Do Ya Understan’ What I’m Sayin’? An Examination of Alice Walker and Sapphire’s Use of Ebonics

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English 300, Fall 2012, UH Hilo

Freedom of speech has been one of the many desired qualities America offers her citizens, though at times it seems that the right to speak freely only applies to those who speak in a manner deemed proper and standard by the country’s -- often educated -- majority. America is home to many different dialects of what is called Standard English. In many settings, like literature or education, variations of Standard English are met with negative and positive criticisms. America’s resistance to allow varieties of Standard English to reach the public can be seen in the receptions of Alice Walker’s The Color Purple and Sapphire’s Push. Both authors use the controversial dialect of Ebonics in their novels to portray African American characters and culture.

The term Ebonics is used in this paper because it is a more commonly used name for the African American variety of Standard English. Compared to the speech it represents, the term Ebonics is relatively new. First coined by psychologist Robert L. Williams in 1973, the words “ebony” and “phonics” were combined to form Ebonics, giving it the literal meaning of “black sound” (Wright 6). The roots of Ebonics trace back to before America’s Civil War. Africans who were brought to America as slaves found themselves separated from speakers of their own or similar languages and banned from becoming literate in English. The stripping of slaves’ language also deprived them of their identities. Even in such isolation, a new language was formed and today’s Ebonics is a linguistic legacy from that terrible time in African American history (Filmer 255). It seems fitting that this “black sound” would be the voice of Walker and Sapphire’s African American characters.

One of the most well-known cases of controversy surrounding public use of Ebonics took place in Oakland, California. On December 18, 1996, the Oakland School Board (OSB) decided that due to its district’s African-American student population of 53%, Ebonics would be used as a means of instruction in Oakland schools. The idea behind this decision was to build a bridge for teaching students Standard English (Applebome, Lakoff 227, Smitherman 13, Taylor 38). Oakland’s studies showed that “…the standardized tests and grade scores of African American students in reading and language art skills... are substantially below state and national norms...” and that Standard English was not to be considered the “primary language” of these African American students (Original Oakland). The students’ “primary language” was reported to be Ebonics and the OSB intended to use it, along with Standard English, as an instructional language in the classroom (Sadker 68). Using both speech styles to teach students appeared to be the best way to help Oakland’s students.

Critics of this resolution ranged from concerned parents and citizens to prominent African American figures like Bill Cosby and Reverend Jesse Jackson. Cosby gave his thoughts on the Oakland Ebonics controversy in an article published in the Wall Street Journal entitled “Elements of Ingo-Ebonics Style.” Cosby argued that if Ebonics would be taught to students it should be taught to authority figures too. As he put it, “…the consequences of a grammatical accident could be disastrous during a roadside encounter with a policeman” (Baugh 91). Reverend Jesse Jackson was at first displeased with the resolution. He changed his thoughts, however, once it was explained to him that Ebonics would be used as a way to teach students Standard English (Coleman). Even with supporters like Jackson, the school board’s resolution did not have enough backing to stay in effect too long.

One of the biggest complaints of Walker and Sapphire’s use of the black dialect was that it was “degrading to black people” and painted blacks in a negative light (Roden 464). The protagonists of The Color Purple, Celie, and Push, Precious, are both young, uneducated African American women who tell their stories through Ebonics. Sapphire attests “Push is about the acquisition of language” (Manderfield). This acquisition can also be seen in The Color Purple. Celie’s story is told in an epistolary fashion -- a series of letters between herself and God and herself and her sister Nettie. Through these letters, Walker illustrates Celie’s ability to understand Ebonics and Standard English. Celie uses Ebonics when talking and when writing about her own life. She is also, however, able to comprehend Standard English used by Nettie and the white townspeople (Huskey 100-1). This leads readers to see Ebonics as Celie’s own language and voice.

Precious’s language is even further from Standard English than Celie’s. Celie writes, in one letter to God, “I ast him to take me instead of Nettie while our new mammy sick” (Walker 7). The extent of Precious’ illiteracy is shown in her journal entries which are comprised of hardly any comprehensible words. To her teacher she writes “tsak Abdul i don notin,” which is meant to say “take Abdul I don not have thing” (Sapphire 70). Her narrating voice is a little easier for readers to decipher with more common Ebonics words like “fahver” for “father”, “maff” for “math”, and “shoutin” for “shouting” (Sapphire 1, 5, 113). In regards to the acquisition of language, Precious’ reading and writing skills greatly improve by the novel’s end. Her voice that narrates the story, however, stays very close to the Ebonics with which the story began.

