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## **African American Language, Rhetoric, and Students' Writing: New Directions for SRTOL**

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**F**or the past few decades, composition researchers have devoted critical attention to studying the ways that African American students employ Africanized linguistic and rhetorical patterns successfully in expository writing situations. More recently, research has focused on the use of African-based rhetorical patterns (Gilyard and Richardson; Ball; Canagarajah), since the use of African American students' Ebonics-based syntactical features has declined over the past decades (Smitherman, "Black English"). As a teacher, scholar, and writing program administrator, I am interested in the extent to which African American students can employ African American linguistic phonological and syntactical features in different expository writing situations, since as the 1974 CCCC Students' Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL) suggests, African American students—and all other students—have the right to write in the "dialects of their nurture" or "whatever" linguist patterns that students bring with them into the classroom (CCCC, "Students' Right" 25). Thus, it

CCC 64:3 / FEBRUARY 2013

469

would seem that SRTOL would include the right for students to use their own languages in formal expository writing situations and to have successes in a writing class by doing so.

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choices about language practices in the composition classroom. To forward this argument, I offer a case study of how three African American students enrolled in a first-year writing course employ

Ebonics-based phonological and syntactical patterns across writing assignments, including those that also require students to compose multigenre essays.<sup>1</sup> By showing the different writing situations where African American students make purposeful and strategic language choices, I offer a classroom example of what SRTOL might look like in an academic writing context that engages students' writing in different academic rhetorical situations. Thus, I offer a research report of students' understanding and practice of their own languages when a supportive Afrocentric first-year writing curriculum is provided. I conclude the essay by offering examples of how students come to see learning about Ebonics as relevant to their literate lives.

### **African American Rhetoric, Syntax, Phonology, and Student Writing: Implications for SRTOL**

Despite the CCCC adoption of SRTOL in 1974, significant concerns remain for many composition teachers. In this essay, I take up two of these criticisms: the first questions the explicit goals of the resolution in relation to pedagogical practice; the second questions its explicit impact in relation to the complexities associated with specific racial groups, in particular students of color. In doing so, I hope to provide examples of how composition can affirm SRTOL, teach Standard English (SE), and demonstrate cultural relevance for students, using writing produced by African American students as an example.

On one hand, the resolution contends that students should have the right to write in their home languages or whatever languages with which they find their style in the composition classroom. On the other hand, the resolution does not suggest that students should not learn Standard English, although it does attempt to correct attitudes toward the mythic superiority of it. Even language scholars acknowledge the benefits associated with learning Standard English

(CCCC, “CCCC Statement”). The question then becomes how to affirm SRTOL and teach Standard English in the classroom. Specific pedagogical strategies for affirming SRTOL and teaching Standard English have been taken up more recently in composition (Gilyard and Richardson; Kinlock; Lovejoy, Fox, and Wills; Perryman-Clark, “Africanized”); however, many composition teachers still question the extent to which teachers are sufficiently equipped to affirm SRTOL and teach Standard English in the classroom, since there still remains limited research on the successes associated with affirming SRTOL (Ball and Lardner).

Another criticism questions the degree to which SRTOL clearly applies to the specific populations (ethnic minorities and working-class students, for example) for which it sought to advocate. For example, David Holmes charges, “while ‘The Students’ Right to Their Own Language’ made avant-garde contributions to race, language, culture, politics, and pedagogy, the document fell short of sufficiently complicating the links among race, language, and identity for peoples of color” (101). When SRTOL is applied to people of color, in particular to African Americans, Holmes asserts that this application runs the risk

of assuming that all African American speakers are speakers of Ebonics. It is also important to point out that although SRTOL often gets taken up in relation to African Americans’ uses of Ebonics, the

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idea that all students have the right to write in “the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style” suggests that SRTOL applies to a variety of racial, ethnic, and social class groups. Because the document can be broadly interpreted in relation to the groups most affected, for scholars like Holmes, it becomes less clear to what extent SRTOL specifically affects different populations, including but not limited to African Americans. In other words, it becomes less clear how the linguistic prejudice that the document seeks to end specifically translates to best practices that affect people of color, including African Americans in higher education.

When applied to African American students, affirming SRTOL in the classroom can contribute to student success in that classroom. In “Students’ Right to Possibility: Basic Writing and African American Rhetoric,” Keith Gilyard and Elaine Richardson studied the ways that African American students draw on African American rhetorical (AAR) patterns while meeting the requirements for their basic writing courses. Using SRTOL as a framework, Gilyard and Richardson begin with the following theory about SRTOL and pedagogical practice:

There was never a shortage of ideas about how SRTOL could be implemented beyond a liberal pluralist paradigm, just a shortage of empirical models. We offer one. In doing so we shift the terms of engagement somewhat; we extend the notion of “Students [sic] Right to Their Own Language” to a question of “Students’ Right to Possibility.” We acknowledge language rights at the outset, and this allows us to place our emphasis on the ways of knowing and becoming that our students exhibit—and that we help them exhibit—as they negotiate the structure of academic schooling. (39)

Gilyard and Richardson’s discussion emphasizes both a pedagogical and empirical model for those wanting to integrate SRTOL into practice. In their study, classroom research becomes the methodology for which the authors aim to apply SRTOL, while they also argue how an Afrocentric composition curriculum becomes possible through SRTOL. Further, a curriculum that is explicitly designed to affirm SRTOL is needed in order to demonstrate student success.

Gilyard and Richardson then describe and analyze their own study of fifty-two African American students enrolled in an Afrocentric basic writing curriculum. A panel of external researchers looked specifically at rhetorical practices and modes of Africanized discourse used in the student essays. Consistent with the findings from Smitherman’s 1994 study on high school students who took the NAEP (“Blacker the Berry”), Gilyard and Richardson found that African American students who employed more AAR strategies scored higher than those students who did not (45). As a result, Gilyard and Richardson concluded that AAR can serve as an opportunity for successfully applying SRTOL to classroom practices.

