

Mock Ebonics: Linguistic racism in parodies of Ebonics on the Internet¹

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ABSTRACT

This study describes and analyzes outgroup linguistic racism in parodies of Ebonics ('Mock Ebonics') that appeared on the Internet in the wake of the December 18, 1996 resolution of the Board of Education of the Oakland (California) Unified School District on improving the English-language skills of African-American students. We examined 23 World Wide Web pages containing 270,188 words, from which we chose nine pages containing 225,726 words for in-depth analysis. Drawing on a characterization of Mock Spanish, our analysis shows that Mock Ebonics is a system of graphemic-phonetic, grammatical, semantic, and pragmatic strategies for representing an outgroup's belief in the imperfection and inferiority of Ebonics and its users. We show how producers of Ebonics parody pages employ these strategies, which are common in speech stereotypes, to articulate an anti-Ebonics language ideology and shift the blame for the poor academic performance of African Americans from a racist society to learners and the community from which they come.

KEYWORDS: African-American Vernacular English, Ebonics, language ideology, language parody, speech stereotypes

INTRODUCTION

On December 18, 1996, the Board of Education of the Oakland (California) Unified School District passed a resolution to respect the legitimacy and richness of Ebonics in order to facilitate African-American students' acquisition and mastery of English-language skills.² The Oakland Ebonics resolution attracted considerable media attention and sparked widespread public controversy. This study examines *outgroup linguistic racism* in Ebonics parody pages that appeared on the Internet in the wake of the Oakland resolution. Our definition of racism is 'the structural societal framework that enables and reproduces dominant group power' (van Dijk 1989: 220). Outgroup racism is the 'socially organized set of attitudes, ideas, and practices that deny [a racialized group] the dignity,

opportunities, freedoms, and rewards that [the United States] offers white Americans' (Feagin and Vera 1995: 7). Extending this notion, outgroup linguistic racism is any linguistic attitude, idea, or practice that has these effects. We use the term *Ebonics*, which is often associated with Afrocentricity and political correctness, because both the Oakland Board of Education and the Ebonics parody pages themselves use this term. Consequently, we use the term *Mock Ebonics* to refer to outgroup attempts, particularly by Whites, to represent spoken forms of African-American Vernacular English in writing, as well as to articulate an oppositional language ideology that surfaced dramatically during the Oakland Ebonics controversy.³

Our analysis draws on the characterization of Junk or Mock Spanish, which refers to monolingual Anglos' appropriation of presumed linguistic features of Spanish in the casual encounters of everyday life (Hill 1993, 1995a, 1995b, 1998). Specifically, Mock Spanish is a system of four major strategies for incorporating Spanish into English: semantic derogation, pejorative euphemism, affixation, hyperanglicization and bold mispronunciation. Mock Spanish usage is especially important because it indexes two things. First, it overtly signifies speakers' desirable qualities: a 'sense of humor', foreign-language facility, 'local identity', and an 'easygoing attitude toward life'. Second, it covertly depends on speakers' and hearers' shared access to understandings of racist stereotypes regarding the alleged inferiority of Spanish, Spanish speakers, and New World Spanish culture in general. By covertly 'inferiorizing' the language and culture of an outgroup, Mock Spanish users 'elevate' their Whiteness, thereby reproducing racism in everyday life (Ochs 1990; Morrison 1992; Hill 1995b, 1998).

Mock Spanish allows for the leakage of presumed features of the language of a subordinate group into the language of a dominant one (Hill 1995a). In our study, however, we show that Mock Ebonics exaggerates the hierarchical ordering of two language systems so that the nonstandard one grossly deviates from and is radically subordinate to the standard. Moreover, the venue of our data, the Internet, differs from Hill's sites of mass reproduction (i.e. billboards, coffee mugs, and greetings cards). The anonymity and relative privacy of the Internet allows for the manipulation of 'the boundary between "public" and "private" talk [such that] the public reproduction of racism [is] possible . . . where racist discourse is supposedly excluded from public discussion' (Hill 1995a: 198).

Ebonics, a blend of *ebony* and *phonics*, is a racially affirmative term that was first coined in the Black Pride era to refer to the full communicative competence of African-American slave descendents (Williams 1975: vi). As was noted, the December 1996 Oakland resolution respected and embraced the legitimacy and richness of Ebonics in order to facilitate African-American students' acquisition and mastery of English-language skills. An amended resolution that was passed in January 1997 incorporated the same goal. However, critics responded by charging that the Board was promoting 'laziness of speech' and 'disorders of

language', as well as 'sidestepping [the schools'] incompetence in teaching correct grammar'.⁴

These charges represent a language ideology, which is a set of beliefs about language that rationalizes perceptions of how language is structured and used (Silverstein 1979: 193). In the case of Ebonics, these perceptions are formalized by some authors in context-free regular expression grammars that form the source code for computer programs that generate Mock Ebonics.⁵ The programs are no more sophisticated than the simple search-and-replace function that word processors use to replace one string of characters with another. However, the programs are not value-neutral; they reveal the linguistic racism of their authors by suggesting that one can 'speak' Ebonics by applying a simple search-and-replace tool to 'standard' English texts.

The output of these computer programs is one manifestation of a language ideology that we refer to as the 'Anti-Ebonics Ideology'. Central to this ideology is the belief that Ebonics is 'bad grammar', 'slang', and a 'pseudo-language'. Some accompanying perceptions are that the Oakland School District 'has decided to teach Ebonics instead of standard English', 'is trying to classify Ebonics (i.e. 'Black English') speaking students as Bilingual', and 'is only attempting to pilfer federal and state funds' that pay for bilingual education (<http://www.west.net/~joyland/Oakland.htm>).

