing the Achievement Gap in Inner City Schools
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The University email announcement for my Dean's Colloquium at Christopher Newport University had attempted to pithily abbreviate a rather gangly academic-sounding title, "Don't Dis Ebonics: Walking Hand-in-Hand toward Standard English." While abbreviation is usually benign, when it comes to matters of Black English the case is not so clear. And so, upon reading an email announcement, "Don't Dis Ebonics," pure and simple, I suspected that more than a few people might enter the room with hackles raised.

It's quite a common response: mention Ebonics, arouse ire, enflame passions. While the second half of the title had been intended to assuage audience concerns from the outset, perhaps my overall purpose was well served with the title's simplification. For it is from the point of our *emotional* response to Black English that I hope to move us. And to move *from* a point, we must first name and comprehend that point.

In this paper, I will begin by examining common lay responses to African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in America. From that vantage, I will move to the core of this work: I will sketch the nature of AAVE and its relation to Standard English (AKA Mainstream American English (MAE), Language of Wider Communication (LWC), Business English, Professional English, School Speech, Standard Edited American English (SEAE)). We will see that when students from working class or poverty backgrounds arrive at the schoolhouse door speaking a language variety very different from the Standard, these students may perform poorly in reading and in writing. I will suggest that the contrast of language varieties is one key component contributing to local African American students failure in basic English skills at alarming rates.

After briefly exploring the nature of the language barrier, we will see that current school textbooks do not teach what African American students need if they are to succeed on the SOLs and in school, more broadly. We will see specific examples from the English Essential Knowledge requirements and from the newly released Virginia SOLs (2000 for reading and writing) which may pose language barriers to the child arriving at school speaking a language variety different from that of the test instruments. Finally, I will describe a culturally and linguistically informed pedagogical vantage and approach which holds promise for helping students transition from home speech to school speech.

Underlying all my work, is our broad societal goal: The educational system of America seeks assure to that all students command Standard English, both spoken and written. The question is, how do we get there, effectively, with all human beings and communities intact? This paper constitutes a response to that question.

Naming our starting point:

In addressing our culture's baseline attitudes toward African American Vernacular English, AAVE, I turn to commentary around the time of the Oakland controversy. In December 1996, the Oakland California School Board issued a resolution suggesting that Ebonics be taken into account in the education of African American children. Notice that Oakland did *not* suggest that teachers *teach* Ebonics. Indeed, doing so would hardly make sense, as that African American student population already spoke the language form natively. What Oakland suggested was that teachers *consider* forms of home speech while teaching the Standard dialect of our country.

And so, although Oakland clearly affirmed our common goal -- every student will learn Standard English -- you would never know it from the firestorm of protest which erupted from all quarters.

Initially, Jesse Jackson came out like a furnace blast: "[In] Oakland, some madness has erupted over making slang talk a second language." "You don't have to go to school to learn to talk garbage," said Jackson (Seligman 1996).

William Raspberry, nationally syndicated columnist, similarly condemned. He diagnosed that the tongue now called Ebonics was, until recently known as Black English, or Ghettoese. "As I recall," Raspberry observed, "it sounds rather like what our mothers used to call Bad English" (Raspberry 1996).

Finally, speaking even more malignantly, James Shaw of the *LA Times* excoriated as follows: Ebonics is "nothing more than a linguistic sham, that with porcine gluttony, vacuum-sucks every verbal deformity from plantation patois to black slang, from rap to hip hop, from jive to crippled English, and serves up the resultant gumbo as 'black English'" (Shaw 1996).

Shocking. Yes, even embarrassing, so strong are those words and images. And yet, I am convinced that we must name our culture's starting point if we are to progress: Our culture begins by assuming that Black English is Broken English; It continues with stark condemnation of this language form.

However, an examination of the evidence reveals that African American Vernacular English is *not* broken English. It is not slang; it is *not* Standard English with mistakes. I believe that understanding this is crucial if we are to achieve our educational goal -- that *all* children command the Standard language variety. Let's look at some examples.

