A brief anecdotal reflection from my youth places this discussion in personal and professional context. Like many African Americans, I was not encouraged to pursue higher education by my high school counselors. I attended a small rural community college in central California before attaining the opportunity to transfer to Temple University in Philadelphia, where I eventually majored in Communication and specialized in rhetoric, argumentation, and persuasion. It was during this time in my life that an episode involving a case of mistaken ethnic identity occurred, which then triggered my initial linguistic epiphany.

In order to fully appreciate the circumstances surrounding this event, it is important to know two things: 1) I am a “light-skinned” African American and 2) despite extensive attempts to fully document our family ancestry, my parents have been unable to accurately identify any of our White ancestors. Whereas many Americans can point to their ancestral and linguistic heritage as a source of pride, my White ancestors (whoever they may be) never legally acknowledged their Mulatto offspring. Thus, while my parents have confirmed that many of my enslaved Mulatto ancestors resided in Virginia and the Carolinas, I have not conducted any DNA testing to determine my unknown White ancestry.

I have always taken great pride in my African American identity, an identity nurtured by loving parents who taught me about the vital economic and military contributions that U.S. slaves and their descendants made toward the birth, security, and economic might of this nation. And it was with my Black ethnic pride firmly intact that I entered community college with aspirations to study accounting, and perhaps attend law school later on.

On the day in question, I happened to be walking alone back to my dorm room when a group of male Hawaiian students approached me. They were all clearly upset.

H1: “Hey, John! How come you always hang out wif da Colored guys?”
JB: “What?”
H2: “How come a Hawaiian Brudda like you hangs wif da Colored guys?”
JB: “I ain’t Hawaiian. I’m Black.”
H1: “No you not. I got a cousin in Hilo look just like you.”
JB: “Say what?”
H1: “It’s true. He’s Po’cho (Portuguese) and Hawaiian, and he look like you.”
JB: “No way! Y’all think I could pass for Hawaiian?”
H2: “(Deleted expletive), if we teach you pidgin, ‘da kine’ talk, oh yeah, you pass for one true Hawaiian Brudda for real.”

This exchange, which gradually became more cordial, triggered an animated debate about which group, Blacks or Hawaiians, had suffered the greatest atrocities at the hands of Whites. At that time, I knew little about native Hawaiian history, and it was similarly evident that the Hawaiians knew little of Black life under slavery. I pointed to the historical epidemic of Black lynching, only to trigger a retort about massive Hawaiian suffering due to the infestation of vermin and fatal sexually transmitted diseases. I then responded with vivid descriptions of other domestic terrorist acts against African Americans at the decree of the Ku Klux Klan, which prompted retorts that native Hawaiians were displaced from their ancestral homeland. I then remarked that they were not ever taken away from Hawaii, whereas all African slaves were forced to endure the Atlantic crossing. We eventually arrived at comparable descriptions of the horrors and hardships of oppressive lives of forced labor under a scorching sun on plantations. Indeed, it was during discussions pertaining to the lives of Black and Hawaiian plantation laborers that we began to settle on agreements, particularly regarding the birth, evolution, and stereotypes associated with nonstandard varieties of plantation English, and the dismal academic prospects for Black and Hawaiian students for whom Standard English was/is not native.

These amateur linguistic observations about nonstandard American plantation English also gave rise to immediate dialect comparisons between African American vernacular English (AAVE) and Hawaiian Pidgin English (HPE). For example, one of the Hawaiians noted that Black athletes who lived in our dorm routinely referred to each other as “Bruthas,” whereas all of the male Hawaiians referred to each other as “Bruddas.” Moreover, we compared the African American statement, “They ain’t come with y’all” (i.e., Standard English: “They didn’t come with you”) with a similar HPE rendition, “Dey no come wif dem.” We tried, through uninformed ethnic jousting, to determine which nonstandard variety was most different from Standard English. Moreover, we recounted our common experiences with well-intended English teachers who had attempted to repair our “broken English.” Despite having grown up in very different surroundings, we soon discovered striking similarities in the ways that many teachers chastised our (mis?)use of English, admonishing that those of us who failed to master Standard English would be doomed to dismal employment prospects and stereotyped as unintelligent because of our nonstandard speech (Kroch and Labov, 1972).

