
**MYTH 13**

**Black Children are Verbally Deprived**

Walt Wolfram

Eloquent orators seem to abound in African-American culture. At religious meetings, political rallies and other social gatherings, speakers demonstrate dynamic, effectual discourse. From the powerful speeches of historic figures such as Frederick Douglass, through William Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Barbara Jordan and Jessie Jackson in the United States – and beyond North America to renowned African orators such as Kwame Nkrumah, Odumegwu Ojukwu and Desmond Tutu, this oratorical tradition is regularly practiced and highly valued. Even political and social opponents of these well-known black orators begrudgingly concede the power and utility of their speaking skills.

Quite clearly, verbal art is an integral, pervasive and highly valued component of black culture – on both a public and a personal level. Its influence on popular culture, through rappers, hip-hop culture and slang expressions is transparent, but it is more than that. Its roots are planted deep within the oral tradition of the African diaspora, and its branches extend to practically every sphere of communicative activity within black culture.

Given such an extensive and widely recognized oral tradition, it is indeed ironic to find young African-American children described in the educational literature as ‘verbally deprived’, ‘language impoverished’ or ‘linguistically retarded’. Can these be children from the same culture we described above? If so, how can such contrasting pictures of language competence arise? And how do we reconcile the conflicting portraits of verbal richness and linguistic poverty? If nothing else, the lesson that emerges from the myth of African-American verbal deprivation shows how far from reality perceptions of language ability
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may wander. Or how much distortion can appear in a language portrait based on the angle of the observer.

As a backdrop for our discussion, we must admit that there are differences in varieties of English which may sometimes correlate with ethnicity. Some African-Americans simply do not sound the same as Anglo-Americans when they speak. When tape-recorded speech samples of working-class African-American and working-class Anglo-American are played, listeners identify with reasonable accuracy whether the speakers are black or white (about 80 per cent of the time in most listener tests based on relatively brief passages of natural speech).

The basis for these language differences is historically, socially and linguistically very natural and understandable. When people from different cultures come together, the languages reflecting these cultures mix and adapt. And when groups are segregated, isolated and excluded, they maintain and develop in different ways, thus enhancing language differences. So far so good - as over 6,000 world languages and multitudinous dialects of each of these distinct languages attest. But when different cultural groups are drastically unequal in their social and interactional relationships - and especially when one group has been dehumanized in comparison with the other - the environment for cultivating myths about these differences is fertile. The end result of these myths is to provide a justification for the differential power relations between the groups.

Myths about the language of African-Americans have, of course, changed as the perspective on the status of black Americans has shifted historically, but there is a common, unifying theme in the mythology, namely, the linguistic inferiority principle. According to this principle, the speech of a socially subordinate group will always be interpreted as inadequate by comparison with the socially dominant group. Explanations may vary, but the principle will be constant. Thus, when African-American speech is compared with the middle-class, Anglo-American norm, it will be considered linguistically deficient, although the explanations for the deficiency may vary.

In the days of slavery, when blacks were institutionally ascribed a status that was less than human, their speech was simply viewed as the communicative gibberish of a people inherently incapable of imitating the language of the ruling European-American classes. If a group of people is considered genetically deficient, what else is to be expected from their language? In various shapes and forms, the myth of genetic inferiority has persisted to some extent even in present-day society. Thus, there are still occasional references to the possible correlation of anatomical differences with racial differences, a throwback to the genetic basis for language differences among blacks and whites.

Myths correlating racial with linguistic differences are fairly easy to debunk logically and empirically. If race were truly a factor accounting for a dialect difference, then how would we explain the fact that African-Americans raised in an exclusively Anglo-American environment will sound indistinguishable from those of the surrounding speech community and vice versa? There is indisputable evidence from listener identification judgments that speakers will be identified with the language of their socialized community, not their racial classification.

Anatomically based explanations, for example, those based on lip size, are also easy to reject. For example, there is great diversity in lip size within both the white and black communities, yet no independent correlation with lip size and speech differences exists. White folks who have larger lips don't necessarily sound black, and blacks with smaller lips don't necessarily sound white. Besides, there is no indication from the world's races that lip size correlates in any way with the choice of particular sounds in a language.