African American Vernacular English is *not* Standard English with Mistakes

Is AAVE 'slang'? No. Slang is a term dealing only with the styles of *words* that people use. According to Professor Geoffrey Pullum, writing in *Nature* magazine, "[s]lang, in any language, consists of a finite lists of words or idiomatic phrases, highly vivid and informal, in the most casual stratum of its lexicon" (Wheeler 1999). Thus, slang is "the ephemera" of the street. Slang deals with individual *words* that come and go -- *cool*, *groovy*, *dig man*, *swell*, *phat*, *da bomb*, and the like... AAVE, on the other hand, is a "perfectly ordinary variety of English spoken by a large and diverse population of Americans of African descent, by no means all of whom are slang users." Of course, language is made up of much more than just words; it's made up of pronunciation of those words; it's made up of word-internal structuring (e.g. word endings or beginnings that signal different meanings or functions of different sorts); and it's made up of how words are ordered into phrases, and phrases into clauses, and sentences. AAVE exhibits

its own regular system of rules for sound, vocabulary, word structure, and ordering of words into phrases and clauses. It is much, much more than “slang.”

In order to evoke the regular system of rules characterizing African American Vernacular English, I will first explore one example in rather great detail. Then, I will turn briefly to several other grammatical traits of AAVE as seen in the writing of Peninsula third graders.

The case of AAVE ‘BE’

For evidence on AAVE, I draw on one of my courses in the language arts concentration of the English Major, at Christopher Newport University. In English 311, Language and Teaching, one topic we explore is how future teachers might respond when a student primarily speaks (and writes) a dialect differing from the target one, Standard English. As we explore examples of home speech, CNU students initially characterize those as in ex. 1 as “bad English” or bad grammar.

1. He be happy.

My students believe that *He be happy* is a mistake, that either the speaker doesn’t know how to conjugate the verb *be*, or is too lazy to produce the requisite form of Standard English. Many would say that the ‘correct’ expression of the idea is as in example 2.

2. He is happy.

It is certainly true that ex. 2 *is* the corresponding expression in Standard English. However, the speaker of ex. 1 is not speaking Standard English. He or she is speaking according to the regular patterns of AAVE. In this language variety, the speaker of ex. 1 is using grammatical tools to convey a systematic meaning not found in the Standard English verb itself.

A student’s email to me illustrates this point beautifully (see ex. 3).

3. Student email

Hi Professor Wheeler,

I just wanted to let you know that I had an encounter with AAVE the other day. Here is a conversation between me, my husband, and my nephew.

My nephew and I were picking my husband up from work. So my husband gets into the car and my nephew asks him, “Uncle Poo-Poo (his nickname) y’all be playing basketball over there?” (looking at the basketball goal in the parking lot). My husband replied, “Naw man, we don’t be playing, but we play sometimes.”

This example reveals much about the meaning of BE in African American Vernacular English. The nephew has asked the uncle, “y’all be playing basketball over there?” to which the uncle replies, “Naw, man, we don’t be playing, but we play sometimes.” A contrast is thus established: *be playing* v. *play sometimes* (see ex. 4a).

4. The syntax and semantics of AAVE *be*

a) be playing v. play sometimes

b) play all the time (routinely) v. play sometimes

Fleshing out the contrast yields *play all the time (routinely)* v. *play sometimes* (ex. 4b). A second example of this usage may be useful in exploring and understanding the meaning of *be* in AAVE.

In English for your Success: A Language Development Program for African American Children (1999), Noma LeMoine cites to a misunderstanding between a teacher speaking Mainstream American English and an African American who is using *be* according to the grammatical rules of AAVE.

The teacher looked up at the student and said, "Bobby, what does your mother do every day?"

"She *be* at home!" Bobby said.

"You mean, she *is* at home," the teacher corrected.

"No, she ain't," Bobby said, "cause she took my grandmother to the hospital this morning."

"You know what I meant," the teacher said. "You are not supposed to say 'she *be* at home.' You are to say, 'she *is* at home.'"

"Why you trying to make me lie?" Bobby said. "She ain't at home." (LeMoine 1-2).

LeMoine explained that the boy became confused when the teacher insisted he say "She is at home," for in Bobby's language system, this would mean his mother was at home *at that very moment*. However, what Bobby had been conveying through the grammar of AAVE was that it was "her *habit* to be home on a day-to-day basis," even though she may not have been at home at the moment of the conversation (LeMoine 2). But the teacher did not know the grammar of AAVE; instead, she believed that Bobby was making mistakes in Standard English.

This conversation illustrates one of the differences between the verb systems of AAVE and Standard English. Let's look at this contrast in more detail.

