

BLACK, BROWN, YELLOW, AND WHITE:
THE NEW FACES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH

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DEDICATION PAGE

Dedico este trabajo a mi mamá quien nunca tuvo la oportunidad de estudiar, solo la obligación de trabajar. Dejó su país cómodo y conocido, por éste ajeno e incómodo, para que yo pudiera llegar a ser “*algo más.*” Espero que lo lograré algún día.

I would also like to dedicate this work to all my young friends who died in the streets far before their times: Brian “Lil Sully” Sullivan, Adam Bautista, Shawn “Murf Dog” Murphy, and José “Chicken Bone” Antonio Villanueva; “I guess for me to come up, they had to pay the cost.”

One Last Goodbye at the Church

Lil’ Sully, Adam, Murf, and Chicken Bone
Everyday I live with hurt but I’m almost home
My friends, you got there first and you left me alone
One last goodbye at the church and you was gone

I’ve buried childhood peers, like brothers to me
Shed so many tears with their families
I hope my time is gettin near, Lord set me free
We’re gettin high and drinkin beer inside my wildest dreams

They ain’t never comin back
But through me they breathe
I’ve made a pact
They’ll live forever in my memories

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Joe Rizzy

PREFACE

Powerfully influential on our popular culture, spoken by a group widely distributed across the country, existing in an ever-challenging relationship with mainstream society, and adopted by an increasing number of members of other minority groups, Black English is the nonstandard dialect all Americans have the most immediate, edgy, and electric relationship with.

(McWhorter, 1998, p. 128)

Even though some people give you no respect
Be intelligent, when you put ‘em in check
‘Cause when you’re ignorant, you get treated that way
And when they throw you in jail, you got nuthin’ to say

So if you don’t listen, it’s not my fault
I’ll be gettin’ paid and you’ll be payin’ the cost
Sittin’ in a jail house runnin’ your mouth
While me and my people try to get out—the ghetto

“The Ghetto”
Too Short

Talkin’ Black

This thesis began, as I imagine most theses do, as a very formal and very orthodox research paper. While it continues to be this to a measurable extent, it has undergone a metamorphosis. In these pages I discuss the serious challenges faced in schools (as well as the setbacks endured inside their walls) by native-English speaking children of all cultures and creeds, who speak forms of English other than Standard English (hereafter SE) in their homes and with their family and friends. I then contrast these challenges with the stark advantages enjoyed by children who, due likely to their inherited socio-economic class, make regular use of SE inside their residences and with their peers and relations. One non-standard dialect of English found in widespread use

by young boys and girls in the United States is African American English (hereafter AAE).

Because success in U.S. schools depends heavily on students' production and comprehension of SE, those youngsters who already employ SE as their principal language are at an immediate educational advantage, one that is, by default, not afforded to children who as a rule speak a dialect/language other than SE, such as AAE. Within these pages you will find an official statement made by the TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) Executive Committee that soundly validates African American English as a true, rule-governed linguistic system, and thus a language. I also discuss my view that to devalue a child's language in school, by not validating it as true, operative speech—"Don't talk that way, that's wrong!"—is, in essence, to devalue the whole child. It is an act that will be perceived negatively and reacted to negatively by most children. In addition to these issues, I discuss the prevalence of AAE in American society at large, as well as its prevalent use by non-African American youth.

Understanding these last two points is key in understanding the broader scope of the issues at hand. The fact that many features, vocabulary, and even some of the accompanying physicality of AAE speech have made their way into mainstream America has removed much of the stigma that was once attached to it. AAE has become empowered by its marketability and its regular appearances on MTV, in blockbuster movies, and on popular TV shows. AAE also possesses, and its authentic speaker is also immediately perceived as having, a certain toughness, a streetwise vibe, and a kind of "knowing coolness" that all blend together to say, "Don't mess with me." This has made AAE attractive to more youths and more youths are willingly adopting it. This in turn

has a direct impact on the language of schools because everyday a greater number of students are employing characteristics of a language that is not spoken by most elementary or middle school teachers. Compounding the issue is the fact that these students are of all cultures and nationalities. The appeal of AAE has proved to be colorblind and it has reached and been welcomed by children of all races.

