

Why the DEA's embrace of Ebonics is lost in translation

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(AP Photo/Louis Lanzano)

When the headlines appeared this week that the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) had issued a request to hire up to nine linguists [proficient in Ebonics](#), it appeared it might be yet another cruel joke about the language of African-Americans. After all, [who can forget the onslaught](#) of racist "humor" and the angry vitriolic comments that circulated internationally after the ["Oakland Ebonics controversy"](#) a little over a decade ago.

The DEA may not have known the full ramifications of its decision to label the language of many African-Americans, "Ebonics," but we bet they know now. The word itself is a controversy. The truth is, very few people would have even realized that the DEA was hiring over two thousand linguistic experts fluent in over one hundred different language varieties had "Ebonics" not been on the list. But what is causing this uproar? What can we learn from this moment? What does this highlight about the relationships between language, race, and power in America? As a linguist and a legal scholar we hope to offer an analysis that will allow us to learn from this moment.

Linguistic Issues

The firestorm due to the DEA's request to hire experts in "Ebonics" highlights several educational, social, and linguistic ironies, each of which can help us understand issues of language and race in the United States and globally. First, from a linguistic perspective it is upsetting -- and quite frankly, frustrating -- that after decades of linguistic evidence and research trying to convince the larger public that the language variety of African-Americans (known by linguists as "African-American Language" or "African-American Vernacular English", AAVE) is systematic and rule-governed, the only people we have managed to convince is the DEA.

As evidenced by the spate of caustic, hateful responses on Internet websites, so many Americans continue to believe that the language variety of African-Americans is nothing but "substandard," a "bastardization of English," or "just plain ignorant." The irony here is, of course, that those who continue to make such comments are only highlighting their own ignorance about language, as these statements cannot be supported by scientific evidence, nor are they given any credence by the Linguistic Society of America. In fact, linguists note that such comments represent mere social judgments based in classist, racist views of black people (even if made by black folks themselves).

In the DEA's list of languages, it is both interesting and instructive that "Ebonics" falls right in between "Ebo," a Nigerian language often referred to as Igbo, and "English." What many do not know is that much of the distinctiveness of the language of African-Americans is due to the language contact situation created by slavery, where African languages (with Igbo being one of them) came into contact with European languages (in this case, English). The language variety developed in a unique manner due to centuries of de jure and de facto segregation and is now the most widely studied variety in the United States.

African-Americans continue to develop the language variety, as it has become an important symbol of ethnic identity, political solidarity, and cultural pride. What the uninformed refer to as a "bastardization of English" is actually not unlike the many varieties of Creole that have grown out of similar language contact situations around the world. In short, "Ebonics" which is the linguistic legacy of the African slave trade, decades of legal and social segregation, and the denial of formal education to generations of African-Americans. It is, in part, the linguistic result of white supremacist, state-sponsored oppression and neglect.

Legal Issues

The truth is that the language variety spoken by many African-Americans is distinct enough from Standard English to be terribly misinterpreted. It is of particular importance that it is understood to be a language and treated as such in the judicial system. African-Americans are grotesquely overrepresented at every stage in the criminal justice system. And African-Americans are the most likely Americans to be subject to crime of various sorts. The effectiveness of criminal investigations depends upon an ability to interpret evidence. Despite the fact that African American vernacular is often mimicked and is popular on the nation's airwaves, fluency in this language is not the norm.

And despite the fact that it is a language that is denigrated by being characterized as "broken" or "ignorant," it is in fact, a language and as such, any given person may or may not be competent in it. Not all African-Americans are fluent in it, and it is not exclusively spoken by African-Americans. Many of its speakers are also fluent in standard English and "switch codes" depending upon context and audience. Like any other language, it is learned and there are varying level of competence among speakers. AAVE remains a primary language in poor and working class African-American communities across the country. If our criminal justice system is to more effectively protect the residents of communities that are most likely to be the victims of crime, then knowledge of the languages spoken by perpetrators, witnesses, and victims is key.