When a verb system indicates the duration of an action, we call that verbal aspect. Thus, Standard English has 2 kinds of aspect – progressive and perfect. Progressive is signaled by *be + V-ing* as in ex. 5. This means the action is or was ongoing or not completed (She is playing basketball).

5. Standard English Progressive Aspect: Syntax and semantics

Syntax: *Be + V-ing*

Meaning: state or action ongoing or not completed

Ex. She is playing basketball; She was playing basketball

Perfect aspect in the Standard dialect is signaled by *have + V-ed/en*, with the meaning that the state or action has completed at least one cycle (She has played basketball).

6. Standard English Perfect aspect : Syntax and semantics

Syntax: *have + ed/en*

Meaning: state or action has completed at least one cycle.

Ex. She has played basketball; She had played basketball

Now we see the contrasts between AAVE and Standard English more precisely. *AAVE allows the speaker to make more grammatical distinctions of aspect inside the verb itself than does Standard English.* Where the Standard can signal completed or ongoing meaning inside the verb string, AAVE can signal those and also another meaning -- that of a state or action which is a habitual or routine occurrence. That is, the AAVE verbal system is able to grammatically signal at least one more type of verbal aspect than Standard English can.

This example is significant because it offers one illustration that AAVE is a systematic, rule governed language variety. It means that when a native speaker of AAVE uses the form “ Subject + BE + Verb/Adjective” what that form MEANS is that the subject is engaging in that activity or trait in a regular way. We call it habitual BE.

Indeed, if speakers of Standard English want to signal that same meaning, they are unable to do it with helping verbs alone. To capture the same meaning in Standard English, one adds an adverb: “He is usually happy” or “he is always happy.”

To summarize the point of examples 3 – 6, the speaker who uses the construction *He be happy* is not making a mistake in Standard English. He or she is employing the tools of AAVE to draw a particular distinction – that of a regularly recurrent action or state.

We’ll see that this fact provides us more evidence that AAVE is indeed a system of grammatical rules, just as is Standard English, although of course, Standard English is the language of the mainstream in our culture, and AAVE among many others, is not.

Dr. Geoffrey Pullum, Professor of Linguistics at UC Santa Cruz, comments on who speaks AAVE and what it is to know the language:

The grammar of AAVE – negative concord, copula omission, dropping of final consonants, and all the rest of it – has to be learned by anyone who wants to speak AAVE and be accepted linguistically within the AAVE-speaking community. Knowing AAVE does not come free with either knowing American English or having African American ethnicity. This point is beautifully (though unintentionally) illustrated by the mocking column on Ebonics [“To Throw in a Lot of ‘Bes,’ or Not? A conversation on Ebonics”] that was published in the *Washington Post* on December 26, 1996 by the distinguished African American columnist, William Raspberry (Wheeler 1999 53).

In this editorial, Raspberry creates a dialogue between himself and a DC cab driver.

We get a total of just thirty-two words of Raspberry’s made up AAVE dialog in the piece. But [Pullum observes,] Raspberry has a problem. He just does not know AAVE. The dialog he invents has grammatical errors (Wheeler 1999 53).

Here’s what happened. After the Raspberry character initiated a conversation, the cabbie replies: “What you be talkin’ about, my man?” With

these words, we now know that William Raspberry, an African American journalist, does not speak AAVE.

Why? Recall that the form “be + Verb/Adj” signals a habitual reading. But in this instance, unless there is a very different relationship between Raspberry and the cabbie than usually exists between passengers and cab drivers, there is no habitual action that the cab driver could refer to. The cabbie does not mean that Raspberry usually is talking about something, for there is no ‘usually’ with a first time passenger. Instead, the driver is trying, but failing, to express the question, “What are you talking about right now?”

What Raspberry didn’t know, was how to capture this meaning in AAVE. The sentence he needed was as in example 7: “What you talkin’ ‘bout?” where deletion, not presence of BE signals the present moment.

- 7. AAVE: the syntax and semantics of “copula deletion” (highly simplified)
Syntax: Delete BE
Meaning: signals action in the present moment
Ex. What ___ you talkin’ ‘bout?

So, we see that Raspberry does not know AAVE. Drawing on the stereotype that Black English is a mishmash, Raspberry does “toss in a whole lot of bes,” and in doing so, stubs his grammatical toe. Just as one must learn the rules of French or German or Japanese to speak these languages correctly, so must one learn the rules of Ebonics to speak it correctly. Raspberry never learned the rules of AAVE.