Those deploying this ideology often presuppose without question the existence of a monoglot standard language, that is, that there is 'an idealized nation-state that has one perfect, homogeneous language' (Lippi-Green 1997: 64; Silverstein 1998). The ideology assumes that Ebonics is an inferior or less-than-legitimate variety of English, and that less-than-legitimate varieties of English ought to be controlled or eradicated so that speakers can succeed by educational, social, and economic assimilation (Lippi-Green 1997: 64; Bing and Woodward 1998: 18; Silverstein 1998: 284–287).

Other ideologies in play in the Ebonics controversy include those of linguists and proponents of diversity. Linguists assume the equality of all varieties of language on the basis of their systematicity and rule-governedness. For linguists, this equality, of course, extends to Ebonics. Proponents of diversity recognize and address the social and economic correlates of language use, such as discrimination and poverty, as well as the need to respect speakers' cultural values and self-esteem (Bing and Woodward 1998: 19–20).

In our study, as sociolinguistic researchers, we merge the ideologies of linguists and proponents of diversity into a 'Linguistic-Diversity Ideology'. The linguistic component leads us to assume that Ebonics and other varieties of English exhibit continuities with and differences from one another, rather than deficiencies in relation to an idealized norm. The diversity component leads us to assume that perceived language inequality is linked to racial prejudice and dominant group privilege. We scrutinize the anti-Ebonics ideology as one that accommodates viewpoints ranging from benign (uninformed) linguistic prescriptivism to victim-bashing and blatant racism. Specifically, we describe and

interpret the concrete linguistic markers that constitute a corpus of Mock Ebonics parodies on the Internet. These parodies appeal to and reinforce beliefs regarding language inequality and, in their most visibly exaggerated forms, reproduce racism and privilege in everyday life.

Mock Ebonics on the Internet is characterized by four major strategies:

1. asystematic graphemic representations of phonetic segments
2. the hyper-use of *be*
3. semantic and pragmatic derogation, and
4. the use of vulgar expressions.

Such strategies stereotype spoken language – suggesting that ‘membership in that speech community is easy but worthless’ (Hodge and Kress 1988: 88). They also appear in the context of controversy over methods for teaching standard language skills to nonstandard speakers in the public schools. It is not surprising, then, that the ‘deficient’ language of the parody pages appears in texts whose overall effect suggests that African-American students are unable to make the transition from orality to literacy or otherwise distinguish appropriate contexts of language use. By representing ‘laziness of speech’ and ‘disorders of language’, these parodies shift the blame for poor academic performance from a society that excludes those who use a system differing from an idealized form (Hodge and Kress 1988: 50) to learners and the community from which they come.

METHODS

The data in this study were culled from World Wide Web pages in mid-March 1997. To locate key Web pages, we searched for the term *Ebonics* using the Yahoo! search engine (<http://www.yahoo.com>). The search engine returned a set of categories from which we chose *Entertainment: Humor, Jokes, and Fun: Writing: Words and Wordplay: Ebonics*. Within this category, we examined 23 texts containing 270,188 words. Of these texts, 12 were linked to one Web site containing Mock Ebonics parodies of classic works of Western literature (*De Ebonic Lectric Libary O De Classicks* ‘The Ebonic Electric Library of the Classics’). For more detailed analysis, we chose nine texts containing 225,726 words. We re-ran the Web searches periodically through December 1997 to monitor changes in the data.

One could argue that, by displaying racist data, we are propagating racism while hiding behind a veneer of academic acceptability that is provided by a respectable scholarly journal. Out of sensitivity to this issue, we have minimized the amount of data that we display to the examples that are needed to illustrate our points. We feel that there are two important reasons to display this minimal data set. First, this is an empirical, data-driven study, in which we present the data and their publicly accessible sources (World Wide Web addresses) to readers. As with any empirical study, we present the data so that readers can

come to independent conclusions and decide whether or not to accept ours. Second, we assume that the readership of this journal has not necessarily been exposed to Mock Ebonics, so the present study brings an element of awareness to the readership and the linguistic community in general. Only by making readers aware of concrete instantiations of popular language ideologies can we as linguists adequately respond to a host of discriminatory issues, of which the Ebonics controversy is only one.⁶

THE DATA AND STRATEGIES

Graphemic representations of phonetic segments

The first major strategy of Mock Ebonics is the graphemic representation of the random reduction, deletion, substitution, and metathesis of hyper-salient phonetic segments.⁷ Of these four phonological processes, the reduction and deletion of phonetic segments signify informality and low social status in many language ideologies of the world (Hodge and Kress 1988: 92). The anti-Ebonics ideology that produces Mock Ebonics exemplifies this perception. Text 1 shows an excerpt from *The Ebology O Blato: Sockradees Defense* ('The Apology of Plato: Socrates' Defense') in *De Ebonic Lectric Libary O De Classicks*. Table 1 summarizes the Mock Ebonics graphemic representations in this text.

Text 1: Excerpt from *The Ebology O Blato: Sockradees Defense*
[<http://novusordo.com/indexn.htm>]

How ya' gots felt, O dudes o' Athens, at **hearin' de** speeches o' **mah** accusers, **Ah** cannot tell; but Ah know dat deir persuasive words **mos'** made me forget who Ah wuz – such wuz de effect o' dem; and yet dey gots hardly spoken some word o' truth. What it is, Mama! But many as deir falsehoods wuz, dere wuz one o' dem which quite **amazed** me; – Ah mean when dey told ya' t' be upon yo' guard, and not t' let yourselves be **deceived** by de force o' mah eloquence. **Sheeeiit**. Dey ought t' gots been **ashamed** o' sayin' dis, a'cuz dey wuz sho' t' be detected as soon as Ah jimmy'd mah lips and displayed mah deficiency; dey certainly dun did appear t' be most shameless in sayin' dis, unless by de force o' eloquence dey mean de force o' truth; fo' den Ah do indeed admit dat Ah am eloquent. But in how different some way fum deirs. Right On! Well, as Ah wuz sayin', dey gots hardly uttered some word, o' not more dan some word, o' truth; but ya' shall hear fum me de damn whole truth, dig dis: not, howeva', delivered afta' deir manna', in some set orashun duly ornamented wid words and phrases. No indeed. Right On! but Ah shall use de damn words and arguments which occur t' me at de damn moment; fo' Ah am certain dat dis be right, and dat at mah time o' life Ah ought not t' be appearin' before ya', O dudes o' Athens, in de characta' o' some juvenile orato' – let no one **'spect** dis o' me. Sheeeiit.