For those who do not speak -- or at least are not familiar with -- Ebonics, it may seem that Celie and Precious speak a different language. Celie’s “black folk English” and the “halting dialect” and “hobbled, minimal English” Precious communicates with provide
strong evidence to the social and racial contexts and environments experienced by each female (Roden 458, Walters 415). Contemporary African American rapper Kendrick Lamar addresses this issue in his song “The Art of Peer Pressure” where, referring to Ebonics, he raps that he and his friends are “speaking language only we know, you think is an accent” (The Art of Peer Pressure). When critics attacked her for the use of Ebonics in The Color Purple, Walker justified her choices by stating that “language is an intrinsic part of who we are and what has... happened to us...” (Roden 464). Those who praised Walker and Sapphire’s vernacular choices supported the idea that the language of the novels contributed to, not detracted from, the overall storytelling effect. Although the language in both novels is not always grammatically correct, both characters possess the power to communicate. The dialect helps readers feel and understand the “relentless, claustrophobic sorrow” that saturates both stories (Walters 415, Zhou 302). The use of Ebonics in the novels gives them a more authentic feel.

If the stories of these young African American women were told in Standard English, much of the novels’ impact, power, and message would be lost. One’s language reveals what culture he or she is from or with which he or she identifies. By using an oral tradition possessing strong ancestral ties, Walker and Sapphire “expose the depth of the conflict” present between African Americans and the oppression of the dominant, white, culture (George 121). A person’s social status can be indicated by how a person speaks. If one’s speech style differs from the established and expected standard, the opportunity for linguistic, social, and racial prejudice and discrimination is presented. Even in contemporary American society, Ebonics speakers are stereotyped and categorized. They are often considered to be “deficient intellectually, culturally, and socially” solely because they speak a non-standard form of English (Filmer 256, 258). Assumptions like these are why some feel Ebonics and academia cannot exist together.

The linguistic and racial prejudice and discrimination that African Americans experience because of the use of Ebonics can create an idea of the Other. Those who are stereotyped are stuck being “a form of knowledge and identification” that waivers between something that is “already known and something that must be anxiously repeated” (Bhabha 62). These degrading stereotypes and prejudices are projected onto the minority by the majority. In America it is not enough for “the black man [to] be black; he must be black in relation to the white man” (Fanon 87). African American speakers of Ebonics often find themselves as being outsiders within their own country. Ebonics is the “first - and sometimes only - language for the majority of its speakers” (Filmer 256). This causes the speakers to be outsiders because, even though it is technically English, Ebonics is a variety that is not considered to be the standard for the American English language. The dialect distances Ebonics speakers from fully becoming insiders (Filmer 256).

The acceptance of Walker and Sapphire’s use of Ebonics is synonymous with the acceptance of Ebonics itself. The denial of Ebonics’ legitimacy and place among Americans is the same as the denial of “the legitimacy of black culture and the black experience” (Filmer 262). To silence that voice would be like erasing the people to whom it belongs. Should African Americans abandon Ebonics in order to be accepted by Standard English speaking Americans? Celie at one point thinks that “... only a fool would want to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind” (Walker 219). Linguist John Rickford traces Ebonics’ origin to the days of slavery. The connection to America’s painful and ugly past may be a reason why so many Americans are hesitant to accept it. Ebonics “gives testimony to the fact that African Americans have not completely assimilated” and credits it partly to the “will to maintain a distinct identity” (Filmer 264). With this distinct identity, Ebonics has helped its speakers establish themselves as something other than the majority.

The Color Purple and Push are important works in America’s Black literary tradition. Literary works by African American authors began in the late 18th century with slave narratives and the Harlem Renaissance (Madhubuti). It was not until the early 1970s that different pieces became part of this literary tradition. The diversity came in the form of “unconventional Black women characters” (Griffin 169). Strong Black female characters are not the only positive products of Walker and Sapphire’s works. The portrayal of African American life through the use of Ebonics is “a moment in which the black English of the oral tradition is forever carved in stone” (George 121). Concerning her own work, Sapphire explains “this is the language you’re hearing now” (Manderfield). The language of The Color Purple and Push contribute greatly to the Black literary tradition.

The mixed receptions and criticisms of Walker and Sapphire’s novels make it difficult to discern whether or not Ebonics should be used in literature. Some feel that the variety of English shames African Americans and stereotypes them as uneducated. Others feel that such uses of Ebonics are positive ways to celebrate Black culture and the history of the language and its people. The use of Ebonics in literature introduces Ebonics to readers who might not have any previous knowledge of the speech style. Those who consider Ebonics to be their first language are able to read stories in the language with which they are familiar. Ebonics in literature also opens the door for further exploration into African American culture. The relevance of the novels’ language in today’s society and their strong connection to its speakers’ past provide ways for members of all cultures to learn about such a large and critical part of America’s history and people.
Works Cited


