

Book Review—
The Skin That We Speak:
Thoughts on Language and Culture in the Classroom
Lisa Delpit & Joanne Kilgour Dowdy (Editors)
New York: New Press
2002

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Seven years have passed since the controversy over Ebonics in the Oakland schools, and much of the media heat has cooled, allowing the rhetoric to evolve from defensiveness to analysis. Several books are available that defuse the explosive notions that what African American children may hear and speak is alternatively the curse responsible for underachievement or an untouchable patrimony (see references). Among possible linguistic, educational, cultural, or political approaches to African American speech, the book under review is the best place to start. For the reader who seeks a single compilation prior to delving deeper into the history, description, and implications of traditional African American, *The Skin That We Speak* serves as an educator's guide through the linguistic detail and political dangers of the discussion.

Delpit says that our skin is the surface of each individual's contact with the world: "a means to negotiate our interactions . . . how we perceive our surroundings and [how others] perceive us." Like skin, "our language plays an equally pivotal role in determining who we are: it is *The Skin That We Speak*" (p. xvii). Delpit cites experiments in which preschool children perceived African American vernacular dialect to imply that a child was "silly, unintelligible, harmful, having nothing, and not being able to draw"; and Standard American English was stereotyped as indicative of being "more gentle, looking better, better drawing ability, and a symbol of success." Most revealing, both Black and White three- to five-year olds held similar views. The situation is clear, as is the goal: African American Vernacular English (AAVE, or Ebonics) is a flag, often

of negativity, and all children, especially those with skin and social class that are liabilities in the imagery of America, need Standard American English (SAE) to scale the walls surrounding the American Dream. But the means to the goal has often been counterproductive, requiring denial and cultural desertion — and here is where the artists, educators, and psychologists in this book make stunning contributions.

Delpit's co-editor, Joanne Kilgour Dowdy, and professor Ernie Smith offer personal stories of how their educational experiences, Dowdy's in Trinidad and Smith's in South Central Los Angeles, shaped both their deficit views of what we now call Ebonics and their views, ranging from mistrust to disgust, on "acting bright and speaking right." Smith passed through a period when he thought education was irrelevant, and the lure of the streets — "ridin 'n' leanin, stylin 'n' schemin'" — was a path to another dream, differently drummed, that he names the manipulative "slum hustle."

The wiliness and virtuosity portrayed in many similar personal histories attest to a skilled duality, perhaps polyphony. Linguistic virtuosos learned a continuum of styles by not listening completely to the teachers who denied Ebonics or called it broken. Frequently young people were wrongly assigned to special education only because of their speech and communicative manner. Both Dowdy and Smith are now articulate scholars who publish in standard, perceptive English, and as they say, their stories embody the "successful colonized mentality, operating behind the mask of 'white' language" (p 11).

Delpit analyzes the linguistic complexity lived by young adolescents who resist being slowed down from their fast and interesting lives in order to listen to teachers. She quotes her daughter Maya in the opening of her article: "Whachall talking bout? It don't make no kinda sense." Delpit confesses to having a heart-pounding emotional reaction to hearing this from her Maya's mouth. Lisa was educated to eschew incorrect language, and allowed only the Standard to be spoken at home. Analyzing her emotions, first, she wondered why such speech was so 'wrong' in her view; and second, she marveled at how facilely her daughter learned a form of speech that was not her own. [The implication that not all African Americans speak AAVE flushes out the canard in the Oakland debate about Ebonics being 'genetic.'] Many young Black, Asian, and Latino Americans become bilingual, loosely speaking, just as Delpit's Maya did. Delpit understood, when her pulse returned to normal, that a collective shame about tradition, linguistic as well as racial, was key to resistance: her own resistance to Ebonics, and her daughter's to the Standard.

Other chapters in the book examine the need for teachers to demystify language purity, explaining to students the structure and value

of what they speak in descriptive, not evaluative terms. The essay by Judith Baker on 'trilingualism' contains a list of features for starters (pp. 53-54) and a follow up: after auto-analysis, students must name what they do, and realize that they have at least three languages to master: home, public, and professional. The task is similar whether home language is Spanish, Ebonics, or a local variety of English.