Table 1 shows that the producer of *The Ebology O Blato* generates phonological processes randomly, rather than systematically. One example is the reduction of the word-final consonant cluster /st/. Word-final consonant cluster reduction in AAVE (Ebonics) occurs before consonants and vowels, but is more

Table 1: Occurrences and non-occurrences of phonological processes in *The Ebology O Blato*

Process	Occurrence	Non-occurrence
<i>Reduction</i>		
word-final consonant clusters	mos' ('most')	request
diphthongs to simple vowels	ya' ('you')	–
prefix {ex-} ([eks] → [s])	'spect ('expect')	–
<i>Deletion</i>		
r-dropping	fo' ('for')	therefore
word-final consonants	o' ('of')	proof
diphthongs	t' ('to')	into
<i>Substitution</i>		
Alveolar for velar nasal ([n] for [ŋ])	hearin' ('hearing')	speaking [with comma]
Voiced alveolar stop for interdental fricatives ([d] for [θ, ð])	dink ('think')	truth
	dat ('that')	
Exaggerated vowel length	baaaad, sheeeit	–
<i>Metathesis</i>		
Lexicalized (one token)	ax ('ask')	–

likely to occur when the following word begins with a consonant (Wolfram 1981: 62–63). However, in *The Ebology O Blato*, the consonant cluster <st> in *most* is represented graphemically as <mos'> only twice. Nine other occurrences in this same text consist of the full form <most> before words beginning with both consonants and vowels.

Another frequent representation in Mock Ebonics is 'g-dropping', which is the substitution of the alveolar nasal [n] for the velar nasal [ŋ]. Graphemically, g-dropping is represented as <n'> for <ng>, as in *hearin'* for *hearing*. Although g-dropping occurs in many informal varieties of spoken English, its overuse in *The Ebology O Blato* signals an informality that is inappropriate to the register and channel of the original text (*The Apology of Plato: Socrates' Defense*). In addition, producers of Mock Ebonics do not represent g-dropping consistently throughout the texts; g-dropping does not appear in tokens that contain a word-final <s> (e.g. *beings*, *doings*) or in those that are followed by a comma (e.g. *nothing*, *speaking*). Therefore, we assume that the representation of <ng> in *The Ebology O Blato* is generated by a search-and-replace mechanism that is sensitive to the graphemic contexts of individual tokens, not the phonological contexts of the segments.

Other phonological processes are represented capriciously in *De Ebonic Lectric*

Library O De Classicks. For example, the producer of *Electra by SofaCleavages* substitutes the grapheme <d> for the graphemes <th> regardless of whether the phoneme is the voiceless interdental fricative /θ/ or the voiced /ð/. This substitution generates such implausible words as *strengd* 'strength' and *lengd* for 'length'. Similarly, metathesis (the inversion of two speech sounds) is reproduced in the hyper-salient *ax* 'ask', but not in other tokens in which this process could also occur (e.g. *childern* for 'children').

It appears that the graphemic representations of phonological processes in *De Ebonic Lectric Library O De Classicks* represent the anti-Ebonics ideology that Ebonics consists of an asystematic subset of markers of 'laziness of speech' and 'disorders of language'. We emphasize the inconsistencies in the graphemic representations to show how the producers of these texts – unaware or unconvinced of the systematicity of Ebonics – feel free to use a 'search-and-replace' approach to 'speak' Ebonics. Only if Ebonics is not a legitimate language such as French, Italian, or Russian, can one 'speak' it by simply replacing letters.

The hyper-use of be

The second major strategy of Mock Ebonics is the hyper-use of *be*. Rickford and Rickford (in press) observe that this strategy is perhaps the most salient one in Mock Ebonics texts. Text 2 shows the Mock Ebonics version of the popular nursery rhyme *Jack and Jill*,⁸ which contains two such uses of *be*.

Text 2: Mock Ebonics version of *Jack and Jill* [<http://joel.net/EBONICS/nursery.htm>]

- 1 Jack an Jill
- 2 Hip-hoppin up da hill
- 3 To fetch da pail of wada.
- 4 Jack **be felt down**
- 5 An busted he crown
- 6 An Jill **be tumblin** too.

Linguists have long observed that the rules for using *be* in Ebonics are systematic and convey semantic distinctions which, in standard English, are not obligatory and can only be paraphrased.⁹ Examples are *He busy*, meaning *He is busy* at the moment vs. *He be busy*, meaning *He is busy* habitually. In Text 2, however, *Jack be felt down* (line 4) and *An Jill be tumblin* (6) are not well-formed in Ebonics because the aspect of the verbs in these utterances is neither durative nor iterative, but perfect. In addition, the use of passive voice is problematic in *be felt down* 'fall down' (4), because the verb is not transitive, which is a necessary condition for the passive. A second example is seen in the Mock Ebonics version of *Baa, Baa Black Sheep*, shown in Text 3.

Text 3: Mock Ebonics version of *Baa Baa Black Sheep*
 [<http://joel.net/EBONICS/nursery.htm>]

- 1 Yo! Yo! Ebony Sheep,
- 2 Got some wool?
- 3 Yea man, yea man,
- 4 Three dim bags done full;
- 5 One **be** fo da masta,
- 6 And one **be** fo yo mama,
- 7 An one **be** fo da little homey dat libs down da screet.