While Gilyard and Richardson focus on rhetorical patterns that were not syntactically or phonologically based, Elaine Richardson’s empirical work discusses how African American students learn about African American language and employ Ebonics syntactical language practices. Richardson’s quasi-experiment studied students’ prewriting and exit exams that addressed students’ attitudes toward Ebonics linguistic, literate, and rhetorical practices, whether students appropriated Ebonics syntax in their writing, and whether or not these attitudes or appropriations changed by the end of the semester. Richardson’s study also discusses how students work through an Afrocentric curriculum that draws on both African American teaching and written and oral practices. Richardson concludes that students’ fluency in producing academic writing was enhanced by creating an Afrocentric curricular approach to teaching composition and by allowing students to draw upon African-based practices to complete writing tasks. By the end of the study, nearly all of her students

wrote or said explicitly that they saw the value in learning and adapting African American linguistic, literate, and rhetorical practices in writing classrooms.

Although previous scholarship points to pedagogical successes when affirming SRTOL for students of color, some existing research continues to point to negative consequences associated with African American students who employ Ebonics syntactical and phonological features, thus suggesting that applications of SRTOL remain limited in pedagogical practice. In “Writing Differences in Teacher Performance Assessments: An Investigation of African American Language and Edited American English,” Michelle Szpara and E. Caroline Wylie study the written practices of African American students who completed the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) portfolio. They compared these styles with European American test takers. The study not only concluded that

African American test takers scored lower on the portfolio in comparison to European American students, but more importantly, the study revealed that while Ebonics syntactical patterns were used less frequently, African American test takers who employed Ebonics (what the researchers identify as “African American Language,” or “AAL”), were penalized more frequently for committing “errors” than those students who committed errors that more closely resembled the conventions of Standard English, and thus the African American students scored lower on the portfolio assessment. Szpara and Wylie argue:

Even at a minimal level, AAL usage holds potential to impact the reader and have the undesired effect of producing stigmatization of the writer (Mohamed 2002). Although a reader may attempt to overlook grammatical and syntactical features inconsistent with [Edited American English], the presence of such features may still cause the reader to devalue content (Santos 1988). (248)

The review of recent studies on African American student writers suggests a need to investigate to what extent Ebonics linguistic patterns can be used by African American students strategically and successfully in ways that affirm SRTOL and also provide opportunities for students to understand Standard English as one of many rhetorical strategies required for academic writing. If students truly have the right to their own languages, is it possible to employ

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the syntactical, morphological, or phonological conventions of their home languages in academic discourse, or is this right only designated for oral or informal discourse? If Ebonics be so good it's baad, why can't it be used in formal writing situations (Smitherman, "African American")? In short, previous studies on the use of Ebonics in academic writing situations provide conflicting evidence of the successes associated with African American student writers who employ their own language practices. These findings may further suggest that composition has not completely come to terms with how to affirm SRTOL in pedagogical practice.

### **African American Students and First-Year Writing: An Institutional Context**

In this essay, I use previous research on African American students' language practices to offer additional possibilities for affirming SRTOL in the classroom, using my own teacher-research as a contextual framework. I designed the first-year writing curriculum specifically for a theme-based racial and ethnic first-year writing course at a large midwestern university. The course, titled "Writing: The Ethnic and Racial Experience," was designed to focus on Ebonics-based linguistic and rhetorical practices used by African American speakers and writers and the scholars in the field of rhetoric and composition who write about them. Although I acknowledge the influence of Downs and Wardle's writing about writing movement in my curriculum (Perryman-Clark, "Toward a Pedagogy"), my curriculum was self-designed.

During the fall of 2008, I designed four major writing assignments that focused on the aforementioned topics of race and ethnicity.<sup>2</sup> These four assignments were also adapted to align with the institution's literacy-focused shared curriculum, which includes the following themed assignment sequence: a literacy autobiography; a cultural literacies assignment; a disciplinary literacies assignment, and a remix literacies assignment. For the literacy autobiography assignment, students composed a linguistic literacy autobiography that compares and contrasts their spoken and written language varieties at home and school, using Keith Gilyard's *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence* and Geneva Smitherman's "Introduction: From Ghetto Lady to Critical Linguist" as lenses.

For the cultural literacies assignment, students were required to construct an argument pertaining to how African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is appropriated or discussed in online and digital spaces. Students analyzed a

personal website, a popular culture website, and an academic website in order to understand how discussions or appropriations of Ebonics change or do not change depending on the website's mode, audience, and purpose. For the disciplinary literacies assignment, students consulted secondary sources that include books and academic journal articles published in rhetoric and composition scholarship to determine whether or how conversations about Ebonics have changed in the field over time in order to assess the state of Ebonics in rhetoric and composition scholarship. For the final assignment, students created a multigenre project where they took a theme from one of their previous major projects and composed a multigenre essay based on that theme.

Because I am interested in the ways African American students negotiate language practices successfully across writing situations, I focus on African American student writers in my fall 2008 first-year writing course. Specifically, I reference the works of three African American students' writing in the four major assignments; these students completed the course and granted consent to cite their work for publication in *College Composition and Communication*.<sup>3</sup> A pseudonym was requested by one participant in this study (Marquise); the other African American students chose to retain their first names: Candace and Jordan. Each participant in this study employed one or more phonological and syntactical patterns in written essay assignments. That is, each of the students used the phenomena of interest in this study in their writing.<sup>4</sup>

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### **Study Findings: Students' Africanized Phonological and Syntactical Patterns**

I include a discussion of Ebonics-based phonological patterns in African American students' writing because limited scholarship in rhetoric and composition directly analyzes the ways that African American students use Ebonics phonological patterns, and I contend that phonology is a necessary aspect of this rhetoric. Based on the students' texts analyzed in this study, African American students most commonly employed the following Ebonics-based phonological patterns:

- the absence of final consonants in sound clusters

- the initial voiced /th/ sound being pronounced as the /d/ sound
- the absence of the middle and final r
- the contraction of going to being pronounced as gon'
- the vowel i plus /ng/ sound being pronounced as /ang/ (Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin* 18–19)

In my analysis, I also focused on the following Ebonics syntactical features most commonly used by my students: the presence of zero copula ( $\emptyset$ ); the presence of the habitual *be* verb; the use of the third-person singular verb form; and the presence of double or multiple negation. By identifying and analyzing

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both phonological and syntactical features, I demonstrate the ways that African American students employ these features across writing assignments and contexts. Such a move illustrates sophisticated familiarity with these Ebonics-based features, in addition to students' ability to execute Ebonics patterns for different purposes. The purposes that students identify for executing particular Ebonics

phonological and syntactical patterns include examples when (1) students want to convey a specific cultural idea or phenomenon; (2) students want to define a word, phrase, or idea in Ebonics prior to translating its meaning into Standard English; (3) students want to provide an example of how they code-switch for certain communicative situations; or (4) students want to execute, identify, and analyze the genres they determine necessary for using Ebonics phonology and syntax.

### ***Uses of Ebonics Phonology and Syntax to Convey a Specific Cultural Idea or Phenomenon***

One example of the ways African American students make informed decisions about their language choices includes the ways that they use Ebonics phonological and syntactical patterns to help illustrate a specific point or idea. Such choices demonstrate the purposefulness associated with employing these patterns strategically. The following examples from Marquise's writing illustrate the ways in which students often use Ebonics phonological and syntactical



patterns to illustrate specific points and ideas. The assignments in which the patterns were used are provided and identified in parentheses.<sup>5</sup>

*“Why yall make it so hard to undastand my talkin,”* is what my grandfather always says when the younger family members tilt their heads, lost in confusion when having a conversation with him. (Literacy autobiography assignment)

The thing about that, people, whether it’s family or complete strangers, lack patience to analyze my unique form of speech. For example, I might use AAE pronunciations along with formal English, like when I speak to my mother, I may say, “momma, what sto’ do you be getting groceries from?” (Literacy autobiography assignment)

“U need to shut yo big head up befo’ I come do it 4 ya!” is something that my friend Kiara would tell me when I scold her excessive partying. (Cultural literacies assignment)

The world has become so standardized that even as I type, I am being criticized for my use of grammatical features (dis freakin’ spell check is irritatin’). (Disciplinary literacies assignment)

For example, if I were to write a statement once in Standard English (SE) and also in AAVE, which would the general audience respond to more quickly? The SE form of the statement without a doubt! Here is an example:

*We always be ova our grandma house, eatin’ up her food.*  
*We’re always over at our grandmother’s house, eating all her food.*  
 (Disciplinary literacies assignment)

These examples are used by Marquise across three different writing assignments. With each example, Marquise uses multiple Ebonics phonological patterns [e.g., “dis freakin spell check is irritatin’”; “We always be ova our grandma house”] (where the /ing/ is rendered as /in/ and the /o/ rendered as *a*); he also uses the habitual *be* verb [e.g., “what sto’ do you be gettin these groceries from?”]. In the last example, Marquise also employs a syntactical Ebonics-based pattern when using the habitual *be* verb but does so redundantly [e.g., “We always be ova our grandma house, eatin’ up her food”]. Because it is implied that the subject (in this case, *we*) is habitually over at grandma’s house, the word *always* is optional and therefore makes the sentence redundant. Instead, the sentence could simply say, “we be ova our grandma house.” However, Marquise is also correct in omitting the *s* from the word *grandma* to show possession.

Marquise also identifies the reason why the Ebonics forms of certain words and sentences are used in his literacy autobiography essay. Marquise uses Ebonics phonology to indicate how his grandparents sound and speak. Later in that essay, he contrasts his grandparents' speech with his own and how his cousins often make fun of this speech. Furthermore, Marquise uses Ebonics phonology and syntax to demonstrate how he talks in his home language with his mother, when writing "sto" and "you be gettin." What is also interesting is how Marquise similarly explains how he instant-messages with

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his friend in his cultural literacies essay when using the absence of final consonants [e.g., "U need to shut yo big head up befo' I come do it 4 ya!"]. The linguistic choices used in his disciplinary literacies essay are perhaps the most sophisticated and complex because Marquise does not merely write how some-

one would say or write *a* in Ebonics; instead, Marquise provides a critique of how Microsoft Word often autocorrects the spelling of certain words to make them consistent with Standard English (SE), when he deliberately intends for the word to be written in Ebonics. To illustrate this idea, Marquise includes in parenthesis, "dis freakin' spell check is irritatin'."

Another interesting strategy that helps readers see that his language choices are purposeful lies in his use of italics to emphasize the ways that language use compares and contrasts in different rhetorical situations. When he writes, "*Why yall make it so hard to undastand my talkin,*" he is contrasting the ways that his grandfather's speech differs from his and the younger children in his family who often use Standard English. When he writes, "*We always be ova our grandma house, eatin' up her food*" followed by "*We're always over at our grandmother's house, eating all her food,*" he not only contrasts the sentence in Ebonics with the one in Standard English, but he also reveals that he is critically aware of how audience expectations and linguistic attitudes affect the potential responses that become imposed upon readers. Marquise's ability to manipulate different Ebonics phonological and syntactical rules for specific purposes, and to explain these purposes in Standard English, shows knowledge and awareness of several of the structural patterns of Ebonics, in addition to an astute ability to execute these patterns in strategically determined contexts for specific purposes.

