The sixties and racial upheaval. The seventies and . . .

American educational institutions is continuing they role as passive reflectors of a racist, inhumane society. In part, the contemporary madness bees manifest in the “language deprivation” teaching strategies for the “disadvantaged” Black American. Suddenly!!!! after more than three centuries on this continent, the educational and societal consensus is that Blacks have a “language problem.” But wasn’t nobody complainin bout Black speech in 1619 when the first cargo of Africans was brought here on the Good Ship Jesus—yeah, that’s right. Nor in 1719, 1819, 1919—really. It wasn’t till bout the 1950’s when it became evident that Afros was really beginning to make some economic headway in America that everybody and they mamma started talkin bout we didn talk right. (It was bout that time—1956 to be exact—that yours truly was a college freshman forced to enroll in speech therapy—un-huh, you heard me—cause of my “regional”—now they just say “Black”—dialect.)

In the current controversy surrounding the Black Idiom (as well as other so-called “minority” dialects) linguists/educators/English teachers/and just plain folk bees comin from one of those bags: 1) eradicationist; 2) bi-dialectalist; 3) legitimizer. These positions have undergirding them not simply linguistic issues but important socio-political concerns. (I mean, where is you head?) While Ima rap specifically bout the Black Thang, with minor modifications, what Ima say can apply to most “divergent” dialects. (Now I ain gon cite no specific folk since this piece ain bout name-callin. But once upon a time, I did this. See my “The Black Idiom in White Institutions,” Negro American Literature Forum, Fall 1971.)

Eradicationist. Now this is a old position and don’t too many people hold it no more since it ain considered cool (if you Black) or liberal (if you white) to be one. Essentially, they say get rid of the dialect; it’s illogical, sloppy, and underdeveloped. It retards reading ability and the acquisition of language skills and thus is dysfunctional in school. It is the language of Uncle Tom and thus is dysfunctional in the socio-economic world. Ergo, the only way to facilitate the up-from-the-ghetto rise of Black folk is to obliterating what one educator deemed

“A riot is the language of the unheard.”
Martin Luther King

“this last barrier to integration.” (Couldn’t resist that one!)

Bi-dialectalist. Not so, say these holders of the most popularly prevailing position. Linguistic analysis demonstrates that the dialect is perfectly systematic and capable of generating cognitive concepts. Blacks acquire language at the same rate and with the same degree of fluency as whites. Because Blacks learn they language patterns in a Black environment, they manifest they linguistic competence in Black English whereas whites do it in white English. And if reading teachers is hip to the phonological system of Black speech, then there ain no reading problem. However, there do be that social/real (?) world out there. And Blacks will need to acquire the “prestige” usage system in order to facilitate they socio-economic mobility. At the same time bi-dialectalists recognize that Blacks need they powerful and efficient dialect to function/ survive in they own communities. So the solution is for Blacks to be bi-dialectal.

Legitimzer. Now enterin the lists is a small but highly volatile group who bees contendin while the former group is linguistically inaccurate and outright racist, the latter is politically naive and pedagogically wrongheaded. After all, if the dialect is not a problem, but sociolinguistic attitudes are, then why not work to change those attitudes? While we may be talkin bout Blacks enterin the mainstream, we can change the course of that stream. Not CAN but IS—since Black language (as well as other Black cultural patterns) is rapidly being adopted by whites. Not CAN but GOT TO—since cultural plurality don’t mean remake Black folk in white face. Anyway, if racism persist, all the language education in the world won’t help you.

It is simply hypocritical to tell kids that they lingo is cool in the home environment, but not in school and mainstream America. (That’s how come Black folk bees so schizophrenic-seemmin, all time havin to front and mask, go through linguistic and other kind of changes round whites.) Kids say don’t run that game on me bout it’s good enough for the ghetto but not the suburbs. Like everybody know the suburbs represent money and success, so who want anythang
associated with the opposite? Eventually then, Black bi-dialectalists become mono-dialectalists cut off from those they left behind. Moreover, the way this country is presently constituted, it ain enough jobs for NOBODY, don’t care how well they can manipulate s’s and ed’s in they speach. Thus bi-dialectalism is not based on a sophisticated analysis of American power relations.

We legitimizers query: Why waste valuable school time on polite usage drills when, in a sense, Black kids is already bi-dialectal? Due to mass media, and after a few years in school, they understand white English and can produce reasonable facsimiles. Witness a group of Black kids "playing white." (Remember that scene from Native Son?) Listen to them, and you will hear the most amazing (amazing to the uninp, that is) mimicking of white folks’ language you ever heard. Or get on the bus and check out a group of domestics on they way home talkin bout and linguistically imitatin Miss Ann. I mean, they bees doin a pretty good (i.e., accurate) job of it.

Bi-dialectal classroom approaches and drills are all the more pointless when we note the lack of deep structure difference between these two closely related dialects of American English. Bi-dialectalists note this too, and some done admirably demonstrated it through linguistic analysis. Yet, ironically, they persist in devising and teaching materials stressing these superfluous features of English usage. (I told y’all in the beginning this was all bout madness, didn’t?) For instance, the kid who wonders what’s the difference between what I wrote—“he do”—and your correction—“he does”—is really posing a linguistically legitimate question since there ain no deep structure—underlyin semantic differentiation—between the two. As a matter of fact, most features of Black English usage, which teachers bees so upright bout, is simply surface features of English, differing in “flavoring but not in substance.” Thus Ain nobody doin nothin’ is merely another surface representation of Nobody is doing anything; I seen him = I saw him; They lost they books is deep structurally the same as They lost their books. And so on.

Speaking to the legitimacy of minority dialects in the English classroom do not mean abdication of responsible language teaching. It do not mean lettin kids get away with irresponsible, disorganized uses of language and communication. Righteous teachers taking care of business in the English classroom must see to it that kids learn to compose coherent, documented, specific, logical—in short, rhetorically powerful oral and/or written communications. There’s good rappers and there’s bad rappers, and anything do not go in the Black community, just as anything does not go in the white community. Uhm talkin bout redefinin what do go. And it mean more than zero in on usage, on such trivia as movin students from they house to their house. This is an abdication of responsibility, for that’s only a lateral move, and like my man Curtis Mayfield sing, we got to keep movin on up—UP, not sideways.

In movin up, however, we must be careful to sustain our moral-ethical vision of the Universe and if, necessary, choose goodness over grammar. As Jess B. Semple says:

If I get the sense right . . . the grammar can take care of itself. There are plenty of Jim Crowers who speak grammar, but do evil. I have not had enough schooling to put words together right—but I know some white folks who have went to school forty years and do not DO right. I figure it is better to do right than to write right, is it not?*

---