In the repeated phrases *One be fo* (lines 5–7), *be* is inserted gratuitously in the Mock Ebonics version where ellipsis occurs in the standard English source (i.e. *One . . . for the master, one . . . for the dame, one . . . for the little boy*). Since a computer program that simply searches for and replaces character strings cannot substitute something for nothing, it is apparent that the version of *Baa, Baa Black Sheep* is hand-constructed. Specifically, the producer substitutes the full form *be* for the elliptical *is* of the original text. However, here, the aspect of the elliptical verb is neither durative nor iterative, but present.

The hyper-use of *be* in the Mock Ebonics nursery rhymes in Texts 2 and 3 illustrates the misappropriation of a grammatical construction to pejorate a language system that differs from the dominant one by failing to follow its prescriptive rules. As was noted in the graphemic-phonetic section, our point is not to criticize the inconsistencies of representation. Rather, we suggest that the inconsistencies illuminate their producers' anti-Ebonics ideology. If Ebonics is not a legitimate language, it follows that anyone can display mastery of its grammatical nuances by randomly inserting *be*.

Moreover, it is important to note that both the graphemic-phonetic and grammatical examples invert the relation between nonstandard and standard forms of language, which was the focus of the proposed educational reforms in Oakland. The examples represent translations from standard English into Mock Ebonics, whereas the intention of the reforms was to use awareness of language differences to teach standard English to nonstandard speakers. The covert effect of the strategies of translation and inversion, however, supports the perceptions that the Oakland Board 'is trying to classify Ebonics (i.e. 'Black English') speaking students as Bilingual' and 'has decided to teach Ebonics instead of standard English' (<http://www.west.net/~joyland/Oakland.htm>). If these perceptions were true, they would be a further step toward challenging not only monoglot standard language norms, but also dominant group privilege in the United States.

Semantic and pragmatic derogation

The third major strategy of Mock Ebonics is semantic and pragmatic derogation, which reinforces the anti-Ebonics ideology that Ebonics is slang. Producers of

Ebonics parody pages formalize such derogation in the longer texts by (1) replacing semantically neutral words with ones with derogatory connotations, and (2) inserting interjections that are inappropriate to the registers of the original texts. Text 4 shows examples of lexical substitutions and phrasal interjections in an excerpt from the Mock Ebonics version of *Electra by SofaCleavages* ('Electra by Sophocles') from *De Ebonic Lectric Library O De Classicks*.

Text 4: Excerpt from *Electra by SofaCleavages* [<http://novusordo.com/jlectra.htm>]

When ah' went t'de Pydian o'acle, t'learn how ah' might avenge mah' fada' on his murderers, Phoebus gave me da **damn** response which dou art now t'hear, **dig dis**:- dat alone, and by steald, widout aid uh arms o' numbers, ah' should **snatch** de righteous vengeance uh my hand. Since, den, de god spake t'us on dis wise, dou must go into yonda' house, when oppo'tunity gives dee entrance, and learn all dat be passin' dere, so's dat dou mayest repo't t'us fum sho' nuff knowledge. **What it is, Mama!** Dine age, and da **damn** lapse uh time, gots'ta prevent dem fum recognisin' dee; dey gots'ta neva' suspect who dou art, wid dat silvered fro. Let dy tale be dat dou art some Phocian stranger, sent by Phanoteus; fo' he be de greatest uh deir allies. Tell dem, and confirm it wid dine oad, dat Orestes had puh'ished by some fatal chance,- hurled at da **damn** Pydian games fum his rapid chariot; be dat da **damn** substance uh dy sto'y. **Slap mah fro!**

[. . .]

O mah' faderland, and ye gods uh de land, receive me wid baaaad fo'tune in dis journey,- and ye also, halls uh my faders, fo' ah' come wid divine mandate t'cleanse ya' righteously; t'row me not dishonoured fum de land, but grant dat ah' may rule ova' my possessions, and resto'e mah' crib. **Right On!**

Enough:- be it now dy care, old man, t'go and heed dy tax'; and we twain gots'ta go fo'd; fo' so's occasion bids, chief rula' of every enterprise fo' men. **'S coo', bro.**

Other phrasal interjections in the full texts include *Ah be baaaad . . .*, which also appears randomly after periods, and *dig dis*, which is inserted before colons. Table 2 summarizes occurrences of semantic and pragmatic derogation in four texts from *De Ebonic Lectric Library O De Classicks*.

Table 2 shows that the producers of the texts in *De Ebonic Lectric Library O De Classicks* draw on a small repertoire of substitutions and interjections to derogate these pages. Some interjections such as *Right on!* and *'S coo', bro* project sufficient informality and familiarity with African-American culture to allow for seemingly innocuous jocularly. However, other substitutions (*wah-tahmelluns* for 'things') and interjections (*What it is, Mama!, Ah be baaaad . . ., Slap mah fro!*) index racist stereotypes by reducing African Americans to stock outgroup images of minstrelsy and forced laugh-tracks of American television comedies that portray one-dimensional African-American families, such as *Good Times* and *Sanford and Son*. Yet other substitutions (*snatch, ho'* 'whore' and *assho'* 'asshole') use sexual and vulgar terms to derogate the texts, whose overall effect is enhanced by vulgar wordplays that create titles and authors such as *Damlet by Willy Snakeshit* 'Hamlet by William Shakespeare', *SofaCleavages* '[Electra by] Sophocles', and [Metamorphosis by] *Ovary* ('Ovid').