### ***Using Ebonics Phonology and Syntax to Define a Word, Phrase, or Idea***

On other occasions, African American students make purposeful decisions for using Ebonics to help explain or define a word, phrase, or idea. This practice was most often executed in students' literacy autobiographies. Because the first assignment asks students to identify the differences between their home and school languages, for Ebonics speakers who identify their home languages as different from Standard English, one might expect to find specific examples of these differences. Consequently, because this assignment also

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provides students with the option of conducting contrastive analysis of their home and school language varieties, many African American students provided sentences or phrases written in Ebonics prior to translating their meanings into Standard English. In this case, the students introduce a term, sentence, or phrase and then translate the meanings for those most familiar with the oral conventions associated with Standard English. Here is one example from Jordan that illustrates the relationship between translation and audience expectations:

*"Was good, cuz?"* was a popular phrase that was spoken amongst my classmates. I would usually answer back in a similar style saying: *"Not much. Sup witchu?"* This was not the preferred style for me, but I didn't want to be anymore of an outcast than I already was.

Like Marquise, Jordan also uses italics to emphasize examples of phrases in Ebonics, in addition to Ebonics syntax and phonology. The first phrase, *"Was good, cuz,"* means, "How are you doing," with *cuz* being short for *cousin*. (Now to be clear, the person need not be your actual cousin to be referred to as a *cuz*. This phrase derives from the Black fictive notion of family.<sup>6</sup>) The next term and sentences, *"Not much. Sup witchu,"* reflects Ebonics-based grammatical and phonological conventions. If we translate, *"sup witchu"* into SE, meaning "What is up with you," or "What's going on," we notice the absence of the *to be* verb, also known as the zero copula. With Jordan's example, however, he does not carry contrastive analysis out completely because no translation into Standard English is provided; nonetheless, his example illustrates how students understand the meanings of different terms, phrases, and sentences in Ebonics and Standard English. The fact that students provide words, phrases, or sentences in Ebonics demonstrates their ability to use Ebonics purposefully

as they translate their meanings in Standard English for readers less familiar with Ebonics varieties.

Like Marquise, Jordan is also conscious of how audience expectations dictate the choices that writers make when communicating in different genres and writing situations. As Jordan also indicates, he chose to respond in the Ebonics variation as opposed to Standard English because while he does not prefer it, he would be considered an outcast among peers if he did not use it.

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Such a point speaks significantly to the ways that communicators like Jordan make language decisions in relation to peer pressure. When Jordan enforces his right to write in “whatever” language pattern in which he finds his style, he is careful to acknowledge the potential consequences that inform his

language choices. A useful conversation about the pressures for students to adapt Standard English in academic writing while adapting alternative language varieties outside of the academy can add complexity to how language rights choices are often affected and contingent upon audience expectations.

### ***Use of Ebonics Phonology and Syntax to Illustrate Examples of Code-Switching***

Explicit examples of code-switching provide readers with another example of how African American students make purposefully informed decisions regarding their language choices to adopt Ebonics or Standard English. While in some cases students identified particular terms and sentences in Ebonics prior to explaining their meanings in Standard English, other students illustrate how they manipulate Ebonics or Standard English in both oral and written discourses by discussing code-switching in their literacy autobiographies. In other words, African and African American students consciously write how they speak and write in Ebonics for certain contexts and SE for other contexts. Consider three examples from Marquise, Candace, and Jordan that discuss African American students’ familiarity with and awareness of code-switching:

Marquise:

I guess it wasn’t one of my smart moments to assume that people have the inability to adapt. Now in my case, people believe that my speech is as formal as it can get, in which I use the exact forms of words, as if I’m an avid reader of Webster’s Dictionary. The thing about that, people, whether it’s family or complete strangers, lack patience to analyze my unique form of speech. For example, I might use

AAE pronunciations along with formal English, like when I speak to my mother, I may say, “momma, what sto’ you be getting groceries from?” That seems to occur naturally (Yet they say that I speak white . . . ok). The thing that I believe is the most funniest is how my brothers mock my speech, but it’s naturally being mixed into their own . . . To sum it up, I must say that Smitherman’s writings, as well as Redd and Schuster-Webb opened my eyes to how AAE can be considered as an official language.

Candace:

My mother explained to me that I had to learn to use my “business voice” on my essay or report that needed to be turned into a professor or teacher. She explained that my “business voice” had to sound like “white peoples voice” when I wrote papers, essays or even when speaking to people outside of my city. It wasn’t hard for me to figure out what “white people voice” sounded like. I could tell the difference because of where I lived . . . The way they spoke when my mother and I went shopping sounded a lot clearer and different than how people sounded in Detroit . . . My mother would use her “white peoples voice” when she was talking to my doctor, the salesman in Gross Pointe, even some of the bill collectors. I was impressed at how she would say, “Candace, get in here and do dees dishes now” but when the phone rang, she would say, “Hello. Johnson’s residence, Sharon speaking”. The passage in our “Reader for Writers” book hit right on the nose when Kieth Gilyard told how his mother was a “. . . bidalectal speaker, capable of producing Black Language and Standard English” (28). My mother was the master of that, and she often got her way when she did it.

Jordan:

If we take a step backward and look at the situation from a different standpoint we may see where issues may stem from this code switching. We’ve all seen comedy sketches that point out the one African American who works in the office building among his white coworkers. After a board meeting, everyone starts slapping high fives giving pats on the back and say encouraging things like “Good job” and “Way to go.” When the congratulations get to the lone African American in the office his coworkers switch to Ebonics and say things like “Dats what I’m talkin’ bout, brotha,” as if he doesn’t understand Standard English. Do you really think that the African American doesn’t understand Standard English? There’s a possibility that he speaks Standard English just as fluently as his coworkers. The same could be said to African Americans who switch from Ebonics to Standard English when they talk to their waiter or their boss. There’s a good possibility that they have an understanding of Ebonics and its rules of syntax. The delivery of the content probably doesn’t matter as long as the proper key words are in place.

