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Spoken Soul: The Beloved, Belittled Language of Black America

My chapter for this volume is an adapted version of the first chapter of my recent book, *Spoken Soul* (Rickford and Rickford 2000). It reinserts all those passages excised from the book for reasons of space or coherence by the senior editor at John Wiley—someone I really do like and appreciate. I should add—plus some other data and reflections that I have added more recently. The title of this chapter also includes the book's subtitle, which the publisher didn't accept either, despite my ardent pleadings. So you may think of this chapter as an author's revenge, or as my last, desperate attempt to get my own way.

Let me begin, like a preacher, by citing two relevant quotations, the first biblical:

For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? (Mark 8:36–37)

SOU. 1. The animating and vital principle in humans. . . . 6. The central or integral part; the vital core. . . . 9. A sense of ethnic pride among Black people and especially African Americans, expressed in areas such as language, social customs, religion and music. (*American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed., 2000)

"Spoken Soul" was the name that Claude Brown (1968), author of *Manchild in the Promised Land*, coined for the informal speech, or vernacular, of many African Americans. In a 1968 interview, he waxed eloquent in its praise, declaring that it "possesses a pronounced lyrical quality which is frequently incompatible to any music other than that ceaselessly and relentlessly driving rhythm that flows from potently

spent lives." A decade later, James Baldwin, legendary author of *The Fire Next Time*, described "Black English" as "this passion, this skill . . . this incredible music . . ." ([1979] 1981).

In the 1980s, two extraordinary black women also "testified" to the value of "Spoken Soul." Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison (1981:27) insisted that the distinctive ingredient of her fiction was this:

The language, only the language. . . . It is the thing that black people love so much—the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them. It's a love, a passion. Its function is like a preacher's: to make you stand up out of your seat, make you lose yourself and hear yourself. The worst of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language. There are certain things I cannot say without recourse to my language. It's terrible to think that a child with five different present tenses comes to school to be faced with books that are less than his own language. And then to be told things about his language, which is him, that are sometimes permanently damaging. He may never know the etymology of Africanisms in his language, not even know that "hip" is a real word or that "the dozens" meant something. This is a really cruel fallout of racism. I know the standard English. I want to use it to help restore the other language, the lingua franca.

And June Jordan (1985), celebrated essayist and poet, identified "three qualities of Black English—the presence of life, voice and clarity—that testify to a distinctive Black value system." Jordan, then a professor at Stony Brook University in New York, chided her students for their uneasiness about the *Spoken Soul* in Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Color Purple*, and she went on to teach them about the regularities of the African-American vernacular.

So much for the "beloved" attitude toward African-American vernacular, particularly common among black writers between the 1960s and 1980s. By the end of the 1990s, "belittlement," or disparagement, was far more common, and one could scarcely find a spokesman (or spokeswoman) for the race who had *anything* flattering to say about it. In response to the Oakland School Board's December 18, 1996, resolution to recognize "Ebonics" as the primary language of African-American students in the California district, poet Maya Angelou (1996) told the *Wichita Eagle* that she was "incensed" and found the idea "very threatening," although she has used the black vernacular herself, for example, in poems like "The Pusher" and "The Thirtens (Black)." The president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Kweisi Mfume (1997), denounced the measure as "a cruel joke," and although he later adopted a more conciliatory position, Jesse Jackson (1996), on national television, initially called it "an unacceptable surrender, borderlining on disgrace." Jackson found himself curiously aligned with Ward Connerly, the black University of California regent whose ultimately successful efforts to end affirmative action on University of California campuses and in the state as a whole Jackson had vigorously opposed. Calling the Oakland proposal "tragic," Connerly (1996) went on to argue, "These are not kids who came from Africa last year or last generation, even. These are kids that have had every opportunity to accclimate themselves to American society, and they have gotten themselves into this

trap of speaking this language—this slang, really, that people can't understand. Now we're going to legitimize it."

As another example of how Ebonics united African Americans from totally different sides of the ideological spectrum, note that the black *conservative* academic and author Shelby Steele (1996) characterized the Oakland proposal as just another "gimmick" to enhance black self-esteem, and the black *liberal* academic and author Henry Louis Gates (1997) chairman of Afro-American Studies at Harvard, dismissed it as "obviously stupid and ridiculous." (Author and former Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver (1997) agreed, as did entertainer Bill Cosby (1997), who despite his own use of Ebonics in comedy routines like "The Lower Tract," penned a biting column entitled "Elements of *Ignorance*-Ebonics.")