I made sure above to say that an *authentic* speaker of AAE would be perceived as having “a certain toughness.” However, if the speaker is not authentic in his delivery of AAE he reaps none of the benefits of its use. Because of its inherent toughness, and the implied connection its use has to the working class, the black community, and to the streets, non-native AAE immediately ousts the speaker not simply (or innocently) as a language learner, but as a wannabe and a fake. Given this, forced AAE speech could spark a physical confrontation, especially among strangers. Forced AAE speech never results in the help of a kind stranger. And the only way to learn AAE effectively and genuinely is through immersion.

Many individuals, myself included, purposely and purposefully seek contact with and exposure to AAE in order to one day be able to use it authentically and enjoy the strong identity that comes along with it. One word that symbolizes, more than any other, authentic membership in the AAE speech community is “nigga” and its various incarnations. I do not think it is necessary for me to say why this word, in particular, could be dangerous to mishandle in the wrong company but it is not a taboo term for all. I focus on the word “nigga” throughout this thesis because while it is a troublesome word with a nasty history it is a very common and defining term used in myriad ways and connotations today in AAE. “Nigga” also serves as an identity marker for its user.

Anyone who can use it confidently in the company of others who regularly employ it would immediately be granted quite a sound degree of street credibility. It may be used purposely and strategically to make others aware of one's comfort with the streets. Given the inflammatory nature of the word nigga and even more so of "nigger," I have discussed, at length, their peculiar usage in the body of the paper as well as in my interviews.

Many accomplished authors such as Geneva Smitherman, Michael Eric Dyson, the father and son team of John Russell Rickford and Russell John Rickford, and John McWhorter have dealt with AAE in the black community, but the use of AAE either outside of the black community or by non African Americans remains largely unexplored. Realizing this, and because the use of AAE outside of the black community, in my community!, has always fascinated me, I began to explore this specific and uncommon use of AAE through conducting interviews with several of my childhood peers and several of the younger "homies" from our neighborhood (Page numbers following interview snippets, throughout the paper, refer to the pages in the "Appendices" section where that portion of the interview can be found. The complete transcriptions of all interviews conducted begin on page 84). Nearly all of my childhood peers make use of at least some AAE characteristics in their speech. One biracial man of about 23 years, known in "the hood" as Scruff, offered some very interesting commentary during a group interview that he took part in. Asked about whom he thought could use the word "nigga" inoffensively, and why, he had this to say:

Scruff: It's the way you present yo'self, my nigga, to another nigga, you feel me? If you present yourself, nigga... as like a real nigga [inaudible] and if it's a square, if you's a square and the muthafucka walk up to a black person and's like, "Wassup my nigga?" (this is said in an artificially high voice) you know. They gon' be like, "Nigga, who the fuck is you? You got me fucked up, nigga. You ain't a part of the game. You ain't a part of this street." [But] If you part of the street you could come any way you want to (p. 108).

Nick, a young Latin American man of about 21 years, and Gill, a young Chinese man of about the same age, saw the issue in much the same way as Scruff had, but did not elaborate quite as nicely. They had this to say:

Nick: Alright, when you're from the hood and niggas know you're *really* from the hood, you a neighborhood nigga [and that makes it okay to say it] (p. 106).

Gill: If it's a cool ass nigga, then you know, that's my nigga. That's my nigga right there (p. 106).

Using these interviews as my momentum, I tell here a linguistic story about growing up on the streets of San Francisco's Excelsior District. Although I *have* indeed spent time on scholarly issues relating to marginalized languages and students, the focus of this thesis, along with its look and feel, has shifted more towards that of an autobiographical linguistic memoir in which I recount, reflect upon, and discuss my own peculiar and interesting language experiences and exposures, as far back as my memory will allow. This reworking took place due to that fact that as I got into this project and the research that went along with it, I began to ponder and reflect upon my own experiences with language, as well as those of my peers, and I realized that there were

some incredibly interesting features of our language use that I should write about. Again, several of my childhood peers, with whom I have shared many memorable and colorful language exchanges, have allowed me to enlist their help and have sat for some often lengthy, but always resonating, interviews. I have woven snippets of these interviews into the anecdotes of my own personal language use, as well as into the research that I have compiled. All of the interviews that I conducted, in their entirety (as I said above), are included at the end of this thesis in the “Appendices” (p. 84).

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INTRODUCTION – MY STORY

When I was young, I went looking for nightfall, slums, and misery. Now,
I wait for the morning, the centro, and peace.