What is quite interesting about each of the previous examples is not only these African American students’ ability to identify and understand the certain contexts that require Ebonics or Standard English, but also the ways that they

actually—and quite deliberately—code-switch in written discourse. These contexts are those that they choose to identify as appropriate or not. To be clear, the fact that students determine the contexts and situations that require them to code-switch is not intended to suggest for those contexts and situations when they choose not to use Ebonics, that Standard English is the only language variety appropriate for communication. Rather, the switching is the outcome of a strategic choice that is an indicator of a rhetoric at work. With the

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first example, Marquise writes, “momma, what sto’ you be getting groceries from,” in Ebonics prior to explaining how he code-switches and translates into SE. Candace similarly writes, “Candace, get in here and do dees dishes now” in Ebonics prior to explaining how her momma be switchin to her “business voice.” Jordan writes, “Dats what I’m talkin’ bout, brotha,” prior to explaining how this sentence is viewed appropriately or inappropriately depending on the context

and audience. Such a move offers a compelling example of how communicators must make critical decisions about which structural patterns they will follow when choosing the language most appropriate for communication. Further, these examples provide readers with a thorough accounting of how students enforce their language rights by acknowledging potential consequences and limits to language choices that are often contingent on audiences who make particular judgments about language use, and the fact that they can thoroughly and intelligently articulate the rhetorical situations that surround their language decisions provides readers with a metacognitive awareness of the cultural epistemologies that inform language usage.

### ***Use of Ebonics to Execute, Identify, and Analyze Ideas across the Different Genres and Rhetorical Situations***

In other cases, students specifically identify particular genres that they find necessary for making deliberate linguistic choices. In the following example, Marquise offers a different passage from his literacy autobiography of a conversation from an America Online Instant Messaging (AIM) text message conversation with a friend in order to demonstrate the differences between the way he writes at home and at school for his own literacy autobiography paper:

*Kiara DatDeal at 10:50pm September 30*

lol o wow . . . interestin lol  
im sure u can find sumbode in hubbard lol

*Marquise E at 10:52pm September 30*

oh thats mad funny . . like akers aint hood 2

*Kiara DatDeal at 10:53pm September 30*

lol it aint fa real fa real . . . but sumtimes i cant tell who live in hubbard and akers..  
we all b in both lol

*Marquise E at 10:58pm September 30*

yeah they kinda mellow ova there. did u go 2 the advantage? the other two was  
there . . .

*Kiara DatDeal at 10:59pm September 30*

naw i aint go . . i juss stayed in ma room watched a movie and fell asleep lol

*Marquise E at 11:01pm September 30*

i wish i could pass out like dat

*Kiara DatDeal at 11:13pm September 30*

Lol why u make it seem like i gotta sleepin problem or sumthin . . . shyt i aint go  
to sleep till dis mornin lol

*Marquise E at 11:18pm September 30*

naw, u put that image in my head . . . passin out walkin down the street

*Kiara DatDeal at 11:19pm September 30*

lol never . . . i b tired but not enough to pass out lol

In the previous excerpt, it is clear that for Marquise, his use of Ebonics in home environments consists primarily of phonological features, although a few examples of the Ebonics syntactical conventions are used. In the first line of his message, we notice the *in* (/In/) sound of the word, “interesting”; in other examples, he writes “sleepin,” “sumthin,” “passin,” and “walkin.” Marquise also makes use of the /d/ sound for voiced *th* sound with “dat” and substitutes the *a* sound with words like “ova,” “fa” (for), “gotta,” and “ma” (my). What we also notice with Marquise is the fact that he applies the *a* phonological rule to sounds to which that phonological rule does not generally apply in Ebonics (for example, in Ebonics *fo*’ would typically be the correct use of *for*). Perhaps this might suggest an example of hypercorrection, where the over-application of the Ebonics rule is applied to another Ebonics rule. Although final consonants are absent in Ebonics, the spelling of *fa* should be *fo* to be considered correct in Ebonics, since only the final consonant *r* is absent, and not the vowel *o*. We are typically accustomed to examples of hypercorrection from Ebonics-speaking students

when they over-apply a Standard English rule to other sentences written in SE. We also see a couple of examples of habitual *be* verb (Ebonics syntax) in the previous excerpt, where Marquise writes “we all b in both” and “i b tired but not enough to pass out.” Marquise’s examples are unique because while they make use of the habitual *be* verb, the spellings of *be* (“b”) are consistent with the conventions of text messaging/digital language. Thus, Marquise’s use of Ebonics phonological and syntactical patterns are complicated by the fact that he also employs linguistic patterns consistent with digital language, a finding that further demonstrates the linguistic varieties that Marquise is capable of using on multiple occasions.

Literacy autobiographies, however, are not the only contexts for which students demonstrate their ability to compare and contrast how the uses of specific Ebonics phonological and syntactical patterns depend upon certain rhetorical situations. Students also execute the following Ebonics phonological rules in their cultural literacies and disciplinary literacies essays: the absence of the final consonant, where *in’* or */In/* is used for *ing*; the absence of the middle and final *r*; the initial */th/* being rendered as */d/*; and the contraction of *going to* rendered as *gon’*. The fact that students are able to execute Ebonics phonological patterns across writing assignments demonstrates their ability to determine the writing contexts necessary for its usage. Additional examples of students’ execution of these patterns by Marquise include the following:

*Marquise:*

U need to shut yo big head up befo’ I come do it 4 ya. (Cultural literacies assignment)

*We always be ova our grandma house, eatin’ up her food.* (Disciplinary literacies assignment)

And I aint gon’ b surprised. (Cultural literacies assignment)

Naw dat ain’t a good look, fa real! (Disciplinary literacies assignment)

Marquise uses examples in his cultural literacies essay of how users employ Ebonics-based linguistic practices in digital environments, despite the fact that many websites continue to stigmatize and make fun of the language. For his disciplinary literacies example, Marquise first writes, “*We always be ova our grandma house, eatin’ up her food,*” in order to show how composition instructors can use contrastive analysis to promote language rights in the field. Marquise uses the final example, “Naw dat ain’t a good look, fa real,” as



a subtitle for one of the sections of his disciplinary literacies essay in order to support one of his claims about composition's hypocrisies in promoting language rights. With both cases, the writers use Ebonics to identify, interpret, or analyze language choices used by communicators both in digital and academic genres and writing situations.