Table 2: Occurrences of semantic and pragmatic derogation in four Mock Ebonics texts

Token	<i>Electra</i>	<i>Ebology</i>	<i>Damlet</i>	<i>Ovary</i>
<i>Semantic derogation: lexical substitutions</i>				
damn	130	126	231	1660
wahtahmelluns ('things')	9	0	0	0
mama	9	0	15	32
honky	6	0	0	38
snatch	19	5	45	55
ho	0	0	13	0
assho'	5	0	0	0
<i>Pragmatic derogation: phrasal interjections</i>				
What it is, Mama!	123	55	166	236
Right on!	132	10	265	300
sheeeit/sheeit	39	73	376	1525
'S coo', bro				
('It's cool, brother')	37	0	0	0
Slap mah fro!	22	0	0	0
Ya' know?	0	20	105	265
dig dis	19	52	528	1487
Ah be baaad . . .	29	0	0	0

URLs for the texts:

<http://novusordo.com/jlectra.htm>

<http://novusordo.com/ebology.htm>

<http://novusordo.com/damlet.htm>

<http://novusordo.com/jmeta.htm>

Because of the length and patterns of representations in the texts of *De Ebonic Lectric Library O De Classicks*, we assume that these texts are generated by computer programs. One program that we found, *Ebonicspeak by pent* (see Appendix), offers a window into the anti-Ebonics ideology that produces Mock Ebonics. The programmer has formalized his impression of Mock Ebonics in an algorithm (a step-by-step procedure for performing an action) and coded it in a script language. A comparison of the source code *Ebonicspeak* and the texts in *De Ebonic Lectric Library O De Classicks* shows the same predilection for semantic and pragmatic derogation. *Ebonicspeak* substitutes a very small repertoire of derogatory words for neutral ones, including *nig* (a clipping of *nigger*) for 'man', *bitch* for 'girl' and 'woman', *nigga* ('nigger') for 'dude' and 'dood', and *sheeit* ('shit') for 'stuff'. To create the impact of slang, the program also randomly inserts the phrasal interjections *Ya' know what I'm sayin'* and *Ya' dig?*

Such lexical substitutions and phrasal interjections take on added connotations

across *De Ebonic Lectric Library O De Classicks*. In the anti-Ebonics view, the embedding of Mock Ebonics words and phrases signifies the hierarchical ordering of two language systems and suggests that, because of their slang-induced ignorance of the standard language, African-American students are unable to read – or at least appreciate – the classic versions. This representational strategy deprecates Ebonics and its users and symbolically marginalizes African Americans from the larger social system. The combination of graphemic-phonetic, semantic, and pragmatic features of Mock Ebonics across *De Ebonic Lectric Library O De Classicks* also reinforces the ideology that colloquial speech, particularly Ebonics, is inferior or less-than-legitimate compared to the language in which the classics of Western literature are taught. At a glance, viewers are fed the anti-Ebonics message that the decline of the English language and Western culture in general will result from Oakland having gone too far.

The use of vulgar expressions

The fourth major strategy of Mock Ebonics is the use of vulgar expressions based on graphemic substitution and pejoration. Exemplifying this strategy is the parody page *Ebonics 101*, shown in Text 5.¹⁰

Text 5: Text of *Ebonics 101*. [<http://www.tcnet.net/joe/ebonics.html>]

Subject: Ebonics 101

Leroy Washington is an 19 year old third grader in the city of Oakland who is becoming increasingly disillusioned with the public school system. One day Leroy got an easy homework assignment. All he had to do was put each of the following words in a sentence. This is what Leroy did.

1. HOTEL – I gave my girlfriend da crabs and the HOTEL everybody.
2. RECTUM – I had two cadillacs, but my ol' lady RECTUM both.
3. DISAPPOINTMENT – My parole officer tol me if I miss DISAPPOINTMENT they gonna send me back to the big house.
4. FORECLOSE – If I pay alimony this month, I'll have no money FORECLOSE.
5. CATACOMB – Don King was at the fight the other night, Man, somebody gave that CATACOMB.
6. PENIS – I went to da doctor and he handed me a cup and said PENIS.
7. ISRAEL – Alonso tried to sell me a Rolex. I said Man, that looks fake. He said, No, ISRAEL.
8. UNDERMINE – There is a fine lookin' hoe livin' in the apartment UNDERMINE.
9. TRIPOLI – I was gonna buy my old lady a bra but I couldn't find no TRIPOLI.
10. STAIN – My mother-in-law axed if I was STAIN for dinner again.
11. SELDOM – My cousin gave me two tickets for the Knicks game, so I SELDOM.
12. ODYSSEY – I told my bro, you ODYSSEY the tits on this hoe.
13. HORDE – My sister got in trouble because she HORDE around in school.
14. INCOME – I just got in bed wit dis hoe and INCOME my wife.
15. FORTIFY – I axed da hoe how much? And she say FORTIFY.

The entire text of this homework assignment satirizes the format of a vocabulary quiz, which is one of the gatekeeping instruments of educational institutions that uphold monoglot standard language norms. The vocabulary items in Text 5 are transformed into pejorative expressions by blending words and exploiting homophony. For example, in sentence 2, *rectum* is a blend of 'wrecked' and 'them', whereas in sentence 4, *foreclose* is homophonous with 'for clothes'.

The introduction to and list in *Ebonics 101* belittle Ebonics speakers in at least three ways. First, consider the statement that *Leroy Washington* (a stereotypical African-American male name) is nineteen and in the third grade in Oakland. The name *Leroy Washington* is a token that stands for a type; namely, all male African-American students. In the United States, third graders are usually eight or nine years old, so the text implies that all male African-American students are years behind their White cohorts. Second, the introduction to *Ebonics 101* expresses the Anti-Ebonics view that Oakland has gone too far, because even students from special interest groups who are presumed to be favored with language enrichment programs are 'becoming increasingly disillusioned'. Third, the assertion that this assignment is 'easy' for *Leroy*, in light of his responses, suggests that Ebonics speakers accidentally stumble across 'false friends' in standard English – that is, across words in Ebonics and standard English that are similar in sound but not meaning. This last statement and the following definitions convey the anti-Ebonics perception that *Leroy* is so ignorant of standard English that he is oblivious to the differences between the two language systems. By having *Leroy* give unusually vulgar definitions, *Ebonics 101* is also more obscenely offensive than other Ebonics parody pages.