Jorge Luis Borges

More bodies bein' buried, I'm losin' my homies in a hurry
They're relocatin' to the cemetery
Got me worried, stressin', my vision's blurry
The question is, "Will I live?" No one in the world loves me!
I'm headed for danger; don't trust strangers
Put one in the chamber whenever I'm feelin' this anger

"Me Against the World"
Tupac Shakur

Me and All My Childhood Peers

My childhood peers and I, as well as several other young men (ranging in age from 19 to 28) with whom I conducted interviews, were born and raised in an urban, inner-city enclave in San Francisco known as The Excelsior District. All of us went to inner-city San Francisco schools, some public and some private, and spoke English as our first language. None of us speak English with any detectable "foreign" accent. This is to say that none of us speak English with a typical (and unfortunately stereotypical) "Spanish" or "Asian" accent, for example. The interviews will show a range of language use from one that is completely saturated with AAE characteristics:

Scruff: If you from the street, right, you gonna recognize a street person, my nigga. Now, if it's another-ass nigga, or a square or whatever you call it, nerd, whatever you want to call it, go and walk up to you and go, "I feel you my nigga, woo, woo, woo." They gonna be like, "Nigga, hold on, blood, you ain't, you can't say that my nigga. What the fuck is you tryin to say?" It's all your personal attitude and the way you come at niggas and the way you swing (p. 108).

to one that is clearly, and all but exclusively Standard English:

Ron: But it's still English, it's just a different dialect of English. Some words that they use there... [For example] If you go to England, instead of saying, "I'm getting on the elevator," they wouldn't know what you were talking about. You gotta say, "I'm getting on the lift." Or something like that, that's English, *true* English (p. 112).

Another characteristic of our speech that will quickly become evident is the quick wit and sense of humor employed. In these next examples, Bert, who I have known since the eighth grade, demonstrates this. I have always considered him one of the best speakers in the neighborhood.

Joe: So your mom is white, right?

Bert: Italian. 100% Italian, on both sides.

J: Oh, your mom's Italian?! So you ain't white at all! (Bert has often claimed he was half-white and was always very opposed to anything that was closer to black, such as Latin American. His next comment is a rarity.)

B: Well, no I'm Latin all the way...Latin language.

J: Black? Did you say black? (I'm purposely ribbing him here).

B: No, I said I'm Latin. I'm only black from the waist down [both laughing hysterically] (p. 100).

J: Do you consider yourself a gifted speaker?

B: Not really...an average speaker.

J: Even on this level? Even on the street level, you know what I mean?

B: Yeah, personally, you know, it hasn't took me over the top and it hasn't buried me neither [both laughing] (p. 96).

My subjects have been asked to discuss situations in which they, for whatever reason, were made aware of their distinctive language use. In addition this, subjects were also asked to reflect on what they remember about how SE was taught, or was attempted to be taught, to them as youths, and if they were ever made to feel like their dialect was “wrong” or “inappropriate” in any way. Throughout the thesis, I have included samplings from my own “linguistic autobiography” that serve to trace and examine my own language use and development. I have discussed the influences that I believe caused, or rather, allowed, me to pursue the development of SE to a level that made it possible for me to achieve advanced education while the vast majority of my peers did not pursue formal education beyond high school.

This thesis aims to give a rationale for developing more effective programs for teaching SE to students of lower-income families, families that often do not employ SE. It is hoped this study will help facilitate a shift in the thinking behind how to go about reaching this class of students who needs it the most. Secondly, it is hoped this study will help facilitate a shift in the attitude towards these students from one in which they are marginalized and seen as inferior to their Standard-English-speaking counterparts to one in which their culture and language is appreciated and they are seen as just as worthy of respect and reward.