Ebonics syntactical features were used minimally in students' cultural literacies and disciplinary literacies assignments. They include the third-person singular verb form and double or multiple negation. The following two examples from Jordan and Marquise are illustrative of those rules:

Third-Person Singular Verb

Jordan:

nearly everyone on KanYe West's blog use some form of AAVE's rhetorical or grammatical features that [...] reveal their racial affiliation. (Cultural literacies assignment)

Multiple Negation

Marquise:

Naw dat ain't a good look, fa real! (Disciplinary literacies assignment)

Although it is clear that Marquise's syntactical choices are deliberate, the same cannot be said of Jordan's since we don't know whether his conjugation of the verb *to use* is purposeful or a typographical error. Nonetheless, while Ebonics phonological and syntactical patterns were used across writing assignments, they were used most frequently in African American students' literacy autobiographies. Perhaps this was because the autobiography as a genre was most personal and familiar (since students were writing about themselves), and students felt most comfortable experimenting with such patterns in more familial contexts. One might also assume that students more consciously used Ebonics more in their literacy autobiographies because the writing prompt required that they compare and contrast their language practices. As a teacher-researcher, however, it is less surprising that students use Ebonics-based phonological and syntactical patterns least frequently in their disciplinary literacies essays, since they were required to engage with and cite numerous academic sources from scholars who typically do not employ such patterns. Marquise did, however, employ numerous AAR patterns in his disciplinary literacies assignment (Perryman-Clark, "Back"). This essay, however, focuses on phonological and syntactical patterns. From each of the examples offered in this section, I argue that students purposefully manipulate Ebonics phonology

and syntax in strategic ways because they provided valid justifications of the linguistic choices that the students employed (i.e., Jordan's example), and they used these justifications and determinations to make very specific decisions about how to employ Ebonics phonology and syntax in different genres and writing situations (i.e., Marquise's discussion of instant messaging).

Candace also demonstrates her ability to manipulate Ebonics, Standard English, and other varieties of English strategically in her final multigenre essay project. Candace doesn't explain the linguistic choices she proposes in

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her multigenre essay per se, but instead she strategically shifts her style back and forth between Ebonics and SE in the PowerPoint presentation she created for her final project. The theme of her project, titled "You, Me, & AAVE," was the appropriation of AAVE in mainstream culture. To convey this theme, Candace chose to compose a poem, an editorial comic advertisement, a

visual collage, and a diary entry in order to dispel myths and misconceptions about AAVE in mainstream culture. On the first PowerPoint slide, where she introduces her themes and genres to her audience, she chooses to use SE. When introducing and summarizing the genres on her slides she also uses SE. In her introduction to her personal diary entry, she writes:

I wrote my diary entry based on my personal feelings of how people perceive other people based on how they sound when they talk. I have also talked about how I feel when I feel misunderstood or when someone is using prejudice on me because of the color of my skin. I discussed certain instances where I was prejudice to someone because of their accent and because of their skin tone. At the end of the entry, I talk about how I learned to be acceptable to everyone and to think about what I say and to think before I act. I chose this piece because it shows how some people may think about those who don't speak in AAE, or who don't speak the way they do and how they feel about the situation. This was my perception of how I felt about my roommates. I am currently the only African American in my room, the other three are Caucasian.

In the previous excerpt, Candace associates speech with skin color in order to demonstrate the ways that Ebonics speakers are "misunderstood" and judged based on both. Although she obviously finds fault with this form of prejudice based on linguistic choices, she still chooses to explain this understanding in SE. Again, readers are confronted with common themes of audience expectations

and consequences when students weigh their language choices. Nonetheless, it is precisely this weighing and contemplating that helps students make informed decisions about their language practices in academic writing.

When the slides provide screen captures of her actual diary entries, entries that she chooses to display handwritten on notebook paper, Candace style-shifts back and forth between SE and Ebonics. In her first entry, “Go Green,” she writes the following:

Dear Diary,

I guess I state ain't Bad considering I see black people. Like Real talk from where I stay. I see nothing but Black people. I like the fact that I can talk how I want to, I mean, [...] with four white girls. Molly cool as me though. A little of me rubbin off on her. The other 2 are more like upscale boutique bougie females for real.

All of em from uptown close to the clans and stuff, even Molly. Molly's mother is from Detroit so I guess that's why her attitude changed. At first nobody talked to me (Scared Ill pull my gun out.) Maybe the “hood” in me showed . . . right. So anyways.

They sound like average white chicks . . .

The first entry immediately leads into the second, titled “Go Black”:

Like they appear to be white but they talk like they are one of me. Poor babies. They try so hard t be like me or black.

Times go on and I see more and more Crayola outa them . . .

That shit bothers me to all ends. I mean they automatically assume the worst outta me . . . but I neva . . . yea I did, white trash. But as time went on, the ignorance faded. The more they loosened up the more I seen out of them. To be honest they are normal. They never seen my kind before and they was just tryin to get a feel for me? I got white experience. I'm not gonna like though, they probably didn't talk to me because of how outgoing I was. I'm a city girl, theyre small time females. They expect urban outta me, not black. Sometimes my ignorance is ignorant.

The second entry is followed by the final one, titled, “Go White”:

One thing I hate though is that not all white people are like them. But whats funny is when I went to the south I notice everybody talked the same. Except for me and my Detroit goons (we got a national rep). We were the outcasts. They were the majority. The way they talked was sloppy! All that long ass unnecessary switching of them words. Then when they loud argue, I want to scream. Later that week as I found out they gave me the accent. The Dirty dirty.

→Damn it←

I actually liked it though. I wanted to keep the crap but couldn't . . . It came back to the D.