But entrenched myths about language inadequacy are like a jack-in-the-box that keeps springing back up. So the exposure of one line of reasoning as objectively unjustified and illogical doesn't mean that linguistic equality will be attained. If the bottom-line belief is that one cultural group - and by extension, its language - is inferior to another, then another line of reasoning will simply replace the old one. Therefore, when nature is ruled out as a possible explanation for the distinctiveness of African-American speech, nurture may rise to the interpretive occasion. Genetically based myths have not died out
completely in popular culture, but they have largely been supplanted by myths related to the social environment.

In some respects, the current set of myths tied to nurture is a more serious threat to the linguistic integrity of African-American speech than those based on nature, because they can be camouflaged in fashionable social and educational concern. In the process, the explanations for linguistic inferiority don't seem so blatantly racist as their precursors founded in genetic inferiority. But the semblance of respectability can actually present a more imposing obstacle to a valid understanding of black speech than conspicuously racist statements about anatomical differences accounting for linguistic differences.

In order for a myth to be nurtured in an increasingly educated society, it should be rooted in 'objective fact' and have a common-sense appeal. The verbal deprivation myth has done this by relying on the results of standardized tests and other formal assessment measures as 'the facts', then turning to conditions in the social environment to explain them. For example, the results of standardized language testing support the conclusion that 'disadvantaged children of almost every kind are typically one or two years retarded in language development' (Carl Bereiter, p. 196). The problem with the facts, however, is that they provide a distorted picture. The norms used as the basis for testing the speakers were derived from standard-English-speaking, middle-class Anglo children who speak a dialect different from their working-class cohorts. Therefore, the tests simply demonstrate a dialect difference between middle-class, standard dialects of English and other dialects.

No language expert would deny that African-American children who speak a variety of English different from the standard English norms used in the measuring instruments will score differently from - and lower than - those children who speak the language variety used as the basis for norming the test. A Canadian French child taking a test normed on Parisian French or a Spanish-speaking South-American child taking a Spanish test normed on Castilian Spanish spoken in Spain would suffer a similar fate in their 'objective' test scores. If standard dialect speakers were given a test using normative, uniquely African-American language structures, they would suffer a comparable fate. Of course, when one group is economically and socially dominant over another, differences will always be interpreted in a way that supports the asymmetrical socio-economic, socio-political and socio-educational status quo. In such a comparative scenario, it is easy to see how cultural and language differences will be interpreted as deficits. So it is just a matter of explaining why these deficits exist. The seeds of language deprivation are firmly planted through 'facts'; now all that is needed is an explanation that will allow the principle of linguistic inferiority to be nurtured properly.

Interpretative explanations that sustain the myth of the linguistically deprived black child appeal to the process of language learning, the nature of language patterning and the situations used to demonstrate language capability. With respect to language learning, models of parenting in general and verbal interaction between caretakers and children in particular are cited as support for the alleged verbal deprivation of African-American children. Some middle-class parents take a fairly proactive, although highly selective role in teaching young children new words and directly modeling speech. By the same token, some working-class parents may not be as proactive in directly modeling language in this way. Looking at this situation, educational psychologists have maintained that working-class black children do not get adequate verbal stimulation from their caretakers by comparison with their middle-class cohorts and, therefore, they end up language-handicapped.

At first glance, this line of reasoning seems sensible - if one assumes that parents and caretakers must play a proactive role for language acquisition to take place. But as it turns out, this is a totally erroneous assumption. There is absolutely no basis for maintaining that language acquisition comes through direct parental initiative; in fact, there is a lot of evidence against it. The capacity for language is a unique attribute of the human mind, and there is overwhelming evidence that all that is needed for normal language development to take place is exposure to a social environment where people use language to interact meaningfully. Anyone who has ever been in a working-class black home knows that verbal interaction is profuse and productive. Children interact with each other and adults interact with each other
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and with the children. Certainly, there is extensive verbal interaction to provide models for language acquisition, and any claim to the contrary would be totally absurd.

