

# BLACK ENGLISH: A RESPONSE

*The court didn't say black English interferes with learning standard English; it said schools must be sensitive to cultural differences.*

JOHN W. CHAMBERS, JR.

I agree with Robinson that the Michigan language decision has created and rekindled much controversy, but I find some of his points misleading or ambiguous.

Robinson gives the impression that the linguistic variations some black children bring to the educational setting cannot legitimately be characterized as a distinct vernacular of English. As evidence he cites regional differences in the speech patterns of white Americans. A number of U.S. English vernaculars have been studied, Appalachian, Puerto Rican, Indian, as well as Black. The English language is made up of many vernaculars, some of which have social prestige and others which do not. The distinction is made not on a linguistic basis (the syntactic, phonological, and semantic rules that govern a language), but rather on a social-political basis. All the vernaculars that make up the English language are more alike than different; that is one of the striking characteristics of vernaculars.

The Michigan language case was not a class action suit on behalf of all "nonstandard" vernacular speakers; it was filed on behalf of 11 black children who spoke black English. The decision, therefore, referred to those plaintiffs and their language. Nevertheless, the educational principles involved are generally applicable to any group (including white Appalachian speakers) whose lan-

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guage has been stigmatized by our society, and for whom negative staff attitudes and practices result in unequal educational opportunity.

Robinson gives the impression that black children are not that different from other minority group children and in many respects this is true. Many other groups arrived in this country under adverse conditions. However, black people are unique in that they arrived here in slavery. Centuries of slavery and pervasive racism have created negative attitudes toward, and low expectations for, the education of Blacks. That is one factor which distinguishes Blacks from most other ethnic groups and linguistic minorities.

Robinson says, "If one is Black and speaks a dialect, 'black English,' he or she is perceived as having a special problem." Is it black children who have special problems, or is it American educational institutions that have special problems because of their refusal or lack of skills to adequately educate black children? I propose it is the latter.

There is little research to indicate black English interferes with learning to read the language of the business and marketplace often referred to as "standard" English (Hall, 1980). There is an urgent need for continued research to discern more conclusively the relationship between black English and reading acquisition. However, we know teacher attitudes and expectations can influence the ability of students to profit from instruction. Attitudes triggered by skin color, language, or cultural characteristics may cause some teachers to consider children less capable of learning, lowering their expectations, and discouraging practices that are more supportive of learning.

The major point in the Ann Arbor case was not that black children have special problems or an inability to learn because of their language, but that they encounter special problems when they must interact with a system that values them less as human beings than it does others.

Robinson also says, "Under the guise of 'acceptance,' black children who speak a dialect could be left to go happily on their way 'doing their black thing.'" This statement is based on a number of false premises. Judge Joiner's order said:

The court does not believe the language differences between 'black English' and standard English to be a language barrier in and of itself. But the evidence does clearly establish that unless those instructing in reading recognize (1) the existence of a home language used by the children in their own community for much of their non-school communications, and (2) that this home language may be a cause of the superficial difficulties in speaking standard English, great harm will be done. The child may withdraw or may act out frustrations and may not learn to read.

The order stated clearly that schools are expected to teach students to read and write standard English, so the decision should not be used as an excuse for not doing so. Any misunderstandings about this explicitly stated obligation are due not to the order itself but, as Robinson says, to inaccurate reports in the media and elsewhere.

I will end as I began by agreeing with Robinson. There is a strong need for sensitive, well-trained teachers who can use cultural differences to enrich the learning climate. Sensitivity and dedication cannot be mandated in the courts or by the federal government, but rather must come at grass root levels with involvement of the community, local and state education agencies, and teacher training institutions. ■

## References

Hall, W. S. "Projecting the Issue Into Time: What Do We Know and Where Do We Go From Here?" In *Reactions to Ann Arbor: Vernacular Black English and Education*. Edited by M. Whiteman. Arlington, Va.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1980.

*Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School Children et al. v. Ann Arbor School District Board*, 473 F. Supp. 1371 (1979).

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