For various reasons, many of which are well known to readers of Research in the Teaching of English, the vast majority of African American and Hawaiian students who lack Standard English proficiency have fared poorly in our schools, and, unfortunately, they continue to rank among the least capable readers and writers in the country. Glaring gaps in educational performance are well known and persistent, despite the tremendous efforts made by members of AERA, CCCC, NCTE, and other professional educational organizations that have advanced literacy among low-income students throughout America. What is less well understood is that the majority of African American and Hawaiian students trace their linguistic ancestry to American plantations. In the interest of the fullest racial disclosure, I dare not ignore the socially stratified linguistic contributions to nonstandard varieties of plantation English made by Whites, who
provided vital linguistic contact from dominant linguistic groups. In the Southern U.S.,
many slave overseers were indentured servants from Scotland or Ireland who lacked
formal education. Many of their descendants speak nonstandard varieties of Appalachian
English, and they too fall prey to misguided linguistic stereotypes that falsely equate their
vernacular dialect with diminished intellectual prospects. In Hawaii, White linguistic
influences began with Captain Cook and were maintained by U.S. military personnel and
plantation managers long before Hawaii became a state.

Lippi-Green (1997) provides greater ethnographic and historical depth to these
trends in her vivid account of dialect diversity in America, including important
observations about plantation English in America. Shaughnessy’s (1977) classroom
insights, pertaining to teacher misconceptions about writing produced by students who
lack Standard English fluency, have been supported by complementary research and
and Hollie (2007), and Rickford and Romaine (1999), all of whom offer productive
suggestions on how to help students navigate the transformation from orality to literacy
that Ong (1995) described extensively.

Educational research, and research pertaining to low-income AAVE and HPE
students, never occurs in a political vacuum. Many years ago, James Sledd (1969)
attempted to expose the unilateral burden of learning (and teaching) Standard English as
a second dialect. Sledd’s controversial proposal was that middle-class White students
who were fluent in Standard English be given lessons in a nonstandard dialect (i.e.,
AAVE). Whereas linguists affirm that all languages (and their dialects) are “equal,”
Sledd’s point was that this “objective” linguistic assessment does not reflect the historical
and sociopolitical reality that not all languages or their dialects are equally valued

Labov’s (1966) massive study of the social stratification of English in New York
City exposed the paradox between the linguistic ethos that all languages and their dialects
are equal and the reality that individuals value (or devalue) languages and dialects based
on their personal life experiences and corresponding social circumstances. Speakers who
have inherited nonstandard varieties of plantation English continue to face special
literacy barriers in schools, where Standard English proficiency correlates closely with
academic success.

Although the Oakland Ebonics controversy attempted to draw strong linguistic
parallels between vernacular African American language usage and the acquisition of
English as a second language, I think there are closer linguistic (and educational)
parallels between Hawaiian Pidgin English (HPE) and African American Vernacular
English (AAVE). The Ebonics debate attempted to clarify the classification of African
American language usage as either a separate non-English language (i.e., Ebonics) or a
nonstandard dialect of English (i.e., AAVE). Most linguistic analyses of contemporary
African American linguistic behavior, as spoken by U.S. slave descendants, confirms that
English is their mother tongue, albeit with lingering traces of grammatical structures,
phonology, and prosodic traits that have evolved since slavery, along with linguistic
innovations born in vernacular African American communities after the Emancipation
Proclamation (Green 2002, Wolfram and Thomas 2002).

Because Hawaii is not only an island, but also the fiftieth state, the education of
HPE speakers had, for many years, been supported by categorical federal funding
devoted to bidialectal education for many Native Hawaiian students who attended the Kamehameha Schools. These programs were established to help local HPE speakers master Standard English. Thanks to special circumstances in Hawaii, students who have been eligible to attend the Kamehameha schools receive an outstanding private education with highly qualified teachers, excellent equipment, and many extracurricular opportunities. On December 6, 2006, the federal appeals court in San Francisco ruled in favor of maintaining preferential admission for Native Hawaiians to the Kamehameha Schools by a narrow 8-to-7 margin. Elsewhere (Baugh 1998) I have drawn some legal parallels between the linguistic and educational plights of HPE and AAVE students. Their nonstandard vernaculars were both born on plantations in socially stratified circumstances where Standard English was dominant and either AAVE or HPE was subordinate. Moreover, once schools were provided for the children of plantation laborers and their descendants, they were routinely inferior. Fortunately for many Native Hawaiian students, the Kamehameha Schools have helped to close historical educational gaps.

The December 6 ruling occurred because a student, identified only as John Doe, sued the Kamehameha Schools, claiming that he would have probably been admitted had he been able to confirm Hawaiian ancestry. Moreover, John Doe’s suit argued that Kamehameha’s preferential Hawaiian admission policy violated the Civil Rights Act of 1866, an act intended to help reconcile racial inequalities that resulted from slavery. However, the court’s majority argued that the mission of the Kamehameha Schools, and their special status as a private school that no longer accepts federal funding, is a unique case that is specific to an indigenous American population.

By striking historical contrast, U.S. slave descendants—the object of the Civil Rights Act of 1866—cannot lay comparable claim to an indigenous heritage in America, nor do the vast majority of AAVE speakers attend well endowed private schools. There are noteworthy exceptions wherein schools provide students from low-income families with a superior education for remarkably low tuition (see www.eastside.org), but such cases are rare.