There are a number of different models for interaction in the acquisition of normal language. Surveys of language socialization across the world’s cultures indicate that parent–child, adult caretaker–child, and older sibling–peer–child interactions all work effectively in modeling the language necessary for acquisition. Regardless of the model, all children acquiring language have a basic language system by the age of five or six, with minor refinements taking place for another five or six years. In fact, surveys of language socialization models in languages around the world indicate that the parent–child interaction model is a minority one. But that’s not the essential point; the important fact is that there are different social interactional models for providing the necessary input for the stimulation of normal language learning. A parent’s proactive role in teaching language may make the parent feel involved and responsible, but it has little to do with the ultimate acquisition of normal language. This is fortunate; if it were not so, the vast majority of the world’s languages would never be acquired adequately.

The myth of language deprivation is also supported by a mistaken understanding about language patterning. There is a popular perception that standard dialects have regular patterns – the ‘rules’ of language – and that structures that differ from these rules violate the basic patterns of language. From this perspective, non-standard varieties involve violations of the standard dialect but no rules of their own. This is the grammaticality myth, which holds that any structure not in conformity with standard English norms is designated ‘ungrammatical’. This myth lumps together cases of true ungrammaticality, where the basic patterns for forming sentences in a language are indeed violated, and social judgments about differently patterned language forms.

For example, an English speaker uttering a sentence such as *dog the barks* would violate a basic sequencing rule of English grammar in which articles regularly come before nouns rather than after them – a case of true ungrammaticality for English. However, the grammaticality myth holds that sentences such as *They be talking all the time*, *They didn’t do nothing to nobody about nothing*, and *She nice* would be considered as cases of ungrammatical language as well. While these sentences may certainly be socially disfavored, they are rigorously patterned. For example, the use of *be* in sentences such as *They be talking all the time* or *Sometimes my ears be itching* uniquely marks a ‘habitual activity’ as opposed to a single-point activity in African-American Vernacular English. It is rigorously constrained in its patterning – different from standard English but every bit as patterned as any comparable structure in the standard variety. Observations of speakers’ use and tests of preferences for sentences with *be* indicate that speakers of African-American Vernacular English will systematically select *be* for habitual contexts such as *They be doing it* but not for single-time contexts such as *They be doing it right now*. Unfortunately, following the grammaticality myth, this regular patterning is not even considered to be a possibility. Instead, social acceptability has become equated with linguistic patterning; thus, a social judgment is translated into a misguided notion of language organization. No one is saying that this structure should be considered standard English – just that its linguistic integrity stands apart from its social assessment.

Some language differences may even be interpreted in terms of logic. Thus, the use of multiple negatives such as *They didn’t do nothing*, which is used in African-American Vernacular English as in many other vernacular varieties of English, may be interpreted as an indication of a flawed logic system – the logicality myth. In a fanciful appeal to formal logical operations in which negatives can cancel each other under certain conditions, it is sometimes maintained that speakers who use multiple negatives lapse into illogical language use. But formal, syllogistic reasoning is quite different from the grammatical manifestations of basic language propositions, including negation, where there are varied linguistic manifestations of basic propositions. In fact, many languages regularly and exclusively use multiple negation in certain types of constructions. Compare, for example, the French sentence *Je ne sais rien* ‘I don’t know nothing,’ the Spanish sentence *No hace nada* ‘S/he isn’t doing nothing,’ or even
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older English constructions such as There was no man nowhere so virtuous, where multiple negatives were the standard norm. Unless one is prepared to say that French, Spanish, the English of respected authors like Chaucer and many other languages of the world are innately illogical in their organization, we must concede that appealing to logic in support of the deficiency of African-American Vernacular English is, somewhat ironically, a quite illogical line of reasoning itself.