MY STORY – THE STREETS OF SAN FRANCISCO

San Francisco, California, is where I call home
Specifically, in the Excelsior, is where I roam
Where streets like Naples and France cross Paris and Rome
Where through the neighborhood drama and the nights I shone

I lost a lotta dear friends to guns, drugs, and violence
And though we witness the crimes, we never break the silence
And everybody's talkin' change but there ain't nobody tryin'
Just saw another young mother left alone and cryin'

But I learned so very much from all the friends I've lost
I guess for me to come up, they had to pay the cost
And we were all young thugs, but we couldn't all be boss
And we all got on drugs, but we didn't all get off

I said, don't say—sshh—another word
Another day—uhh—is never sure
Just let me play, act immature
And keep my spirits raised, forever upward
(Repeat)

And there was so much drama with which we all had to cope
The weed, the drink, the crack, the coke
The guns, the knives, the smog, the smoke
The thieves, fiends, friends, and foes

The death, the AIDS, the overdose
The drive-bys—the bullets—fly by so close
The crooked cops, the villains, the gunshot wounds
I know my friends still feel me, from inside their tombs

I said, don't say—sshh—another word
Another day—uhh—is never sure
Just let me play, act immature
And keep my spirits raised, forever upward
(Repeat)

“Forever Upward”
Joe Vanegas

I remember when the world went crazy, back in 1985
I remember when rock cocaine used to be a rich man kind of high
Till one day in my neighborhood, muthafuckas started havin' fetti (money)
They was hangin' on the corner yellin', “Base rocks, nigga!”
Bumpin' Too Short, “Blow Job Betty”

“World Went Crazy”
E-40 & The Click

There's no escape from a deadly fate
And everyday there's a million Black bodies put away
I'm startin' to lose hope; it seems everybody's on dope
Mama told to leave 'cause she was broke

“Nothing 2 Lose”
Tupac Shakur

The Excelsior

In the section that follows I take the time to detail some of the hard-life experiences that were shared and beared by all of us who were trying to live and grow in the Excelsior as young people. I do this in order to set the context for our peculiar and quirky language use. You will see, through the following examples of the extreme violence that was present in our neighborhood, why a young person might have found it necessary or beneficial to adopt a “tongue” or dialect that carried with it this implied toughness or “hardness.” Any time one is able to diffuse a potentially violent situation with just some tough talk, and before having to actually risk bodily injury, it is a good thing.

San Francisco's Excelsior District has never been heralded as one of the premier or posh neighborhoods of this picturesque and world famous destination. Even with its impressive array of restaurants, bars, parks, and cultural offerings, the Excelsior District routinely and noticeably goes unmentioned on tourist maps and receives no visits from bus tours. It escapes the title “ghetto” only due to the fact that it is comprised mainly of single-family dwellings and sprawls over several square miles. It does not, though, manage to escape any of the negativity or “funk” that comes standard issue with an urban, inner-city ghetto.

The name “Excelsior” comes from Latin meaning “forever upward” and it used to be a befitting name for this historically Italian, working-class neighborhood that was once widely known as the “Outer Mission.” While the Excelsior remains working class, it is now, and has been during all of my life, primarily a Latin American neighborhood (though likely by an ever-slipping margin, as the presence of other ethnic groups continues to grow everyday and the toll of gentrification is felt). But it most definitely reflects the cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic melting pot that is San Francisco. This is where my friends and I grew up and learned “the game” which means, in essence, how to survive on the streets without getting hit by a bullet, hung out to dry in a jail cell, or hooked on dope, all while doing enough “dirt” and/or “hustlin’” to make quick cash here and there for new clothes and cars. Not all were successful at *the game* and fewer were able to make it their living. Many, though, enjoyed a surprising amount of fortune in their playing of “the game.” They bought cars, boats, and even homes, all while unemployed on paper. Some got married young, moved away, and left it all behind (the smart ones, some would say). Some went to jail for years. Some were adept enough to hit it while it was hot and get out before it got too hot. Some died trying. Some are still going.

I grew up just a few “houses” from the corner of Naples and Brazil in the heart and soul of the Excelsior neighborhood. Naples Street is six blocks up the hill from, and runs parallel to storied Mission Street, which is rumored to run south from San Francisco Bay to somewhere deep into México. I’ve taken it at least fifty miles south from San Francisco in my lifetime, to somewhere past San José and Stanford. It does, though, become “El Camino” as soon as it crosses the San Francisco/San Mateo County Line into

neighboring Daly City, which is just two or three miles from the Excelsior District. Brazil and Excelsior, Brazil to the south, run parallel to one another just a block apart.