Ironically, the bidialectal education efforts in the Kamehameha Schools provide an excellent model for how the federal government might address the unique linguistic legacy of U.S. slave descendants who speak AAVE—that is, students who would benefit from programs that could help them gain greater Standard English proficiency. The Kamehameha Schools are very well endowed and do not need the federal funding they once received to support their bidialectal education programs. By coincidence, the Ebonics controversy in Oakland raised the specter that African Americans might seek programs for AAVE speaking students that resembled the federal education programs that had once thrived in support of HPE bidialectal education. The December 6, 2006, ruling did not focus on linguistic facts; rather, the judges who ruled in favor of the Kamehameha Schools’ preferential Hawaiian admission policy did so because many Native Hawaiians continue to suffer disadvantages, and the Kamehameha Schools have had great success in closing educational gaps between affluent White students and Native Hawaiians. Again, it is my contention that language and literacy programs in the Kamehameha Schools hold many lessons for those seeking to educate AAVE speaking students.
However, from a purely legal point of view, most AAVE students attend public schools, and the fact that they may also receive some form of federal funding places them in different circumstances than the students who attend the private Kamehameha Schools. Alas, both groups have suffered historical wrongs, but in the Kamehameha case the beneficiaries of preferential admission are indigenous peoples, whereas AAVE speaking students’ historical hardships result from slavery and purposeful disenfranchisement—circumstances that the 1866 Civil Rights Act, which is at the legal heart of the John Doe v. Kamehameha case, was intended to correct.

African Americans who are descended from slaves and who speak AAVE cannot lay claim to an indigenous birthright comparable to that of HPE speakers with native Hawaiian ancestry. For many, this legal distinction will override the educational parallels that confront many HPE and AAVE speaking students as they strive to master Standard English as a second dialect.

In the case of African Americans, it is vital that we recognize the inherent linguistic diversity that abounds among Blacks in America. In other words, Black Americans do not necessarily share a common linguistic ancestry. My remarks about plantation English in the United States are intentionally limited to those African Americans who, like me, trace our ancestry to slaves in the United States. Other plantation vernaculars throughout North and South America that resulted from the African slave trade find parallels in contact with other colonial European languages, resulting in other (e.g., Caribbean) varieties of plantation English, plantation French (i.e., Haitian Creole), plantation Portuguese and plantation Spanish. In each case we find a shared history of linguistic subordination regarding African versus European vernaculars resulting from the African slave trade.

The plantation vernaculars that emerged in Hawaii and the Southern U.S. have been greatly misunderstood by linguists and educators, to say little of the politicians and pundits who routinely criticize the nonstandard speech of Hawaiians and African Americans whose vernaculars are nonstandard. On the other hand, I have been greatly inspired by the insightful scholarship of superb educators who are familiar with the collective and intricate relationships between teachers (Foster 1997, Ladson-Billings 1994), the teaching of reading (King et al. 1997, Lewis and Hoover 1979), the teaching of writing (Ball 2006, Lee 1993, Rickford 2007), and how these components must ultimately be coordinated with speech (Smitherman 2006, Alim 2003, LeMoine and Hollie 2007).

Some of my own contributions in this area depend heavily upon teachers who allow students to celebrate their home language, for instance using popular lyric music as a basis for teaching elementary-to-advanced literacy skills (Baugh 1999, Alim 2005, De Bose 2007). Similarly, Rickford (2007) provides a comprehensive model of various writing styles and requirements, in addition to suggestions on how best to help AAVE speaking students become more effective Standard English writers.

Although Brown v. Board did not address the linguistic consequences or relevance of the African slave trade to the history of racial segregation against Blacks, there is no doubt that many African American students still confront extensive linguistic barriers in their pursuit of academic success. Similarly, many HPE students encounter linguistic hurdles that inhibit their academic performance. The educational needs of AAVE and HPE students differ in terms of pedagogy from those who must learn English
as a second language. Many African Americans and Hawaiians, having inherited varieties of pidginized and creolized plantation English, continue to face the subtle (and yet daunting) task of mastering Standard English as a second dialect.

I pray that all students who suffer linguistic dislocation in schools may ultimately find success. It is also my fervent hope that the valuable resources necessary in order to evaluate and redress the plight of nonstandard vernacular speaking students in educational settings be invested in pedagogical advances rather than legal disputes. Regardless of racial background, speakers of nonstandard English frequently encounter misconceptions about their intellectual abilities as well as other stereotypes that devalue the ways in which they use language. It is my hope that the observations made here will help to clarify the historical relevance of plantation English to the education of many students residing in diverse American communities, including rural Appalachia, Native American reservations, America’s inner cities, and the islands of Hawaii.

Bibliography