The virtual consensus blurred political lines among white pundits, as well. *Conservative* talk show host Rush Limbaugh assailed the Ebonics resolution, and leading *Republican* Bill Bennett (1996), former U.S. Secretary of Education, described it as "multiculturalism gone haywire." Leading *liberal* Mario Cuomo (1996), former governor of New York, called it a "bad mistake," and Education Secretary Richard Riley (1996), a member of President Clinton's *Democratic* cabinet, declared that Ebonics programs would *not* be eligible for federal bilingual education dollars: "Elevating black English to the status of a language is not the way to raise standards of achievement in our schools and for our students." At the state level, anti-Ebonics legislation was introduced both by *Republicans*, like Rep. Mark Ogles of Florida, and by *Democrats*, like Georgia State Senator Ralph Abernathy III. Newspaper, radio and television commentators of all stripes tended to agree in their critiques of Ebonics (as a way of speaking) and of the Oakland proposal itself.¹

Millions and millions of other people across America and around the world also rushed in to express their vociferous condemnation of Ebonics and the proposal to take it into account in schools. ("Ebonics," in fact, quickly became a stand-in both for the language variety and for Oakland's proposal, so the recurrent question, "What do you think about Ebonics?" elicited reactions to two topics.) The forums of everyday folk were the animated conversations that sprung up in homes, workplaces, and at holiday gatherings, as well as the TV and radio programs, letters to the editor, and electronic bulletin boards that were deluged after the Oakland decision. According to *Newsweek* (January 13, 1997), "An America Online poll about Ebonics drew more responses than the one asking people whether O. J. Simpson was guilty."²

The vast majority of those America Online responses were not merely negative. They were caustic. Ebonics was vilified as "disgusting black street slang," "incorrect and substandard," "nothing more than ignorance," "lazy English," "bastardized English," "the language of illiteracy" and "this utmost ridiculous [sic] made-up language." And Oakland's resolution, *almost universally misunderstood as a proposal to teach Ebonics instead of as a plan to use Ebonics as a springboard to Standard English*, elicited superlatives of disdain, disbelief, and derision:

"I'm embarrassed and appalled at this latest fiasco." (December 21, 1996)

"Idiocy of the highest form" (December 21, 1996)

"Man, 'ubonics will take me far back to de jungo!" (December 21, 1996)
 "what a joke! Ebonics.... Sheesh!" (December 23, 1996)

"This has to be the silliest thing that my black brothers and sisters have done yet."

"I think it be da dumbest thing I'd ever heard be." (December 23, 1996)

"... this is a joke. Why not use Pig-Latin?" (December 24, 1996)

"Ebonics is a terrible mistake and a complete waste of time." (December 26, 1996)

These comments, dripping with deprecation, are clearly far removed from the adulation that Brown, Baldwin, Morrison, and Jordan had heaped on the African American vernacular in earlier decades. As another example of how much things had turned around, listen to the following incident, which Graylen Todd Graham, a black graduate student at a university in Tennessee, shared with me recently:

I am still in the Ebonics fight. I belong to an African-American male book club here in Nashville. There are a lot of professional black men who attend these meetings. In our last meeting, we discovered that only two guys read the book of the month. So we decided just to sit around talking.

One of the guys just came out with the statement that he did not think Ebonics was part of our culture.... Then another guy stated that if Ebonics is a part of our culture, then it was an ignorant part that we need to let go of.... When I stated that I... supported and respected Ebonics, the room went wild. One of the two brothers who were against Ebonics, blurted out, "I can't believe you!" There was an adjunct professor from Vanderbilt who supported me. All in all, a lot of the men had a lot of legit questions they had been dying to ask.

Anyway, the two guys who were totally against Ebonics got really ugly. One guy (who... is always asking me to help edit his work so that the whites will stay off his back) stated that when he first met me he assumed I was very ignorant because of the way I talk. He was trying to use the... example to point out to the rest of the group how white people viewed Ebonics speakers and why our culture should let go of Ebonics. Anyway, the brother in the group had my back and stated the remark was uncalled for. I even held my own and went on educating the brothers. Then at the end the other brother was so upset that he blurted out that there was a boy in his class who sleeps most of the time during class and when he did speak, he spoke Ebonics. This brother went on to say that this boy is an embarrassment to him. He also stated that he felt that he would label "the boy's lazy posture" as also being part of Ebonics. He directed the comment to me.