But then the question is “what has all this to do with public education?”

Statistics from one Peninsula Elementary School: Black children falling way behind

At one inner city elementary school on the Virginia Peninsula (the school and district will remain nameless as stipulated by the relevant school administration), we get a snapshot of the student population from Table 1. With nearly equal gender ratios, the real divergence lies in race. At this elementary school, the overwhelming proportion of students, 76%, are African American, while only 21% are white.

School enrollment: 644 students		
49% male (317)		
51% female (327)		
Ethnicity:		
American Indian	5	1%
Asian	6	1%
Black	490	76%
Hispanic	8	1%
White	135	21%
Talented and gifted	75	12%

TABLE 1: CONSTITUENCY OF THE SCHOOL BY RACE AND ETHNICITY

As seen in Table 2, spring 2000 tests of student reading level showed a disturbing trend across the elementary grades.

Spring 2000	total tested	Total %	Black	White
2	75	61%	58%	72%
3	135	33%	25%	61%
4	100	52%	35%	92%
5	135	53%	43%	90%

TABLE 2: SPRING 2000 RESULTS: STUDENTS READING AT OR ABOVE GRADE LEVEL

Grade 2 was a high water mark for Black Students, with 58 % of these children reading at or above grade level, as compared to 72% of the white children. While grade 3 shows a drop for both ethnicities, 61% of Whites did read at or above grade level, but only 25% of Black student reached or exceeded expected reading performance.

By the 4th and 5th grades, while white students are reading at a superior level (in the 90th percentile or higher), Black students are failing. Black student performance hovers between 35% and 43% of expected reading capacity. See Table 3 for parallel results in 1999 reading scores across the ethnicities.

Spring 1999	total tested	Total %	Black	White
2	77	53%	53%	53%
3	111	40%	24%	72%
4	145	43%	29%	86%
5	8	56%	48%	81%

TABLE 3: SPRING 1999 RESULTS: STUDENTS READING AT OR ABOVE GRADE LEVEL

Such disparities of language performance are neither isolated nor restricted to Virginia. Thus, in 1996 Stanford linguist and AAVE scholar, John Rickford, reported the results of a 1990 study of student writing performance. This study revealed that

third grade kids in the primarily white, middle class Palo Alto School District scored on the 94th percentile in writing; by the [sixth] grade, they had topped out at the 99[th] percentile. By contrast, third grade kids in primarily African American working class East Palo Alto (Ravenswood School

District) scored on the 21st percentile in writing, but by the sixth grade, they had fallen to the 3rd percentile, almost to the very bottom (Rickford 1996).

Clearly, African American children are confronting a brick wall when it comes to language in the public schools. While our local children are doing better than those reported from working class East Palo Alto, our African American students consistently fail the Virginia English statewide assessment tool, our Standards of Learning (SOL).

In Grade 3, spring 1999, 81% of white students passed the SOLS, but only 38% of the Blacks did. And in spring 2000, while white students did less well, with 64% passing, the achievement gap remains as Black students performed on the English SOLs at the level of 38%.

Grade 3	Percent of Students Passing					
	Spring 1999			Spring 2000		
	Total	Black	White	Total	Black	White
English: Reading and Writing	50%	38%	81%	44%	38%	64%

TABLE 4: SOL TEST RESULTS DISAGGREGATED BY ETHNICITY 1999 –2000

Similar divergence between Black and White student performance is found on the English SOLS for grade 5, as in Table 5.

Grade 5	Percent of Students Passing					
	Spring 1999			Spring 2000		
	Total	Black	White	Total	Black	White
English: Reading/lit/research	53%	48%	71%	46%	36%	81%
Writing	60%	57%	65%	58%	48%	83%

TABLE 5: SOL TEST RESULTS, GRADE 5, DISAGGREGATED BY ETHNICITY 1999 – 2000

While there are many details to be explored in these results, consistent patterns remain. African American students perform poorly in English Language arts.

The question is ‘*Why?*’ Why do African American students stumble hard in our schools? If we can answer that, next we must wonder how precisely we ought proceed.

According to elementary teachers at the school in question, African American students do poorly on the SOLs not because they fail to command the *content* of the tests, but instead, teachers believe, the students’ failure lies in their inability to understand the *language* in which the test questions are written.