Similarly, it has been argued that verbless sentences such as She nice or The dog brown may be indicative of a cognitive breakdown in denoting relationships of identity. But as it turns out, the juxtaposition of items in these constructions is a simple variant for linking predicate constructions, including predicate adjectives such as She nice or location constructions such as She in the house. Languages like Russian, Thai and many others use such constructions, since the verb in these kinds of construction turns out to be redundant. Appeals to logic may have a very strong common-sense appeal, but the logic of these appeals for language organization is fatally flawed.

Finally, we should say something about the perceptions of the 'nonverbal' African-American child. This classification has been made by some educators who observed that some African-American children may say little or nothing when spoken to by adults under certain kinds of conditions. The typical situation on which these conclusions are based involves an adult attempting to elicit conversation in what seems — at least for the adult — to be a relatively innocuous and non-threatening situation. But consider the typical scenario in which a friendly adult sits across from a child in an institutional setting and asks the child simply to 'tell me everything you can about the fire engine on the table.' The situation is laden with values about language use, including the value of verbosity (the more you speak the better), obvious information (there is value in describing objects that the questioner already knows about) and consequences for providing information (what a child tells will not be held against the child), to say nothing of the asymmetrical power relations between the adult stranger and child in a relatively alien, institutional setting. The same child who says virtually nothing about the fire engine in this social situation may, in fact, be highly animated and verbal when playing with the fire engine in her home on the floor with her playmates. The appearance of nonverbalness is just that — an appearance created by the artificial testing conditions under which language is sometimes collected for the purposes of assessment. Given the actual value of verbal presentation and repartee as discussed earlier, the myth of the nonverbal black child is perhaps the most ironic twist of all in the assessment of African-Americans' language ability.

In challenging the myth of black language deprivation, I am not trying to say that the language of the home and community is appropriate for the particularized and socialized uses of language in education and other kinds of public institutions. There is an academic register necessary for carrying out certain kinds of educational routines, just as there is a language register for carrying out certain kinds of legal routines. In fact, there are lots of different situations and domains for language that call for specialized language uses, and our participation in particular institutions in society necessitates that we be familiar with the registers associated with them. But these specialized uses of language have nothing to do with basic language capability.

In some respects, no myth about African-Americans seems more absurd than the myth of verbal deprivation. All the evidence indicates that black culture is a highly verbal culture which values the development of verbal skills. Unfortunately, relationships of social and political inequality can lead to the dismissal of even the most obvious reality in order to mold language perceptions in conformity with the inferiority principle. Rather than being labeled as verbally deprived, African-Americans ought to be thanked for contributing to daily conversation with words, phrases and other manners of speaking that enrich our language and our lives.

Sources and further reading

The quote on language disadvantage is taken from Carl Bereiter, 'Academic instruction and preschool children', in Richard Corbin and Muriel Crosby, Language Programs for the Disadvantaged (Champaign, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1965). Some of the

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**MYTH 14**

**Double Negatives are Illogical**

Jenny Cheshire

Nothing shows why
At this unique distance from isolation,
It becomes still more difficult to find
Words at once true and kind,
Or not untrue and not unkind.
—Philip Larkin, ‘Talking in Bed’

An’ when they be saying if you good, you goin’ t’heaven, tha’s bullshit, ‘cause you ain’t goin’ to no heaven, ‘cause there ain’t no heaven for you to go to. —fifteen-year-old black youth from Harlem

You won’t get nothing for dinner if you don’t come in and clear up your mess. —adult woman from Hackney, East London

It never occurred to me to doubt that your work would not advance our common object in the highest degree. —Charles Darwin

There are three types of double negative here, each of which is from time to time condemned as illogical. Fowler’s *Guide to Good Usage* claims that the type illustrated by Darwin’s sentence is a ‘fuzzy error’ that occurs when people don’t know exactly how to handle negatives. George Orwell said that the first kind (*not* plus a negative adjective) should be ‘laughed out of existence’. But it is the second kind, where there is a negative verb (*ain’t* and *won’t* in the examples here) and a negative word such as *no*, *nothing* or *no one*, that arouses the strongest feelings. It was one of the top ten complaints sent in 1986 to the BBC Radio 4 series *English Now* after listeners had been invited to nominate