The unusually vulgar definitions perpetuate a common outgroup stereotype of African-American males with abnormal sexual appetites. To some degree, this effect is achieved in the text by repeated uses of *hoe* or *ho* 'whore' and its variants, which have crossed over into White speech. In addition, sexual and racial stereotyping are achieved by repeated uses of the first-person, which associate *Leroy* with driving cadillacs (gained illegitimately), seeing his parole officer, and buying stolen merchandise, as well as with committing adultery and soliciting the services of a prostitute. Thus, one does not need to look for deep meanings to see that *Ebonics 101* is an extraordinarily racist text.

The mix of vulgar definitions and deviant activities creates both linguistic and social effects. First, it locates Ebonics in the same register as obscene language. In *Ebonics 101* and other Ebonics parody pages, this shift inverts the relationship between a language and a stigmatized register, which lowers the status of Ebonics. Second, the mix overtly associates Ebonics speakers with the same kinds of blatantly racist images that van Dijk (1989: 218) identifies in the media's portrayal of minorities in general: violence, illegality, crime, and 'strange cultural behavior . . . with deviance of many kinds'. Together, these strategies covertly articulate outgroup fears and elevate Whiteness by reducing

all male Ebonics speakers – and, by extension, all African Americans – to participants in a monolithic ‘Snoop Doggy Dogg’ underworld culture.¹¹

Finally, the most flagrant example of racism that we found among the Ebonics parody pages is *Ebonic Olympic Games*, shown in Text 6.¹²

Text 6: Text of *Ebonic Olympic Games* [<http://novusordo.com/elympic.htm>]

Ebonic Olympic Games
Event List

Opening Ceremonies

The Torching of the Olympic City

Gang Colors Parade

Track and Field

Rob, Shoot & Run

9MM Pistol Toss

Molotov Cocktail Throw

Barbed Wire Roll

Chain Link Fence Climb

Peoplechase

Monkey Bar Race

100 Yard Dog Dash (100 Yard Dash While Being Chased By Police Dog)

200 yard Trash Can Hurdles

500 Yard Stolen Car Battery Run

1000 Meter Courtroom Relay (Team of 4 passing murder weapon – not getting caught)

1500 Meter Television Set Relay

1 Mile Memorial Richard Pryor Burning Ether Run

5 Mile High Speed Automobile Chase

Bitch Slapping (Bruises inflicted on wife/girlfriend in three 1 minute rounds)

Ebo-Marathon (26 Mile Long Distance Run While Evading Blood Hounds)

Ebo-Decathlon (Timed competition, consisting of the following 10 events)

- Rob Liquor Store
- Guzzle 1 Fifth of Fortified Wine
- Drink 6 – Pack of Old English 800
- Steal 1 BMW
- Commit 1 Car Jacking
- Have Sex With Prostitute
- Pimp Girlfriend to Family Member
- Complete 1 Drug Deal
- Remove Serial #'s From 1 Stolen Gun
- 1 Additional Felony of Choice

Swimming

10 Meter Dumpster Dive

100 yard Free Style Handcuff Swim

Concrete Overshoes Buoyancy Drop

Winter Events

Ebo-Biathlon (Drive-by & Shoot)

All Other Winter Events Canceled (Considered too Cold)

Miscellaneous Events

Graffiti Wall Painting

Name Your Father (Canceled, Considered too Difficult)

Lying To Police (Canceled, Considered too Easy)

Welfare Fraud (Canceled, Considered a Lifestyle, Not an Event)

Closing Ceremonies

Grand Finale Firearms Display & Gang War Shoot Out

Note: Games Will Be Canceled if Nobody There Can Pass the Drug Screening Program

Sponsors: ACLU, Oakland Board of Education, Congress and the Supreme Court

Although *Ebonic Olympic Games* does not display any graphemic-phonetic, grammatical, or semantic features of Mock Ebonics, it is included here for three important reasons. First, it reinforces the overtly negative stereotypes of African-American males that appear in *Ebonics 101*, including stealing BMWs, abusing wives and girlfriends, conducting drug deals, possessing stolen weapons, and having sex with prostitutes. Second, *Ebonic Olympic Games* contains a hyperlink to the *Ebonics Main Index Page* (<http://novusordo.com/altindex.htm>), which also has a link to *De Ebonic Lectric Libary O De Classicks*. The producer thus invites consumers to activate beliefs beyond the separate texts, which allows the pseudo-language of the *Libary* pages to stand as an intertextual metaphor for the allegedly contemptible culture of all Ebonics speakers. Finally, *Ebonic Olympic Games* lists as its sponsors the ACLU, the Oakland Board of Education, the [United States] Congress, and the [United States] Supreme Court. This chain of referents covertly displays the anti-Ebonics opinion that the Oakland resolution is an example of the liberal agenda of organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which already unduly influence governmental bodies (the United States Congress and Supreme Court) to enact misguided policies that benefit minorities (the Oakland Ebonics resolution).

OVERVIEW AND CONCLUSIONS

The anti-Ebonics ideology that is described here resembles other subordinating language ideologies (e.g. that of Mock Spanish) in two ways. It is transmitted by a simple set of strategies, which we have called Mock Ebonics, and suggests that one can 'speak' Ebonics by simply pejorating standard English. By using a set of hyper-salient markers to represent a language system and its valuation, Ebonics parody pages produce a racialized language stereotype of a subordinate group. Thus, the pages reproduce racism and elevate outgroup privilege in everyday life.