I guess I'm angry that people are prejudice anyways . . . I am, but not anymore. I actually want an accent and ignorance to fade away.

From these entries we see Candace's struggle with her own form and others' forms of racial and linguistic prejudices, a struggle that can possibly be explained by her understanding of audience responses to linguistic judgments. These entries reveal that linguistic prejudice isn't only an issue for non-Blacks who make judgments about the speech patterns of African Americans, but also African Americans who unfairly judge speakers based on other speakers' linguistic choices. One point that Candace wants to emphasize is the idea that we often make judgments about a person based on the way he or she speaks. As Leah Zuidema states:

Many of us feel free to make judgments about others because of the ways that they use language. We make assumptions based on ways that people speak and write, presuming to know about their intelligence, their competence, their motives and their morality (Wolfram, Adger & Christian, 1999). As [Vivian] Davis (2001) explained, we assume that because we know a little about how people speak or write that we also understand "what they wear, what they eat, how they feel about certain things including birth, death, family, marriage, and what they believe about the world and their place in it" (p. 1). (668)

Similar to Zuidema, I find that this is exactly the point that Candace conveys in her entries. From these entries we see the closely knit relationship between linguistic prejudice and overall judgments that people make about other people's identities. With the first entry, Candace reveals how White females made judgments based on her speech, particularly judgments that speak to the ways that African Americans have been stereotyped in mainstream culture. With the second entry, she continues to show the ways that White speakers negotiate their own negative attitudes toward Ebonics speakers all the while appropriating African American communicative patterns for their own use. This point speaks volumes to our understanding of the overall theme of her project that uncovers the ways that Ebonics is continually appropriated by nonnative Ebonics speakers in mainstream culture, despite its stigmatization. On one hand, people make negative assumptions about the language of African Americans, but on the other hand, we find evidence of its appropriation in mainstream culture (her collage and advertisements demonstrate ways

that general terms and phrases associated with Ebonics [e.g., Apple Bottoms] have become part of mainstream and popular culture). With the final diary entry, Candace also takes responsibility for the ways that linguistic prejudices continue to perpetuate mainstream culture by sharing her experiences with southern English speakers. While she admits her own prejudices, she attempts to reconcile them by acknowledging that they are in fact prejudices, and that a change in one's attitude is necessary.

Although this genre highlights significant knowledge about sociolinguistics and linguistic prejudice, Candace's linguistic choices are also noteworthy. She employs more Ebonics in the first entry than the latter two, although some Ebonics is used in each of these entries.

When she references the ways that White females judge her based on her skin color and the way that she speaks, she employs more Ebonics phonological features and syntax (e.g., "neva"; "A little bit of me rubbin off on her"). But when she references her own forms of linguistic prejudice, she uses

less Ebonics. Although her style still reflects a nonstandard variety of English in many cases, there are less Africanized phonological and syntactical patterns used. From Candace's work, then, we see quite extensively how the subject matter influences her linguistic choices. In other words, when she is being judged by how she talks, we see more appropriation of Ebonics. But when she is the one who judges other people based on their linguistic choices, we see less Ebonics. From Candace's work, we see quite effectively how she manipulates Ebonics phonological features and syntax quite eloquently and purposefully.

The fact that African American students make critical and conscious decisions—and even explain many of those decisions in the text of their compositions—provides considerable evidence of successful rhetorical awareness associated with different writing situations. Marquise identifies the appropriateness of Ebonics in digital texting, where parallels exist between the phonological features of Ebonics and digital texting language. Jordan is astute at articulating how purposeful decisions about language choices are strategically made. Candace's linguistic choices reflect her ability to employ the language patterns that she determines appropriate for the rhetorical situation and context. When Candace references Europeanized cultural contexts, she employs different varieties of English; when she references African American cultural

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contexts, she employs Ebonics phonology and syntax. In short, evidence of African American students' language decisions provides composition scholars with considerable evidence that students can make informed decisions about language in various rhetorical contexts and writing situations. When students possess the rhetorical tools necessary to make informed choices about language, they provide composition with an applied example of what it means to have a right to their own language.

### **Responses from Students: The Relevance of Ebonics in Their Literate Lives**

By the end of the course, African American students came to understand Ebonics in relation to their literate lives beyond the classroom, with Marquise and Candace providing specific examples of the relevance of learning about Ebonics in relation to their literate lives. As illustrated in previous analyses of the students' work, this relationship demonstrates students' sophisticated understandings of audience expectations; it also shows that students have come to understand the legitimacy of Ebonics as something that warrants persuasion for specific audiences. In Marquise's final multigenre essay topic proposal, readers are provided with an understanding of (1) how Ebonics becomes useful in relation to his literacy practices outside of the classroom, and (2) how the legitimacy of Ebonics linguistic patterns requires persuasion for specific audiences who might prefer Standard English:

Whoa . . . my last project in WRA 125! I finally see how fast paced college is. In this project, I plan to investigate further into the treatment of AAVE in modern day America. In the 1960's and 1970's, people were quick to dismiss the AAVE factor from American culture, especially academics. This project is to focus on AAVE/Composition Studies, but I believe that the culture of the dialect must first gain positive ground in the country, if not the world before introducing ideals of language equality in academia.