The corner one block to the north from where I lived was “Naples and Excelsior” and this was where everything went down. This was where Don Chuy’s Taquería was (and still is), and where we ate nearly everyday. We would order “carne asada” super burritos, chicken tacos, “carnitas” sandwiches, or super nachos dripping with “crema” and guacamole, and then we would eat right outside while we held up the walls and laughed and dreamed. This was where we all came to get our messages, congregate, check-in, and checkout everything and everyone. Cars pulled up at random to do “donuts” and “hole shots” and pour gross amounts of thick, white smoke onto the crowd that screamed in delight, never considering for a moment that the “responsible, everyday” residents of the Excelsior might not enjoy our antics. On any given day standing on this conflicted corner you might see a heated argument between life-long friends, a fist fight between the same, a good-sized drug deal, someone who you have watched lose everything, someone who is unemployed driving a brand new car dressed up in super-sized chrome wheels, someone that you went to the first grade with, a gun, or a knife. Weed burns and beer is consumed continuously. This is a place where I have spent countless sun-shiny hours surrounded by the most hilarious, addicted, eclectic, confident, ignorant, insightful, ornery, welcoming, loud, insecure, racist, accepting, and violent group of people in the world. I have never in my life enjoyed and hated a place more than that corner: the corner of Naples and Excelsior. There is no greater ambivalence that exists in me. There has never been anything more delightful, fantastic, and exciting, and

never anything more grotesque, tasteless, and sad in my life, than hanging out on “Naples and Excelsior.”

Though today, in 2008, many houses in the Excelsior could easily fetch over a million dollars and none could be had for less than five hundred thousand, the streets of the Excelsior have seen more than their fair share of mayhem and terror. There is a reason they do not send any of the one million or more yearly tourists here. Many, many people I know have been shot and killed — actually targeted and murdered — in our neighborhood. There are several more that have been killed in other, less popular ways, like being stabbed in the neck or beaten with a bat. A certain few have brought death unto themselves through the abuse of one substance or another. And many have been left scarred or disfigured. I happen to sport a jagged scar on my left cheek from getting punched in the face with a broken bottle. I was watching a fistfight that was taking place in the street in front of a party. It was your basic, garden-variety fistfight by which I mean that no one was getting stomped or stabbed and it was mostly just some wrestling around in the street. A friend of mine was getting the upper hand and I was being an ass, being obnoxious and loud. One of the other guy’s friends wasn’t particularly pleased with my antics and he shut me up with the broken bottle. I got 18 stitches on the inside and 21 stitches on the outside of my cheek. I was eighteen. Some of my closest and dearest childhood friends are among the unlucky dead.

My devious little buddy Brian Sullivan, who was “Lil’ Sully” to the neighborhood and who was known for taking great pleasure in putting a swift foot in the ass of anyone who forgot to mind him and innocently bent over in front of him to pick something up, was shot and killed by a San Francisco police officer in 1993. He was 22. He died on the

roof of his parents' house after getting into a fight at Naples and Excelsior with another young man from the neighborhood. The two had been friends/known each other for at least ten years. Directly after the fight, that Brian had apparently gotten the worst of, he pedaled his mountain bike the two blocks down Excelsior to his house on Madrid Street, retrieved a sawed-off shotgun from a car in his garage (the shotgun was later found to be unloaded, but I understand, of course, that this is neither here nor there), wrapped it in a blanket, donned a bandolier, and returned to the corner on his bicycle, apparently to brandish the weapon and intimidate his new adversary. He arrived to find that his foe had left. Unfortunately for Brian, a neighbor had seen the weapon poking out from under the blanket and called the police. As Brian made his way back home the officer was already in pursuit. He hit Brian with his patrol car and sent him sprawling to the ground on Madrid Street just several houses from his own. Brian then got to his feet, retrieved the weapon, and went running for the safety of his house. The officer jumped from his vehicle in the middle of the street and opened fire, missing his target, but putting two bullet holes in the wooden sides of the stairs of Brian's home. Lil' Sully then opened his garage door, went in, closed the door and started to run the thirty foot length of his garage towards his backyard. While this was taking place, the policeman returned to his car and drove hurriedly to the front of the house. He got out and again opened fire, this time putting five bullet holes in a tight pattern, about waist-high, through the now closed garage door (the bullet holes remained in the garage door for years as a baleful reminder to all of us who loved him of the day Brian met his violent end; this reminds me of the farmer who ties dead squirrels to his fence to warn others of the imminent danger). The chase was not yet over. The cop opened the garage door and took yet another shot at

Brian, missing again, as Brian ran out of the back of the garage into the backyard. This relentless cop, “Officer Bill,” who we all knew and who had been hard on all of us while we tried to grow up on the tuff city streets (he had given me no fewer than eight tickets between the time I was 17 and 23), finally shot Brian as he climbed a ladder in his backyard leading to the roof of his house. The bullet entered Brian’s left buttock, seemingly harmless enough. But it traveled unobstructed through his torso and severed his aorta. He bled to death, while wearing handcuffs, lying there on the roof of his parent’s modest home. His mother was inside listening to the sirens coming. Officer Bill committed suicide years later.