Afterward, a lot of guys came up to me to inform me that they respected and supported my position on Ebonics. Anyway, out in the parking lot, one of the guys (who was against my position on Ebonics) tried to start a fight with me. I simply asked him to get out of my face because I did not have time to raise anybody else's kids. I was mad that the brother had the nerve to come up on me like that. One of the guys (whom I was having a serious conversation with and who was also in support of my position on Ebonics) jumped in between us. The security guards, who had been watching us, came out to show themselves. You know how they get when

they get a lot of black males in one place. Needless to say, we did not throw down, even though I really wanted to wipe the floor with that dude.

This readiness to castigate and even fight about AAVE (African-American Vernacular English) at the end of the 1990s seems a far cry from the AAVE lovefest that Brown, Baldwin, Morrison, Jordan, and others had manifested in earlier decades. Why the about-face? What had happened to transform "Spoken Soul," in the interim, from an object of praise to an object of ridicule?

Well for one thing, the frame of reference was different in earlier days. The Ebonics controversy that ignited in 1996 was clearly about the use of the vernacular in *school*, whereas the earlier commentaries were more about the expressive use of the vernacular in *literature* and informal settings. Several of the America Online respondents drew a sharp distinction between the appropriateness of Ebonics in casual and formal domains: "I feel like there is a time and place to speak in different dialects. When you are out with your friends you can speak in 'slang' but when it comes time to apply for jobs, apply to college, and things of that nature, you better know how to speak proper English" (December 23, 1996).

Moreover, the almost universal misconception that the Oakland School Board intended to teach and accept Ebonics rather than English in their classrooms (with Ebonics itself interpreted as "gansta rap" or "street slang") made matters worse. Most of the funning and fulminating about Ebonics stemmed from the mistaken belief that it was to *replace* Standard English as a medium of instruction and a target for success:

Teaching our teachers to teach our youth to speak EBONICS makes about as much sense as telling these children that once they learn to speak it they will now have to unlearn it so they can learn how to fit in as adults. What a waste. . . . (December 22, 1996)

if you[r] black students are told that it is all right to talk in slang and actually practice it . . . they will grow up with even more illiterate speech. (December 23, 1996)

The few positive responses on America Online stressed the fact that the Oakland School Board agreed with its detractors on the importance of learning Standard English and that they simply wished to use Ebonics as a means toward that larger goal:

I think the public should read past the headlines (sensational) to what is actually proposed by the school board. This is not a reinforcement or glorification of what are thought to be black ghetto patterns, but rather a teaching method to enable the student to translate his or her black ghetto language into the more common or "accepted" grammar commonly used in our country. It is primarily a learning tool. (December 20, 1996)

The posted summary misrepresents the position of the Oakland Schools. Teachers are not to teach or teach in Ebonics. They are to understand Ebonics as a distinct language in order to assist students to translate the "dialect" in which they were raised into Standard English. The goal is to facilitate the learning of standard English by empowering students to validate, yet distinguish, their "native" language from that of the majority culture. . . . Please note that I am a white middle-aged male . . . educator who has no links to the Oakland schools. (December 21, 1996)

Those who applauded the Oakland proposal were willing to accept the fact that many black children speak quite differently from their white classmates and that this way of speaking might be harnessed to steer them toward the speech of corporate success. The idea is not new, of course. And actually, it is inaccurate to suggest that critics have *always* bashed the vernacular whenever discussions surfaced about its presence in schools. Indeed, James Baldwin's praise-song for the vernacular was penned in the aftermath of the July 12, 1979, ruling by Michigan Supreme Court Justice Charles Joiner that the negative attitudes of Ann Arbor teachers toward the home language of their black students ("Black English") created a psychological barrier to their academic success.³ At the time, media accounts and public commentary revealed the avalanche of misunderstandings surrounding the case, for instance, nationally syndicated African-American columnist Carl Rowan (1979), writing the day before Justice Joiner's decision:

For a court to say that "black English" is a "foreign tongue" and require schools in Ann Arbor, Mich., or any place else to teach ghetto children in "black English" would be a tragedy. . . . What black children need is an end to this malarkey that tells them they can fail to learn grammar, fail to develop vocabularies, ignore syntax and embrace the mumbo-jumbo of ignorance—and dismiss it in the name of "black pride." (emphasis added)

Of course, no one had proposed teaching children in 'black English,' or telling them that they could ignore syntax and vocabulary. But the anxieties surfaced nevertheless. By contrast, Vernon E. Jordan, Jr. (1979), then president of the Urban League (and yes, the same President Clinton chum who helped Monica Lewinsky land a job) got the story straight:

Black English became a barrier to learning not because of the children's use of it, but because teachers automatically assumed its use signified inferior intellectual intelligence, inability to learn or other negative connotations. . . . by focusing on the teachers, the judge made the right decision. Sensitizing teachers to Black English will equip them to communicate better with pupils who use the language in their daily lives. And it should help them to make better assessments of their students' ability to read and speak public English.

But even he went on to stress, lest anyone get ideas, that it would be "a big leap from that to advocate teaching Black English in the schools. That would be a big mistake."

The fear that affirming the vernacular involves teaching "bad" English instead of "good" English is not strictly an American obsession. Proposals by Caribbean linguists to take students' Creole English into account to improve the teaching of standard English—in Jamaica, Trinidad, and Guyana—have been similarly misinterpreted and condemned over the past 40 years as attempts to "settle" for Creole (or patois) instead of English.⁴ This despite the fact that—as in the United States—attempts to teach standard English that ignore or disparage the vernacular of the students have been notoriously unsuccessful. The con-fusion that always seems to mire such efforts is largely due to the disdain people around the world have for vernacular (or nonmainstream) language varieties and for the folk who speak them. We may recall

Professor Higgins's disparaging remarks to Eliza about her market vendor speech in the film *My Fair Lady* and how she rolled him with her pronunciation of "The train in Spain falls mainly on the plain." And Penelope Eckert (personal communication) recently reminded me that in France in the late 1970s, speakers of rural Breton dialects were derided for their dialect and forced to wear wooden shoes around their necks in school as a badge of shame. Speakers of so-called prestige varieties (the languages of political and social clout) are most prone to such disdain, but those whose linguistic and social status are themselves insecure—for instance, the lower middle class in New York City—also harbor similar hostilities and anxieties.⁵ These attitudes are often transmitted to and adopted by people who speak the vernacular vigorously or exclusively.

The Ebonics firestorm of the 1990s was ignited and fueled by a variety of elements, including the ambiguous wording of the resolutions, the media's voracious coverage, and ancient, class-based apprehensions and misunderstandings about the role of the vernacular in schools. But much of the kindling was also a product of the unique American climate that exists now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. For example, there is much more concern today for the *unity and uniformity* of America (see Arthur Schlesinger's [1991] 1998 popular book, *The Disuniting of America*)—and for emphasizing what we have in common as Americans, including English—than there was in the 1960s and 1970s, when ethnic, linguistic, and cultural pluralism had their heyday and everybody wanted to be "exotic" in one way or another. Just look at the rise in the number of residents who claimed a non-English mother tongue in the 1970 national census as compared to the 1960 census and the decline in that number between the 1970 and the 1980 censuses.⁶ That seesaw is an indication of several factors, including the rise and fall of cultural pluralism. The success that English-Only legislation has enjoyed at the state level in the 1980s and 1990s is further evidence that many Americans believe a shared identity should somehow be rooted and expressed in a common language, English. Many of those who thrashed Ebonics in Internet forums were concerned that the dialect would isolate African Americans and lead to further linguistic and social fragmentation:

There seems to be a movement with the cultural diversity, bilingualism, and quota-oriented affirmative action campaigns to balkanize the country and build walls between people and dissolve the concept of being an American. This Ebonics question will successfully keep a segment of the black community in ghetto mode. . . . A KKK [Ku Klux Klan] member would love it. (December 20, 1996)

The recognition of Ebonics only further marginalizes those that use this fractured slang. English as a language is one of the few things that binds us as a nation. (December 22, 1996)

This is such a crock considering that we are changing laws to make English the only language of America. (December 23, 1996)

One more way that the Black people of this country wish to put themselves into a special category. Try to get them to spell American first, and without a hyphen or the word African. It's separatism and racist. (December 23, 1996)