Indeed the structure of the language system is an acknowledged culprit. According to Ruby Payne, educational consultant with decades of experience in inner city schools and author of A Framework for Understanding Poverty, it is unfamiliar language structures that pose serious impediments to the child arriving at school with a home speech significantly distinct from the school speech. However, while pointing to language as a key culprit, Payne stops there, offering scant specifics.

What constitutes the language obstacle and what might be our pedagogical remedy?

In initial response to the first question, I report preliminary findings from my research into Peninsula public schools. In this initial phase of my research, I studied the writing of inner city third graders in order to ascertain simply *whether* home speech patterns intruded into school writing.

My research method during this informal pilot was as follows: every three weeks during spring semester 2001, I collected school papers from each of 5 third grade classes (15 – 18 students per class). For each 3rd grade essay, I performed a syntactic analysis sentence by sentence, noting and categorizing those places where the child's writing sample differed from the expected patterns of Standard Written English. Based upon this analysis, I found that home speech did intrude into school writing, and I identified over 3 dozen recurrent grammatical home speech patterns in the children's essays (Wheeler, ms).

Based upon this work, I have begun to explore the hypothesis that these dialectal intrusions represent one important factor impeding the child's performance in reading, writing, and on the SOLs.

Examples 8 –10 illustrate just three of the dozens of home speech intrusions I identified into the school writing of Peninsula third graders.

8. Possessive marked by adjacency of nouns

- a) And we have sweets on the weekend at my mom house.
- b) My goldfish name is Scaley.
- c) Christopher family moved...

What we see in Example 8 is a different structure by which language can signal possession. In Standard English, possession is signaled by using an apostrophe s ('s) or by changing the shape of a pronoun, if present; the corresponding Standard English counterparts to 8 would be "my mom's house, Christopher's family" or "her house, etc."

By contrast, AAVE may indicate possession not with an apostrophe but by proximity of two nouns – possessor/ possessed. It is the fact of one noun coming immediately before the other, (e.g. *mom house, goldfish name*) which signals possession. The first one possesses the second one. That is, in AAVE, possession is signaled by adjacency, the occurrence of two nouns side-by-side. (Smitherman 2000).

For a language to use position to encode a grammatical meaning is nothing new. Standard English does it all the time; one knows the subject, in part, by *where* it typically occurs in the sentence -- in front of the verb. Thus, languages may use position as a means to signal a particular grammatical meaning. Standard English uses position to signal subjecthood; AAVE uses position to signal possession.

Another home speech intrusion into the writing of inner-city third graders is exemplified in 9-10. Example 9 illustrates the home speech pattern, while Example 10 shows the corresponding Standard English translation. Examples 9 and 10 show that AAVE and Standard English operate with contrasting constraints on reduction of the verb BE, a contrast of which school children may be unaware.

9. AAVE: Deletion of BE

- a) He preacher too.
- b) He born on January 15, 1929.
- c) I'm a preacher too.
- d) He be preaching.

10. Standard English Equivalent

- a) He is a preacher, too.
- b) He's a preacher too.
- c) He was born on January 15, 1929.
- d) *He's born on January 15, 1929. (asterisk indicates that the sentence is ungrammatical).

The Standard Dialect, as shown in 10 a-b, can contract the verb 'be', yielding "He's a preacher too." Examples 10 c-d show us that Standard English does however operate with constraints on the contraction of 'be.' In particular, *be* can not contract if it is in past tense. Hence, 10d would never occur in Standard English.

AAVE, also operating under very specific constraints, deletes 'be' in very particular circumstances. In AAVE, BE is deleted *only* when the sentence is (i) present tense, (ii) affirmative (not negated), (iii) other than first person, (iii) not habitual. Thus, the speaker of AAVE can not delete 'be' when the sentence is as in 9c, first person, or as 9d, habitual. It is a predictable, regular system – different from Standard English, but a system nonetheless (Pullum 1999).

Interestingly, while the details differ, AAVE patterns just like Russian, Hungarian, Arabic, and Swahili, in permitting deletion of the copula, 'be'. Again, the patterns of BE in African American Vernacular English do not constitute mistakes; they follow the syntax of AAVE, just as copula deletion in Russian, Hungarian, Arabic, Swahili and Standard English follow the syntax internal to their own systems.

Finally, let's turn to example 11 which illustrates home speech pronunciation intruding into the school writing of third graders.