My pretend little brother, Chicken Bone, yes, *Chicken Bone* (the story goes, he hollowed the marrow out of a drumstick, in county jail once, to use as a pipe with which to smoke crack out of — the nickname just stuck like Chuck), who grew up right across the street from me, was shot and killed just two blocks from his house and mine in a drive-by shooting performed from a motorcycle. We met when I moved to Naples Street at eleven years old. He was seven. The young men of the Excelsior had been having some kind of serious problems with those of the Mission District at the time and a pair on a motorcycle had recently made several runs through the neighborhood shooting at unsuspecting people, and even worse, people uninvolved with any neighborhood “goings ons.” They had already killed a 42-year-old family man in broad daylight, Zeke, who was working on a car in the street that day, and who had nothing to do with anything “neighborhood drama” related. During the same moments of terror in which that man was killed, another young neighborhood dude, Dre, maybe 21 at the time, took five bullets as he sought refuge underneath a car. The helmeted passenger on the motorcycle

had jumped off and given chase while his partner was killing Zeke and as Dre ran for cover. Dre had happened to be standing there, shooting the breeze with Zeke while Zeke worked on the car. Dre was able to slide underneath a car at the sidewalk side but his tenacious assailant rounded to the street side, crouched down, and let off five rounds at the underside of the car before making a mad dash back to the waiting motorcycle. Dre lived, somehow, and to this day can be found hanging out at Naples and Excelsior eating burritos, smoking weed, and laughing it up with the fellas. He will tell you the story and show you his scars if you ask him to.

The night that Chicken Bone died he was hanging out on the front stairs of a friend's house, having beers and shooting the breeze, when two helmeted people on a motorcycle stopped and asked for directions. In his usual kind and friendly way, he approached to help. They opened fire when he reached the bottom of the stairs and he was hit once in the back. He died on the street telling the young homies who were on the scene to tell his mom that he loved her. His given name was José Antonio Villanueva. He was 23. His parents had migrated to San Francisco from México to give their two children a better life. His younger sister's name is Laura and she is married and has a couple of kids now.

Before he died he had taught me one very key life lesson that is, to this day, expressed in me everyday and in every moment that I come into contact with other human beings and animals. That lesson was to treat all people the same regardless of anything at all, as, for example, their status in the arbitrary social hierarchy that we adamantly adhered to in the neighborhood. Though in retrospect it is perfectly apparent that he lived this way from the day I met him, *I* did not learn the lesson until one day

when he and I were walking down Mission Street. We heard someone call “Chicken Bone” and as we turned to look we saw a man who was literally lying on the sidewalk, filthy and drunk. *My* first impulse was to keep on walking and pay him no mind, but I turned to see Chicken Bone kneeling down right in front of him with both hands extended, grasping one of the man’s hands with his two and shaking it. I remember thinking to myself, “What the fuck is this guy doing?” But as I watched Chicken Bone interact with this utterly intoxicated, grimy man I noticed that there was no difference in how he spoke to him versus how he spoke to me, or any of the other fellas, or any other human being for that matter. He was smiling at him genuinely, listening to him intently, talking to him animatedly, and laughing heartily with him as he continued to grasp his hand, ignoring the filth and the stench. I could see clearly that he was being honest. I could see clearly that he considered this man a friend and truly cared about how he felt. And most importantly, I could see clearly that this down and out man *also* knew it. He knew it in his heart. He considered Chicken Bone a friend as well—a *true* friend. I don’t doubt for a second that Chicken Bone would have gone to the store for a couple of beers and then sat right there with him to talk, were it not for the fact that we were on our way somewhere. As we walked away (not having quite learned the lesson yet) I asked him, “What the fuck are you doin’ talkin’ to *that* guy for?” He looked at me, squinted his eyes, shrugged his shoulders, and said, “Blood (“blood” used this way is a very Northern Californian term of address meaning man, dude, friend, etc; Chicken Bone started nearly every sentence he spoke with an emphatic “Blood!”), we’re all just people. That could be *you* one day.” It almost was.