As P.A. Ramsey states in "Teaching the Teachers to Teach Black-Dialect Writers," "Dialects are simply different!" (Ramsey, *Teaching Black-Dialect*, 200) This couldn't be any closer to the truth, if you consider the principles that this country were built upon. We must embrace language variations much in the same way we have with ethnic backgrounds. Also, stereotypical assumptions must cease, breaking down the walls separating each dialect. No longer shall we consider one language better than the others. I believe that there is something from every language that all people use, standard or nonstandard. As Tiffany Jones explains in "You Done Lost Yo' Mind" by acknowledging the linguistic divide, many African Americans have been ostracized from their AAVE-using counterparts, for simply

following the grammatical “rules” set by the white academic world. She states, “Today Blacks are charged with dealing with a conflicted sense of identity in which speaking a particular vernacular can mean acceptance in one community and rejection by another.”(Jones, *You Done Lost Yo’ Mind*, 6)

I will be presenting four diverse genres of expressing how AAVE is being treated in the year 2008, in which readers, where they could assist in changing the views of non-dialect users. I have chosen these specific outlets to achieve this:

#### **Feature Story (Entertainment)**

In this genre, creativity flourishes. I plan to present AAVE as if it were a person, being hounded by the devilish paparazzi. It will blow up common misconceptions about AAVE and show how easily the public can spread these assumptions without performing their own background checks on the “individual.”

#### **Dialogue (two-person)**

Oh this is gon’ be mad funny, I swear! The idea of creating, no scratch that, recording and analyzing dialogue between two or more people shall introduce the audience to the main purpose of AAVE. It’ll be like puttin’ somebody on hip-hop. I can also prove that AAVE is not used intentionally, but is molded in most African Americans’ livelihoods.

#### **Resume (employment/internship)**

This will most likely be the most comparative example that I will showcase. I plan to create two resumes, one in Standard English and the other in AAVE. I may then ask for volunteers to review both documents and record their findings. Hopefully my findings shall be that my subjects can easily understand the AAVE version as quickly as the Standard English one.

#### **Visual Photography**

Something that I am extremely passionate about is photography, and I can finally show off my talent! What I plan to do with this category is capture the very essence of AAVE, whether from the past to the days we live now. Words, comics, graphics, among others will be grouped together displaying the ways AAVE has soaked through the culture cloth of African Americans.

The purposes of Marquise’s phonological use of Ebonics (e.g., “gon” and “puttin”) differ from previous examples illustrated in this essay. Instead of using Ebonics to define, illustrate, or provide examples of cultural phenomena and code-switching, Marquise’s uses of Ebonics function rhetorically as a form of persuasion. Because his topic proposal requires that he argue for the legitimacy of Ebonics (what he calls AAVE), he artfully blends Ebonics with Standard English to illustrate that Standard English is not superior. Marquise’s discussion here further provides readers with an understanding of his argument

(that Ebonics be legit) in relation to his interests outside of the classroom and how they speak to literacy. With this discussion, readers are provided with examples of Marquise's interests in hip-hop and photography, and how these interests intersect with literacy. With his dialogue, readers are provided with glimpses of how the recording of spoken texts in hip-hop function in relation to the composing process. With Marquise's photography, readers are informed of his interests in photography and how he uses visual literacy rhetorically to construct and develop his argument. Further, hip-hop becomes a theme and heuristic offering readers examples of how the legitimacy of Ebonics can be seen and recognized in popular culture.

Like Marquise, Candace also came to understand the legitimacy of Ebonics as relevant to literacy practice in the final reflection for her multigenre project. While Marquise understands this legitimacy and relevance in relation to his hobbies and interests outside the classroom, Candace understands this relevance in relation to her postsecondary and career aspirations:

I've come to the conclusion that there is no correct way to speak, but there is a correct way to present yourself. You wouldn't show up at dinner with the President in blue jeans, sandals and tank tops would you? So there is a time and place to speak a certain way. I'm not changing who I am as a person, but I am maturing and learning how to present myself the way a college student/future Criminal Justice professional should.

From this discussion, audience expectations continue to function as a common theme for the ways in which African American students come to understand and make language choices. For Candace, while acknowledging that there is no single correct way to communicate, there is an appropriate context that dictates the choices for which one chooses to adapt language, including those communicative contexts that are related to her postsecondary work and future profession in criminal justice. While one may or may not agree with Candace's interpretation of appropriate contexts for language choices, it is clear that Candace understands language choices and practices as something that requires negotiation in relation to the rhetorical situation, communicative context, and audience.

This essay presents evidence of how African American students successfully make linguistic choices that include Ebonics phonology and syntax and Standard English across writing assignments and genres. While I argue that students successfully make linguistic decisions according to specific genres,



what is a bit disconcerting is the fact that students were more likely to use Ebonics phonology and syntax when discussing oral-based and digital genres, genres where composition research has already determined the appropriateness of Ebonics when writing in those genres. Nonetheless, Ebonics phonology and syntax were still used in the disciplinary literacies assignment, the most scholarly assignment in the sequence, which may suggest that some progress is being made with regard to the struggle for language rights in expository writing contexts. Students' analyses also provide composition teachers with a compelling case for affirming SRTOL while teaching Standard English by equipping students with the skills necessary to make informed and purposeful linguistic decisions in expository writing contexts. Once we equip students with the skills to make informed, conscious decisions about language, we can begin thinking more critically about what it means for students to have the right to their own language.

**Nonetheless, Ebonics phonology and syntax were still used in the disciplinary literacies assignment, the most scholarly assignment in the sequence, which may suggest that some progress is being made with regard to the struggle for language rights in expository writing contexts.**

## Notes

1. These three students have agreed to IRB consent and have granted permission to use their work for publication in *College Composition and Communication*. Although six African American students have granted consent through IRB, they have not granted permission to use their work for publication in *CCC*.
2. For a detailed course syllabus, see Perryman-Clark, "Writing, Rhetoric and American Cultures."
3. Students were selected based on their self-identification as African American.
4. The findings from the African American students who granted permission to cite their work in *CCC* are consistent with those African American students who agreed to participate in the study but did not grant permission to cite work in *CCC*. Those whose work does not appear in *CCC* is featured in my dissertation, "Back to the Classroom: Afrocentricity and Teacher-Research in First-Year Writing."
5. On occasion, I italicize text that adds emphasis to the phonological or syntactical pattern being employed by the writers to support readers with identifying Ebonics-based phonological or syntactical patterns.
6. For an extended discussion of cousins, see Fordham.

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