Significantly, these and other critiques of Ebonics were often couched in larger objections to bilingual education, affirmative action, and any measures that seemed to offer special "advantages" or consideration for ethnic minorities and women (despite the centuries of *disadvantage* and discrimination these groups have endured). Just a month before Oakland passed its Ebonics resolution, Californians had endorsed Proposition 209, outlawing affirmative action in education and employment. Residents of Orange County had also approved a measure eliminating bilingual education in their schools. And in June 1998, the electorate stood behind Proposition 227, which prohibited most forms of bilingual education statewide.⁷ Politicians in other states have been scrambling to draft and pass similar measures ever since, and similar legislation is under consideration at the federal level. This is the reactionary historical context in which the Ebonics fracas unfolded.

Truth be told, some of the antagonism Ebonics encountered in 1996 stemmed from pure, unadulterated racism:

Blacks can't compete with the high standards of whites so they must lower theirs to suit themselves. They will lower themselves out of existence. (December 22, 1996)

The joke is on the Black folks in America who are proving themselves to be the most self-destructive group of people in the history of the world. You pro-Ebonics clowns are determined to keep the minstrel show going for another hundred years. (December 23, 1996)

These stupid niggers are born in America. What else should they speak??? There's [sic] no excuse. Though its [sic] true, they talk in such broken english [sic] you can't understand what they are trying to say. Oakland is infested with niggers. (Niggers meaning the low-class, poor, stupid African American) . . . Blacks have the highest crime rate. . . . Blacks have the lowest grade avg in the world. Now they run english [sic] because of more stupidity. Pathetic [sic]. (December 26, 1996)

Even among African Americans, however, the 1990s saw internal divisions—by socioeconomic class, generation, and gender—grow more pronounced than they were in the 1960s. This accounts for some of the stinging criticism of Ebonics that originated "within the race." It's significant, for instance, that whereas the 1960s featured "The March on Washington"—a united protest by African Americans and others against racial and economic inequality, blacks in the 1990s found themselves participating in separate "Million Man" and "Million Woman" marches and two "Million Youth" marches that took place almost simultaneously in New York and Atlanta. Moreover, while the proportion of African Americans earning over \$100,000 (in 1989 dollars) tripled between 1969 and 1989 (from 0.3% to about 1% of all African-American households), the proportion earning below \$15,000 remained the same (about 43% of all African-American households), and their mean income actually dropped in the interim (from \$9,300 to \$8,520).⁸ When we recall that Ebonics pronunciation and grammar are used most frequently by poor and working-class African Americans, and that the comments from black America that made it onto the airwaves and internet exchanges came mainly from the middle- and upper-middle-class people, their deprecatory tone is far from perplexing.

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, freestyle' 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 dismally 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 shuck and jive, to sing, to rap, 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 chastise, to cuss, to act, to act 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.
3. For summaries of Justice Joiner's ruling, see the *New York Times*, Friday, July 13, 1979. The ruling itself is reprinted in Smitherman (1981).
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).

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INDEX

- AAVE. *See* African-American Vernacular English
- acquisition of a second dialect, 124–34, 143
- 'acts of identity' model, 162
- adolescents, 14, 24, 109, 121, 124, 170
- in Detroit, 109, 167, 170
- in England, 124–34
- and identity, 110, 167
- African-American Vernacular English. *See* African-American Vernacular English
- African-American Vernacular English, 12, 54–55, 57, 84, 198, 200
- divergence from white vernaculars 26, 164–66, 206
- features (*see* phonetic variables; syntactic variables)
- internet reactions to, 200–206
- in North Carolina, 12, 54–55, 57, 98–101
- and Oakland School Board decision, 199
- age, 121, 205–6
- age-grading, 109–10, 121–24
- and changes in phonetics over the lifespan, 122–24, 136–37
- and moribund dialects, 94–96
- as social category vs. indicator of change, 152
- and use of nonstandard features, 26, 94–96, 152
- Aggieiland, 69
- Andersen, H., 90, 94
- Angelou, M., 199
- Ann Arbor, 203
- Appalachia, 84, 86, 88–89, 91–92
- apparent-time data, 94, 121–24, 136–37
- assimilation, linguistic, 90, 199
- Bailey, G., 11–28, 74–77
- Baldwin, J., 199
- Bean, J., 74–75
- Becker, A. L., 49
- Belfast, 164–65, 170