His death moved me to write a poem about him. When I read it now, eleven years after writing it in 1997, the words still resonate profoundly inside of me and I picture them dripping with feeling as if feelings were warm syrup.

CHICKEN BONE

Chicken bone where you at, and why'd you leave?
I know you're never comin' back
But I feel you watchin' me grieve – from where you're at
Forever changed is my life now – a slammed door
What a shame, what the price, for being poor

Prejudged by society – “He’s just a trouble makin’ kid!”
Our neighborhood died quietly ‘cause no one would give
But they don’t get the kind of pain you took, or all you went through
‘Cause Bill Clinton doesn’t look and wasn’t raised like you

A veteran of 23 summers, then you died young
But lived a life like no other you had a helluva run
I go by to see your mother, to try to comfort her some
I say, “Don’t cry for my brother, I’m sure heaven is fun.”

Then I walk into your room although it hurts inside
I close the door real slow and all alone I cry
Why did you leave me behind to live my life all alone?
Why’d my homie have to die? Rest in peace Chicken Bone!

I didn’t ask for the extra weight
But I pull it
My little homie died ten years ago today
He ate a bullet

(Pause)

Today, I swear I seen you standin’ there on Excelsior
Blowin’ school, learnin’ rules, but did they help ya?
Made your money in the streets and you never paid retail
You couldn’t’ve cared less about the Internet or email

You never had a job and never went to an interview
Everybody’s starin’ like it’s odd but we’d all love to live like you
I toughed it out at your funeral, had to witness you dead
Snuffed out, just a juvenile, but you’re alive in my head

There was nothing funny at the wake when your moms collapsed
Now it's a vision I can't shake, I've never felt so bad
It was all eyes to the floor, just like I thought
Another slammed door, another murderous plot

My clock is still runnin' though, I just had another birthday
Wait for me 'cause I'm comin' bro', and so I won't be afraid
We gon' kick it like before, and get high as a muthafucka
I miss you till I'm sore, goodbye little brother

Finally, another one of my best friends from my innermost circle, Shawn Murphy, affectionately known as “Murf Dog” in the neighborhood, died in a car wreck two blocks from his house, which is just two blocks off of Mission Street. His parents, Mr. and Mrs. Don and Patsy Murphy, as well as his brother, Shane, all of whom I continue to know and love, still live there to this day. Shawn’s death certificate likely says “automobile accident” but Shawn was a casualty of this nation’s crack epidemic of the late 80’s and early 90’s. All of us still living, who were growing up in the neighborhood during this time, without a doubt, should consider ourselves *survivors* of this nation’s crack epidemic of the late 80’s and early 90’s. Coming home late one night from a friend’s house that lived on the other side of The Bay, his 7-year-old daughter and his 7-month-old son in the car, Shawn fell asleep behind the wheel and smashed head-on into a gas pump at a service station just around the corner from his house. He reportedly had had his seatbelt on during the entire one-hour trip home and had only taken it off and forgotten to put it back on when he stopped to get food at a Burger King drive-through ten minutes before he crashed. He all but died on impact, the steering wheel and column crushing his chest. His toxicology data reported that his system contained “an acute level of cocaine.” For all those unaware, crack is made from cocaine. It is, in essence, purified, smokable cocaine.

Shawn had likely had little sleep for the preceding two to three days. He was a third generation union carpenter working for the same company, Plant Construction, that his grandfather, father, and uncle had worked for before him. His father, Don, who I have always and continue to address as Mr. Murphy, got me a job at Plant when I was 18. I worked for them for the next four years straight and then on and off around school, into my thirties. Shawn and I had gone to the same vocational high school in San Francisco, John A. O'Connell, and had both taken cabinetmaking there for four years. One day, only months after we had graduated, I was in front of his house on my dirt bike with my girlfriend of many years, Marcy, on the back. I was watching Shawn; already working for Plant (Shawn graduated from high school on a Friday and went to work as a union apprentice carpenter for Plant Construction, Saturday morning), he was unloading his tools when Mr. Murf heard me say to Marcy, "Fuck, I wish I could get a job in the carpenter's union like that." He turned to me and said, "You want a job, boy?" I said, "Hell yeah, Mr. Murf." "Will you take that goddamn earring outta your ear?" he asked. I took it out right there and then. He then looked at me and said, "Okay, I'll make a call tonight and you go to Plant's office tomorrow morning **at 7:00 am sharp** (punctuality is a huge theme in Mr. Murphy's life and to this day he will tell you that he was never late **not once** in the thirty plus years that he worked as a union carpenter; his favorite line to this effect is 'Son, a man is only as good as his word. If the man's word ain't worth a shit, the man ain't worth a shit. If you tell a man that you're gonna be there at 7:00 in the morning, be there at goddamn 7:00 in the morning! Not at 7:02 and not at 7:03. At 7:00 in the goddamn morning!'), and talk to Don Lenarduzzi. But son, I mean ya know, hey, I'll only go to the man for you once, if you muff that up, you're on your own." One of

