Ebonics Essay, Research Paper

Ebonics, or Black English, was recently a controversial topic in the United States, when the Oakland School District school board attempted to classify ebonics as a completely different language from Standard American English (SAE). There was further controversy when the school board stated that ebonics was genetic. This report will explain Ebonics and its origin, as well as the Oakland school board case.

There are over 20 million blacks in the United States today. It is hard to tell exactly how many people speak Black English because it is not the language that all blacks in America speak, and also there are other races that speak Black English to some extent in certain areas of the country, mainly urban areas and in the South. In addition, white people, especially in urban and Southern areas, speak Black English to some extent. It is called Black English, nevertheless, because most of the people who employ it are African-American.

In America, most black children first learn Ebonics before SAE from their parents and their environment. Once they get to school though, some will encounter many types of problems because classes are taught in SAE. It is easier to adapt to the dialect or language your peers use so if they are taught in an area where many of the children use SAE, they will most likely adapt with few problems. Some blacks will speak in Ebonics at home and in many informal situations and then they will use Standard English when they are in situations that call for “proper” English.

There is a tendency for young black men to use Ebonics far more than older blacks. Black people nowadays use Black English more than the older generation because they feel more pride in their heritage and culture because of the equality movements back in the 60’s. There are still obviously people who think of Ebonics as inferior or improper English though. Ebonics is not improper or inferior, it is simply a variation on Standard English. It is clear that Ebonics has gained respect because it has a title other than “Negro Non Standard English” or “Negro Dialect”, the names that Black English were formerly know by . Black Americans have gained more respect in American society. Hopefully, Black English will also get the respect that it deserves. Next the origins of Black English, or Ebonics, will be explained.

Ebonics is a combination of West African languages and Standard American English. The West African languages were incorporated into the English language when Americans brought slaves from those areas. The slaves, while on plantations, would not be taught anything and usually they were mixed on purpose with slaves who spoke a different language so that they could not easily communicate and organize rebellion. The slaves improvised and created a pidgin language so that they could communicate with each other as well as their masters. The pidgin language became known as a plantation creole as the children of the people who started using it employed the pidgin language as their native language and added words and grammatical rules. Eventually, slaves were liberated and many blacks learned SAE. There are still many black people who use an evolved form of the plantation creole today, though it is called Ebonics. Now that the history of Ebonics has been explained, the following paragraphs will describe the distinct speech rules and grammatical patterns of Black English.

Black English is similar to Standard American English in many basic ways. However, there are variations in speech and grammar that make it such a unique language. Black English tends to be more “sung” than spoken. It is not sung as in spoken with a tune, though, there just tends to be more of a rhythmic pattern in speech. Another difference is that Ebonics is spoken more nasally than SAE. This is also a characteristic of African languages, so it is safe to say that this is where the nasal manner of speaking comes from. An example of nasal speaking would be the word head being pronounced as “hayd” in Black English or bed being pronounced as “bayd”. Other differences are the dropping of the l in words like sef (self) and switching the v to a b in hab (have) and the th to a d in dis (this). Many words that are commonly used today come from older Black English. Words such as jazz, jukebox, and mumbo jumbo are a few examples. Also, many modern slang terms are adopted into popular language from Black English. Some of these words are kicks (shoes) and slammer (jail) , as well as many more popular terms that are commonly used as slang.

The grammar rules for Black English are unconventional, but sometimes they are more convenient and make more sense than the SAE we use on a daily basis and learn in school. Some people argue that Black English doesn’t have any grammatical rules Some are not more or less convenient, they are just unique. In Black English, the linking verb, or copula, is often omitted. Instead of saying “He is going”, Ebonics rules will change the phrase to “He going.” Verb agreement is another tool that varies in Black English. In SAE, the verb agrees with the noun in a different way then it does in Black English. There is usually one verb for all subjects in Black English (example: SAE – I think, you think, he thinks, they think, we think. Black English – I think, you think, he think, we think, they think – all of the verbs are the same)

In the past tense, Black English does a few different things from SAE as well. In words that in SAE end with – ed, many times in Black English they do not have the – ed ending. (Example: In SAE- “He lived in New York” … in Black English – “He live in New York.” This can get confusing because this would be said the same in the past tense as it would be in the present tense.)

One of the most interesting variations in Black English is the changing of a – st, -sk or – sp to – ss. This would be like saying the word “mask” as “mass”. What makes this so unique is that they will then use every form of the verb this way. More than one mask would be “masses”, not “masks.”

After looking at the examples of Black English in the previous paragraphs, it is obvious that Black English certainly has its own system of speaking and that it isn’t just improper english or anything like that. Though some of the words and a few of the rules may be different from one area to the next, it certainly is true that there is a definite system in Ebonics. It is not possible for a language to function with grammar. But we have to be familiar with patterns and rules before deciding whether or not a language is substandard

Black English has come a long way from the days when the slaves started using it just for basic communication and it is proved itself strong. There are still many decisions for people to make when they decide to use this dialect in there personal lives, as well as in their public or professional lives. The educational system also must make decisions when it comes to using Black English.