spoken soul: the ignored language of black america

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The emotion of feeding was quite an emotional one. The scene of a mother and her newborn baby, the bond between them, was heartwarming. It was a moment that brought tears to my eyes. The beauty of life, the love, and the connection between generations was truly remarkable. I could feel the warmth of the moment, the love that was shared, and the joy that filled the air.

The child, with its innocent gaze, looked up at its mother, seeking comfort. The mother, with a gentle touch, held the baby close to her, providing a sense of security. The scene was a testament to the power of love and the importance of familial bonds.

As I watched, I couldn't help but think about the future. What would become of this child? Would it grow up to be a kind and compassionate person? Would it find love and happiness in its life? These are questions that we all ask ourselves when we see a child in need.

But for now, I was content to simply witness this beautiful moment. The emotion of feeding, the bond between mother and child, was a reminder of the simple joys in life. And as I left, I carried with me the memory of that moment, a memory that would stay with me for a long time to come.
Woven Soul: The Exhibit, National Museum of African American History and Culture

Annex 1: December 19, 1996

The annex 1: December 19, 1996, was a significant event in the Antitooon School Board's history, marking the announcement of a new program aimed at enhancing educational opportunities for students. The program, titled "The Annex 1 School Improvement Project," was designed to address the needs of students from underprivileged backgrounds and improve their academic performance. The opening of the annex 1 was a milestone in the Antitooon School Board's commitment to educational excellence and inclusivity. It was a day marked by speeches, speeches, and speeches, with the entire school community gathered together to witness the grand opening ceremony. The speeches were delivered with great passion and enthusiasm, highlighting the importance of education and the role of the Antitooon School Board in shaping the future of its students. The day ended with a community picnic, a tradition that has continued to this day, fostering a sense of unity and belonging among the school's families. The annex 1 has since become a beacon of hope and opportunity for generations of Antitooon students, embodying the Antitooon School Board's unwavering commitment to excellence in education.
SPOKEN SOUL: THE BLACK, BILLETUDINE, LANGUAGE OF BLACK AMERICA

Professor Higgin’s dismissive remarks to Eliza about her market vocabulary in the film My Fair Lady, the plot of which is set in a small Southern town and features a white Northerner trained to speak like a Southern belle, is a classic example of the language and attitudes of the time. The film’s portrayal of African Americans as monolithic, unnuanced figures of charity and subservience is a testament to the ways in which the dominant culture was able to maintain a narrative of African Americans as “other,” while simultaneously erasing the complexity and richness of their lived experiences.

This is a crucial point to consider when examining the ways in which language has been used to maintain power imbalances. The language of the dominant culture is often constructed in opposition to the language of the marginalized, with the goal of distancing and dehumanizing them. This has been particularly true in the case of African Americans, who have been systematically excluded from participation in the language and culture of the dominant society.

The cultural landscapes of African Americans, however, have been rich and varied, with a diverse array of dialects and accents developing across the country. Even among African Americans who grew up in the same neighborhood, it is common to find differences in speech patterns that reflect the unique experiences and cultural influences of their communities.

Despite these linguistic differences, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of preserving African American dialects and accents. This is particularly important in light of the threat to these languages posed by the spread of standard English. The loss of African American dialects would represent a significant cultural loss, erasing a wealth of historical and cultural knowledge.

The significance of these linguistic differences is not limited to the preservation of cultural heritage. The use of African American dialects and accents can also challenge the dominant narrative of African Americans as monolithic and unnuanced figures of charity and subservience. By recognizing and celebrating these linguistic differences, we can begin to move towards a more equitable and just society.

References:
What's more, the distance between the younger hip-hop generation and older African-American generations—marked by the politics of dress, music, and slang—has in some ways also grown more stark in the 1990s. Some middle-aged and elderly black folk have increasingly come to view baggy jeans and boot-wearing, freestylin' youngsters as hoodlums who are squandering the gains of the Civil Rights movement. Most of the publicly aired comments on Ebonics came from black baby boomers (now in their 40s and 50s) or older African Americans. When discussing the "slang" of hip-hop youth—which they (mis-)identified with Ebonics—they often bristled with indignation.