11. Spelling paralleling home speech pronunciation

- a) Her momder come in the room she was not dair
- b) Somebody trow livefish in the pool

Some believe that the AAVE speaker saying 'dair' or 'trow' in contexts when a Standard English speaker would say "there" or "throw" is being lazy and speaking in a sloppy fashion. Two points are relevant: First, the linguistic tools of articulatory phonetics readily demonstrate that laziness and sloppiness are not at issue: Standard English and AAVE simply use two distinct sounds at the beginning of these words. For a sound to be different is not the same as a sound

being “inferior” (whatever *that* means). Second, to claim that the AAVE speaker is lazy in pronouncing ‘trow’ instead of “throw” is to also claim that speakers of Standard English are lazy when pronouncing “torn” but energetic and careful when pronouncing “thorn.” That is, the initial sounds of these two Standard English words are identical to the initial sounds of the criticized AAVE pronunciations. The faulty logic here is apparent. The same case holds for the assessment of AAVE speakers’ pronunciations.

What do these examples mean when it comes to African American students falling deeply behind in reading and writing? I will illustrate with three examples of how dialect contrast may interfere with performance on the VA SOLs and on the English Essential Knowledge.

My first example is drawn from the SOL 2000 Released Test Items: One reading question directs as follows:

12. “Read this sentence: ‘What a beautiful day!’
What word rhymes with ‘day’
- a) boy
 - b) they
 - c) car
 - d) sat

For the child speaking preponderantly AAVE, this question may prove confusing. If the child comprehends the definition of rhyme, he or she will know that two words rhyme if they end with the same final syllable but are otherwise distinct. But for the child speaking inner city home speech, the answer deemed correct by the test-makers, *they*, does not meet the definition of a rhyme. For the AAVE speaking child, item b) does not rhyme with ‘day’; instead, it is identical to it.

Without explicit study of the contrasting structure of home speech and school speech language patterns, an inner city child might get questions such as this wrong on the SOLs.

Similarly, one requirement of the English Essential Knowledge for 3rd grade students specifies as follows: “Students are expected to... apply knowledge of change in tense (ed), number (s) and degree (er and est) signified by inflected endings” (3.3).

However, if a child speaks preponderantly in the language patterns of home speech, in this system, verbs do not show ‘-ed’ endings for tense and nouns do not show ‘-s’ endings for plural. Thus, in AAVE, past tense is not marked on the verb but instead past time is shown by adverbials in the broader sentence context (He walk yestedy). Similarly, in this language variety, nouns do not typically indicate plurality by addition of ‘-s’; instead, plurality is often indicated by an accompanying number word (two brother).

A child who speaks in the patterns of home speech and remains unaware of the contrasts between home and school grammar may find these requirements confusing. That is, in home speech, “He walk yestedy” *does* signal past time and “two brother” *is* plural.

Finally, I offer an illustration that dialectal contrasts may interfere multiply in comprehension of SOL test questions and reading passages.

Example 13 is drawn from the 2000 SOL for English Writing (3rd grade). It asks the student to examine a reading passage and answer a question.

13. Q: "Which sentence says the same thing twice?"

A: "Everyone has a talent, and there isn't anyone who doesn't have a talent" (q. 15, p. 32, SOL 2000 Writing)

The intended answer is as in 13 A. However, for the child who mainly speaks a home language variety and who is relatively unfamiliar with the grammatical patterns of Standard English, many barriers exist to that child even comprehending the answer the SOLs intend as correct.

Thus, in the child's home speech, the meaning of 13A might be rendered as in 14:

14. Everybody got a talent and it ain't nobody what don't got no talent.

We see fully eight grammatical contrasts between the home speech pattern of 14, and the Standard English pattern of 13A. For the child not fluent in these grammatical contrasts, I hypothesize that this child confronts a grammatical thicket creating a near impenetrable barrier to comprehension of the intended test answer.

How to transition: from home speech to school speech

The question then becomes how can we help the child transition from home speech to school speech?

Standard grammar texts are of little use in addressing the achievement gap. Where they are used at all, the standard texts on grammar and writing rely on a traditional grammar approach where students explore the 8 parts of speech and several sentence types, seeking to avoid fragments, and conflicts of verb tense. Not only are such approaches to and models of language not very useful in and of themselves, but they do not address the issues confronting AAVE-speaking children who arrive at the Standard English schoolhouse. Such children use nouns, verbs, and adjectives along with the best of them. No, for AAVE speaking children, the contrasts of dialect pertain to the more detailed grammatical system, a system not treated in K – 12 language texts.