The Oakland resolution brought language ideology to the foreground in the entire United States in a dramatic way. The resolution, moreover, precipitated a nationwide discourse on language in which attitudes toward Ebonics served as a safe proxy for a discourse on the threats that racialized groups pose to

dominant group power in the United States. Both discourses appear in the responses on the Mock Ebonics parody pages themselves, which display their producers' attitudes toward Ebonics and perceptions of the essential characteristics of African Americans. In addition, Mock Ebonics on the Internet distances producers and consumers from responsibility for language that would be highly offensive in other public venues, such as call-in talk shows, neighborhood bars, and letters to the editor.

One response on the parody pages to the controversy is that Ebonics is 'bad grammar', 'slang', and a 'pseudo-language'. Realized by features of Mock Ebonics, this response appears consistently on all the pages except *Ebonic Olympic Games*, which nevertheless associates the presumed linguistic deviance of Ebonics with flagrant and racialized non-linguistic deviance. Another response is that the Oakland Board endorses teaching Ebonics instead of standard English. This response appears in the inversion of nonstandard and standard uses of language, as in *Ebonics Nursery Rhymes*, *The Ebology O Blato*, and *Electra by SofaClevages*, among other pages. The inversion expresses the fear that if Ebonics were recognized as an official language of the public schools, Ebonics and its speakers would assume equal footing with 'standard' American English and its speakers.

Eye-catching graphics also reinforce the inversion of nonstandard and standard uses of language. One graphic on several parody pages shows an upside-down container of margarine bearing the label *I Can't Believe It's Not English*, clearly a parody of a brand of margarine that is sold in the United States under the name *I Can't Believe It's Not Butter*.¹³ This parody works by analogy: just as margarine is believed to be an imitative and inferior product compared to butter, the anti-Ebonics ideology presupposes that Ebonics is an imitative and inferior product compared to standard English. In addition, in the Mock Ebonics label *I Can't Believe It's Not English*, the normative anti-Ebonics presupposition *It's not English* is embedded in the performative layer whose illocutionary force is the statement ([_sI say to you [_sI can't believe [_sIt's not English]]]).

A third response on the parody pages is that the Oakland Board is trying to classify Ebonics-speaking students as bilingual, and will attempt to 'pilfer public funds' to do so. This response is perhaps best illustrated by the Mock Ebonics rendition of a disillusioned African-American student's vocabulary assignment in *Ebonics 101*. Consistent with the pervasiveness of monoglot standard language ideology in the United States, bilingual education is often seen as a wasteful policy that hinders the assimilation of immigrants, the majority of whom are now immigrants of color. Thus, the linking of the teaching of Ebonics to bilingual education transfers the negative attitudes toward the education of immigrants of color to the education of speakers of Ebonics.

Moreover, the 'deficient' language of the Ebonics parody pages appears in texts whose overall effect suggests that African-American students are unable to

make the transition from orality to literacy or otherwise distinguish appropriate contexts of language use. Crucially, this effect justifies shifting the blame for the poor academic performance of African Americans from a racist society to learners and the community from which they come. For example, both *The Ebology O Blato* and *Electra by SofaCleavages* represent presumed deficiencies of colloquial speech. The *Ebology O Blato* also mocks the African-American value of orality with Socrates' plea to use his own conversational style in the context of a library of the classics of Western literature. In addition, *Ebonics Nursery Rhymez* exclude from a shared early childhood experience those African-American children who bring their home language to school. Finally, *Ebonics 101* ridicules the language and behavior of male African-American students, whose environment is represented as being so contemptibly deviant that it prohibits them and, by extension, all African Americans, from acquiring standard English-language skills.

Parody pages such as these exploit the symbolic potential of stereotyping and a powerful new medium of mass communication to exaggerate the hierarchical ordering of two language systems, as well as the gross deviance of the nonstandard one. In doing so, they rationalize an outgroup anti-Ebonics ideology that the decline of the English language and Western culture in general will result from Oakland having gone too far in respecting and embracing the legitimacy and richness of Ebonics.

NOTES

1. The first author wrote an earlier version of this paper for Heidi E. Hamilton at Georgetown University in Spring 1997, and presented it to Peter L. Patrick's seminar on African-American Vernacular English at Georgetown University in September 1997. Both authors presented a substantially revised version of the first author's paper at the Annual Meeting of the American Dialect Society in New York City in January 1998. We are grateful to our departments at Georgetown University for the support that enabled us to present this research. We also thank Jane H. Hill, John R. Rickford, an anonymous referee, and an anonymous reader for their valuable comments.
2. For the full text of the amended resolution of January 15, 1997, see <http://www.ousd.k12.ca.us/AmendRes9697-006.html>. For the proposed and amended resolutions, as well as other primary documents related to this Ebonics controversy, see *Journal of English Linguistics*, 26/2, June 1998. The article by Richardson discusses Anti-Ebonics legislation. The article by Scott discusses some of the same themes of Ebonics humor that are discussed in the present paper. The article by Wolfram compares popular and sociolinguistic understandings of controversial issues in the Oakland Ebonics resolution.
3. The imitation of AAVE by non-native speakers, particularly Whites, is not a new phenomenon. Joe Chandler Harris created collections of stories with *Uncle Remus* (1985 [1881]) as their central character; Mark Twain attempted this with the