Although today's debate is charged with new elements, the question of the vernacular's role in African-American life and literature has been a source of debate among African Americans for more than a century. While Paul Laurence Dunbar was establishing his reputation as a dialect poet in the late 1800s, James Weldon Johnson, who wrote the lyrics to "Lift Every Voice and Sing," (long hailed as "The Negro National Anthem"), chose to render the seven African-American sermons of God's Trombones in standard English because he felt that the dialect of "old-time" preachers might pigeonhole the book. During the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, a similar debate raged among the black intelligentsia, with Langston Hughes endorsing and exemplifying the use of vernacular, whereas Alain Locke and others suggested that African Americans needed to put the quaintness of the idiom behind them and offer the world a more "refined" view of their culture. These enduring attitudes reflect the attraction-repulsion dynamic, the oscillation between black and white (or mainstream) poles that W. E. B. Du Bois defined a century ago as "double-consciousness."

But the Ebonics controversy at this century's end represents a distally new low in terms of the degree of denial and deprecation to which the vernacular was subject. Although most linguists suggest that speakers of AAVE should also master Standard English, corporate English, mainstream English, the Language of Wider Communication, or whatever you want to call the variety you need for school, formal occasions, and success in the business world, we must not forget that Ebonics, African-American Vernacular English, black English, Spoken Soul, or whatever you want to call the informal variety spoken by the majority of African Americans also plays an essential role in African-American life and culture and, by extension, in American life and culture. Black people use it now, as we have for hundreds of years, to laugh, to cry, to preach and praise, to shout, to style, to express our individual personas and our identities as black people ("spress yo'self!" as James Brown put it), to confide in and commiserate with friends, to chaste, to cuss, to act out, to the fool, to get by and get over, to pass secrets, to make jokes, to mock and mimic, to tell stories, to reflect and philosophize, to create authentic characters and voices (in novels, poems, and plays), to survive in the streets, to relax at home and recreate in playgrounds, to render our deepest emotions and embody our vital core.

If we lost all of that in the heady pursuit of Standard English and the "world" of opportunities it offers, we would indeed have lost our soul. But despite widespread deprecation and denial, we are not convinced that African Americans really want to abandon "down-home" speech to become one-dimensional, "white bread" speakers. Nor—judging from their continuing enjoyment and adoption of many of the distinctive linguistic elements of African-American music, literature, and popular culture—do we believe that whites and Americans of other ethnicities want to see it abandoned either, quiet as it is kept. It is certainly not necessary to abandon Spoken Soul to master Standard English, any more than it is necessary to abandon English to learn French or to abandon jazz to appreciate classical music. But this complexity is just part of the dizzying love-hate relationship that Americans of all ethnicities have with Spoken Soul.

Furthermore, abandoning Spoken Soul would be unwise since recognizing and building on its contrasts with mainstream English represents a much more successful strategy for helping inner-city children master the latter than the abysmal but widespread policy of pretending that the vernacular does not exist or treating it as a disease. The fact is that most African Americans do talk differently from whites and Americans of other ethnicities, or at least they can when they want to. And the fact is that most Americans, black and white, know this to be true, and they know that what makes many African-American writers, storytellers, orators, preachers, comedians, singers, and rap artists successful is their skillful deployment of Spoken Soul.

Notes
1. Information on legislative efforts to ban Ebonics from schools and other official contexts is in Richardson (1998).
2. The report of the America Online poll about Ebonics was in John Leland and Nadine Joseph, "Hooked on Ebonics," Newsweek, January 13, 1997, p. 78. For the America Online quotations cited in this chapter we are grateful to linguist and school volunteer Lucy Bowen of Menlo Park, California, who printed out hundreds and hundreds of them during the holiday season in December 1996 and passed them on to me.
4. For information on proposals by Caribbean linguists to consider Creole English in schools, see Rickford (1999).
5. For information about New York residents' linguistic insecurity about their English, see William Labov's (1966) classic study, The Social Stratification of English in New York City. For information on the negative attitudes toward their own vernacular language or dialect, which speakers of such varieties often share with or learn from speakers of mainstream varieties, see Lambert (1967).
6. Information on the number of people in the United States who claimed English and/or other languages as their native language is available in Fishman (1985).
7. For more about Propositions 209 and 227 and similar measures in California and other states, see Gibbs (1998).
8. The income statistics for African Americans are from Carnoy (1994). For other income statistics and for a discussion of the generation gap within the black community, see Chideya (1998).

References
Angelou, Maya. 1996. Oakland Decision Spurs Debate over Ebonics. Wichita Eagle, December 22, 7A.
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