But before we can address fostering transition, we must look at one more point – the human and cultural experience of speaking a dialect distinct from the Standard. One of my CNU students voices her feelings eloquently:

...deep down inside everyone feels Black English is not correct (even the blacks that speak it). They know it's a sort of slang that must be left behind when speaking to authority figures. I speak "Black English" and I sometimes feel inadequate around those who don't speak it. I know I am an intelligent person, but I just feel very uncomfortable around others that may not speak as I speak. I find it very hard for me to code-switch [switch from Black English to Standard English, and back again]. It's like - I am speaking informally majority of the day and those few hours that I attempt to speak Standard English is very hard for me. I often get tongue-tied and I am unable to express my self. It's almost like a second language (Standard English) and when I conform to speaking Standard English I feel as if I have abandoned

my first language, which is Black English. I realized this one night when I came home from class and my husband said, "why you talkin' like that? Stop talk'in white! " I had not made the transformation from Standard speech to Home speech and it seemed "fake" or "unreal" to my husband because he was used to hearing me speak informally.

...

I mean everything is double layered - It's like, if you want to succeed in life you must speak a certain way or do certain things, but when we conform to these "things" we somehow lose our selves and our identity. ... (Personal communication, 4/01)

The stakes are enormous. We are talking about the students' sense of self, family and community. We are talking about individual identity.

We are equally talking about the realities of our society – It is a fact of our world that if a person wants to succeed in the broader enterprise of business, government and commerce, he or she must command Mainstream American English.

Question: How do we balance the competing demands so well articulated by my African American student? How do we assure that each student emerges from our educational system with strong command of Standard English, all the while honoring the diversity of home and community in our society?

Answer: If students possess a full linguistic toolbox and are able to code-switch, selecting the language appropriate to the setting, they will come to more fully command Standard English.

Language is a code. The nature of the code varies by time, place, audience, and communicative purpose. Ideally, we choose the code that meets the exigencies, the requirements of the context. While oftentimes formal speech is required, sometimes casual speech is what is appropriate.

Thus, when my attorney brother telephones me and begins his conversation with "HEY, whatchu doin?" he is speaking casually, in a manner appropriate to the casual speech of our family. But it is equally clear that Brad does not approach the circuit court judges in that manner. He wouldn't keep his job as attorney for long, if he did. So, just as my attorney brother does not use home speech to talk to the judge, so he does not use the most formal professional speech with his family.

What we realize with this example is that all of us change from casual to formal speech regularly and seamlessly throughout our day. Accordingly, as we talk about African American Vernacular English in our schools and community, we are seeing just one example of a much broader phenomenon. The issue is not so much AAVE itself, as it is our children learning to code-switch from a casual home language to a formal professional language.

Teaching students to code-switch has been demonstrated successful in inner city schools. Stanford Professor, John Rickford, speaking to the U. S. Senate Committee on Ebonics, in 1997, reported the efforts of a Chicago educator with inner-city university students.

Rickford reported that Hanni Taylor had tested two approaches with his African American students in English composition. In his experimental class, he taught writing by *contrasting* African American Vernacular English with Standard English, thus helping students see the differences between the two grammatical

systems. In the control group, he used so-called, “traditional English department techniques,” presumably techniques which entailed characterizing African American English as wrong and Standard English as right.

After three months “the experimental group showed a 59% reduction in the use of Ebonics features in their SE [Standard English] writing, while the control group, using traditional methods, showed a slight INCREASE (8.5%) in the use of African American features.” That is, when the teacher helped the students explicitly contrast the structure of AAVE and the Standard, their success in writing Standard English improved by 59% (Rickford 1997, Wheeler 1999). Explaining these results, “Taylor observed that students were often unaware of the detailed differences between African American English and Standard English. Thus, contrasting the two systems helped students ‘limit AAE intrusions into their SE usage’” (Rickford 1997).

Such an approach has also been demonstrated successful with elementary students from south. Teachers in DeKalb County, Georgia help young speakers of minority dialects explicitly contrast their home speech with school speech. Thus, when a fifth-grader answers a question with a double negative (“not no more”) the teacher prompts the student to code-switch, to which the student replies, “not any more.” *The Atlantic Constitution* has reported that in this “Bidialectal Communication” program, the children learn to switch from their home speech to school speech at appropriate times and places, and that “the dialect they might use at home is valuable and ‘effective’ in that setting, but not for school, for work – of for American Democracy” (Cummings 1997). This program has been designated a “center of excellence” by the National Council of Teachers of English (Wheeler 1999).