character Jim in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1985 [1885]), and Marc Connelly's play *The Green Pastures* (1929) has God, his angels, and earthly creatures all speaking AAVE. Some of these early classics reflect a patronizing nineteenth-century notion of the noble savage and use 'a combination of dialect speech and pretentious malapropisms' (Holton 1984: 105). Fishkin's (1993: 108) chapter on the character Jim in *Huckleberry Finn* furnishes extensive background on the controversy surrounding Mark Twain's use of African-American voices, suggesting that these may have been an imaginative 'act of appreciation, rather than appropriation' (for a critique of Fishkin's linguistic analysis of Huck's speech, however, see Downing 1996). Until the mid twentieth century, however, it was more usual to find a 'conventionalized, almost stylized method of dialect representation, drawn, often indiscriminately, from the 'stock' of the recorded black dialect speech features of local colorists or from the stage artificialities of the rather mannered 'Negro' speech employed by the 'locutors' of the minstrel shows, an indigenous form of comic entertainment then gaining widespread acceptance on American stages' (Holton 1984: 89). Recent sociolinguistic studies of marking and crossing among White predominantly male urban adolescents in the United States (e.g. Bucholtz 1996 and Cutler 1996) document outgroup uses of spoken AAVE-like features, particularly phonology and hip-hop vocabulary. Many studies suggest that contemporary marking and crossing do not eliminate racial boundaries, but represent a transitory, age-graded flirtation with the others' languages and cultures (Hewitt 1986; Rampton 1995; Bucholtz 1996; Cutler 1996; Sweetland 1997; Hill 1998). In contrast, we claim that the Mock Ebonics texts in the present study do not have any salient rhetorical purpose beyond the satirical advocacy of a racist language ideology, which is the focus of this paper.

4. <http://www.ousd.k12.ca.us/AmendRes9697-006.html>;
<http://www.west.net/~joyland/Oakland.htm>.
5. For one such example, see <http://members.visi.net/~icculus/ebonics/ebonics.irc>.
6. For one linguist's description of his role in the fallout of the Ebonics controversy, see Rickford (1999).
7. Following the convention of the Linguistic Society of America, we use angle brackets (< >) to indicate one or more graphemes.
8. Similar versions appear in the section *Nursery Rhymez on Big D's Joke Page* [<http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Lot/3340/ebonicsw.html>].
9. The extensive literature on this topic includes Fasold (1970), Fasold and Wolfram (1970), Labov (1972a, 1972b), and Wolfram (1981).
10. Similar versions of *Ebonics 101* are located on *Big D's Joke Page* [<http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Lot/3340/ebonicsw.html>] and *Ebonics, Hebonics, Hickphonics, Etc.*, which is a hyperlink in the satire section of the *Politically Incorrect* ('Grand Central Station for White Nationalists') home page [<http://www.sound.net/~fenix/SA-hebonics.html#anchor5092999>], and at <http://neon.netlite.com/incoming/EbonicsHomework.txt/>. For an explanation of the ways in which Ebonics jokes frame other 'Onics' jokes, see Rickford and Rickford (in press).
11. For a critique of how early sociolinguistic approaches constructed 'authentic African-American membership and language as male, adolescent, insular and trifling', see Morgan (1994). For a personal account of this effect on one male African American, see Peterson (1997). For a critique of how sociological and ethnographic scholarship have constructed this kind of Otherness, see Kelley (1997).

12. A similar version of this text is *Ebolympic Games on Big D's Joke Page* [<http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Lot/3340/ebonicsw.html>].
13. See, for example <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/3070/ebonics.html>

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Additional URLs not shown in the text

City of L.A. High School Math Proficiency Exam:

http://www.makeyoulaugh.com/Jokes/Regional/los_angeles.shtml

De Advenfure [sic] uh de Dyin' Detective:

<http://www.novusordo.com/hdetective.htm>

De Final Problem:

<http://www.novusordo.com/hfinal.htm>

De Unibomba' Manifesto:

<http://novusordo.com/junibomb.htm>

Jim [sic] Clinton's Inaugural Address:

<http://novusordo.com/jclinton.htm>

M. L. King's 'I Have a Dream' Speech:

<http://joel.net/EBONICS/mlking.html>

Paradise Lawst (Fust Book) by Jim Milton:

<http://novusordo.com/jplawst.htm>

Politically [sic] correct Redneck Jokes:

<http://www.tcnet.net/joe/page2.html>

Rime O Da Auntshint Marimer [sic]:

<http://novusordo.com/jrhyme.htm>

Sonnets fum de Po'tuguese:

<http://novusordo.com/jlove.htm>

'Sup, dudes Last Bow an Epilogue uh Sherlock Holmes:

<http://www.novusordo.com/hlastbow.htm>

The Bill of Rights:

<http://joel.net/EBONICS/borights.html>

West Side Christmas:

<http://joel.net/EBONICS/christmas.htm>

APPENDIX**Source code of *Ebonicspeak by Pent*:**

[<http://members.visi.net/~icculus/ebonics/ebonics.irc>]

```
# ebonicspeak by pent. who the hell else would do this?
# i think people like this though :)
^ set input_protection off
@ englishwords = [i are am is pretty ask alright hi hello friend man girl \
people suck cool neat awesome and my don't friends you more for everyone \
this work beautiful were thing anything something there door anymore \
have about the get warez shit having using fool hey good with white \
a shoot went guys them boys girls fuck best dude dood no that was \
you're woman oh doesn't doesnt isn't isnt your to stuff ebonics they \
question script i'm i'll does because better again of saw any]
@ ebonicswords = [ah be be be fine ax aight werd peace homey nig bitch \
brothas wack phat phat phat an' mah don' homies ya mo' fo' brothas \
dis werk fine was thin' anythin' somethin' dere do' anymo' \
gots 'bout de git juarez sheeit havin' usin' foo' yo pimp-tight wiff whitey \
```

uh sheeeyit go pimpz dem nigs bitches fuk bawmb **nigga nigga** nahh dat been \
 you **bitch** awww don' don' ain't ain't yo' ta **sheeit** ebonix dey \
 queshun scrip' ah'm ah'll do cuz bettah ag'in o' seen no]
 eval \$srand(23134234)
 @ ephrasenum = [7]
 @ ephrase[0] = [. Ya' know what I'm sayin']
 @ ephrase[1] = [. Ya' dig?]
 @ ephrase[3] = []
 [. . .]

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