Asa Hilliard III, a psychologist and renowned spokesperson on African American child development, carries the debate beyond language to issues of teaching, learning, and assessment, all of which are biased against the cultural traditions by which many African American children are raised. His view is strong, based in the psychology of testing and sorting. Psychometrics needs to recognize that heritage, ethnicity, and cultural-environmental experiences are essential [the norming standards] for any valid assessment of intellect or learning. His argument reaches both to African and English language history, and highlights misconceptions about both the deficit of the former and purity of the latter. Hilliard shows the psychological flaws in assessment practices and notions of what passes for basic information. He concludes: "We need no more analyses of the African American child. We need to renovate the system that teaches error. We have the tools to do the job. Do we have the will?" (p. 102).

Many other chapters in the book portray the stance of teachers and teacher educators, concerned only peripherally with linguistic analysis, and more focused on the consequences and promises of new approaches to language for schooling. Gloria Ladson-Billings and Victoria Purcell-Gates write about the successes and failures of teachers who embrace or abandon challenges in socialization and literacy among children who are marginalized, specifically African American working class children. Herbert Kohl talks about "attunement," careful listening and crafting of responses to student needs that requires a personal mental revolution within the teacher. Geneva Smitherman rekindles the lessons learned over twenty-five years from the Ann Arbor and Oakland cases. She offers three sociolinguistic resolutions: (1) reaffirm the need for mastering the languages of wider communication [LWC], i.e., standard English; (2) affirm the legitimacy of other languages and dialects as co-equal with LWC; and (3) promote the acquisition of languages such as Spanish, because of its presence in the Western hemisphere.

Smitherman, like many of the authors in this book, knows that language issues are compelling intellectually, but demand political and educational efforts beyond language to bring justice to the education of African American children, many of whom live in Ebonic environments. The benefits from her prescriptions reach beyond African American

populations: “understanding and carrying on dialogue with non-Western peoples, the majority population in today’s world” (p. 173).

This book should be required first reading to understand the current state of the Ebonics issue, because it acknowledges the value of linguistic analysis, without rigorous linguistic detail, the exception being the review of sociolinguistic principles by British linguist Michael Stubbs. In Chapter Five, Stubbs connects dialect prejudice in the United Kingdom to issues in Ebonics, noting the intersection of social and regional dialectology.

If there is a weakness in this book it is the lack of up-to date references, with items published in 2000 listed as forthcoming, although the publication date of the book is 2002. Stubbs’ essay contains more than 80 references (pp. 81-85) of seminal sociolinguistic work mostly published between 1966 and 1981. In fact, several essays are reprinted from work in the 1970s, seemingly without updating, which this reviewer sees as a flaw in editorship. Hilliard and Smitherman provide references reaching into the 1990s. Other articles provide only handfuls of associated citations. A final list of 28 books (pp. 225-226) includes the canon of key works on African American Vernacular English [AAVE] by American sociolinguists, including Labov, Wolfram, Shuy, Smitherman, and Robert Williams [who is generally acknowledged as having coined the term Ebonics]. Missing are references to recent work by Smitherman (1994, 1999), Baugh (1999, 2002), Rickford (1999, 2000), McWhorter (2000, 2001), and others in the new canon of AAVE scholarship. Several key books by Heynick (1997), Mufwene, et al. (1998), Tan and Alatis (2001), Green (2003), and a very accessible volume by Perry and Delpit (1998) should also be consulted for background.

In sum, *The Skin That We Speak* is a compelling and accessible volume of readings, suitable for a course in educational linguistics, a preliminary investigation by the interested reader trying to comprehend the furor over Ebonics, and any educator concerned about the wider implications of a still-misunderstood and maligned sector of the language landscape. Lisa Delpit is one of the most focused scholar-teachers regarding urban education, and this compilation of essays provides a non-trivial and non-esoteric view of Ebonics. She and co-editor Joanne Kilgour Dowdy may have neglected key spokespersons in the debate, but the essays address issues that for years have disturbed educators and dismissed students. The accessibility of the writing and clarity of purpose in this book about the consequences of language and social perception motivate the sincere reader to both further investigation and immediate action.

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