In sum, as Professor Rickford reported to the U. S. Senate in 1997, “teaching methods which DO take vernacular dialects into account in teaching the standard work better than those which DO NOT” (Rickford 1997).

Closer to home: The Virginia Peninsula

What can we do in our public schools to unbind the achievement gap?

Once we step away from the anger and inflamed passions we heard in the words of Jesse Jackson and columnists William Raspberry or James Shaw we can move toward concrete, straightforward pedagogy which fosters our students’ transition.

Many approaches to code-switching in the classroom come immediately to mind: A teacher might invite children to translate a Standard English story into a variety of home speech forms. Southerners could translate the tale into Southern English, using the distinctive grammar, vocabulary, and sounds of that language variety. A child from the Bronx might render the story in the cadences of his or her home speech, just as the child speaking AAVE and the child from the local fishing community would write the story into the grammar and rhythms they had learned at home.

Students might translate the various passages into the kind of language their grandparents would use, or that their 3 year old brother might use. They might put rap lyrics into Standard English, and Country Western back into rap.

Alternatively, and importantly, a rich body of African American children’s literature provides fertile ground both to reach the cultural interests of the African American child, and to offer examples for contrasting the language systems of AAVE and Mainstream American English. For example, Terry Meier (1998)

illustrates how the children's book *Flossie and the Fox* may be used in the classroom to help students gain greater "conscious awareness of how they (and others) use language" as determined by place, time, audience and purpose. Featuring a little girl, Flossie, who is "able to outwit a fox by pretending not to believe he's really a fox," this children's work is written in both Standard English and AAVE, with the fox speaking the Standard and Flossie and her family using the linguistic features characteristic of AAVE.

Meier describes language centered activities ranging from "writing like a fox," to "using your words," to "sounding word endings" to foster children's becoming explicitly aware of the contrasts between the grammatical patterns of AAVE and Standard English. Children can role-play the fox's way of talking and role-play Flossie's patterns of speech. Through role-play children are able to attend to the linguistic contrasts involved without feeling personally on the spot.

As students contrast the grammatical patterns of the two language varieties, teachers may help them create a Grammar Translator, where, for example, the student writes the school speech pattern on the left hand side of the page, with the corresponding translation into home speech on the right, thus taking authorship of their own language learning.

As demonstrated by Rickford, Hanni, and teachers in DeKalb Georgia, students who are able to contrast the dialects of home and school are more successful in reading and producing Standard English (Meier 1998 100 – 104). Such activities centering on language and culture form the core of the successful program "English for your Success" developed by Noma LeMoine in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LeMoine, 1999a, 1999b).

In any event, research has shown that the most effective path to Standard English is the one by which students are able to say freely and confidently, "In my dialect, we say it like this."

Conclusion

Our inner city schools are in crisis; they have been so for a long time. We received a wake-up call more than 20 years ago when a Northern school system was sued for educational malpractice.

It was in 1979 that "Michigan Legal services filed suit ... on behalf of fifteen black, economically deprived children residing in a low-income housing project on Green Road in Ann Arbor, Michigan" (Smitherman 2000 133). Their case, *Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children v. Ann Arbor School District Board*, resulted in a decision for the plaintiffs. The court found that "the suit had merit under Title 20, Sec. 1703(f), which stated that no child should be deprived of equal educational opportunity because of the failure of an educational agency to take appropriate action to overcome linguistic barriers" (Labov 1995 quoting Joiner).

The issue before us now, more than two decades later, is how to take "appropriate action to overcome linguistic barriers." In this paper, I have suggested that we must begin with our beliefs about the nature of African American Vernacular English. Once we recognize that African American Vernacular English is NOT Standard English with mistakes; it is not slang, and not broken English, we are free to recognize that AAVE possesses its own full grammar, similar to but distinct from the grammar of Standard English.

From this vantage, we may more readily foster our students learning to code-switch between the language of the home and the language of the school.

Indeed, all students need a full linguistic toolbox, a toolbox well stocked with a diverse range of language styles, supported by the student's ability to code - switch between language varieties as appropriate to time, place, audience, and communicative purpose. With these skills of linguistic diversity, perhaps the schoolhouse doors will more widely open to *all*.

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