the proudest things in my life is that I could still go to work for Plant Construction to this day if I wanted. I cannot, however, claim to have never been late to work. Shawn was 26 when he died. His children survived the accident though his son has dealt with learning and motor challenges as a result.

The crack epidemic of the late 80's and early 90's wasn't something that young people growing up in the Excelsior at the time got a chance to be educated about. It was not something that we got to watch on the news from the safety of our living room couches either. It just happened to us. It was just there one day. There was crack in our streets, crack in our schools, crack in our hands, crack in our weed, and then crack in our lungs before we knew anything about it, or, even more key, to fear and to respect it. The first time *I* saw crack, coincidentally, was during my junior year at John O'Connell, in my cabinetmaking class with Shawn at my side. The year was 1987. A mutual friend of ours, Carlos Brewster, who was African American and lived in a housing project not more than a mile from O'Connell, had one day brought these larger-than-softball sized, irregularly shaped clumps of this off-white mass to school and then to cabinetmaking class. He took them out and had them on one of our worktables, during class, along with huge wads of cash. I remember vividly how Shawn and I, having absolutely no idea what we were looking at, curiously examined these blobs of this unknown substance and how we basically "played" with these gobs on the table rolling them around and laughing at how they would wobble jerkily before coming to a halt. I can still imagine us handling and inspecting these clumps of crack like curious monkeys who had been given a foreign object. There was not, in our hearts nor in our minds, even a modicum of concern for the danger, desperation, and destruction that crack would come to cause in the Excelsior.

Carlos Brewster, along with his younger brother, I have heard, was shot and killed a few years after high school in the same housing projects in which they lived.

One of my best friends today, Tony Colón, who is seven years younger than me, was musing one day about the effects the crack epidemic had on my generation versus his, when he very insightfully remarked that my generation had simply “missed the education on it.” What he meant by this was that by the time *he* came of age, at 15, 16, and 17 (in the mid to late 1990’s), crack was already very much on the radar of anti-drug agencies and was the target of many anti-drug campaigns. When *I* was coming of age on the gritty streets of San Francisco proper, in my mid to late teens, crack was an unknown killer lurking. And this is why the ramifications were much worse for my generation. With Tony’s comment in mind, it is no coincidence that I can name only three or four homies/friends/acquaintances, my age, that I know to have ever tried heroin, and that I can name only about the same number, only about three or four, that I know to have *not* ever tried crack. We all benefited from the education on the old and dangerous drug, heroin, but my generation, as Tony so skillfully pointed out, had to learn about crack while on the job.

Back near the bottom of page six, I put “houses” in quotation marks because *my* house in the Excelsior was not a house. Though most of my friends’ parents owned their homes, we did not. From the time I was eleven until I turned 21 my mom, my sister (my mom’s mom, my *abuelita* lived with us there for two years until she passed away in 1983 when I was thirteen), and I lived in the top half of what is called a flat but which is actually a two-unit apartment. There were only two “bedrooms,” which meant I got my own due to my gender. My mom and my sister shared a bedroom. Before my abuelita

passed away, I can't remember what we did. I put "bedroom" in quotes because mine was not really a bedroom. It was a large closet with a small closet in it. It was maybe six and a half feet by seven feet. It was about the size of two twin mattresses laid side by side. So, with one twin bed in the room, I had just about enough room for another one, left to work with.

Now, although I'm confident that I have adequately set the context for our language use, "painted the backdrop," if you will, a large puzzle remains unsolved. How/why did my friends and I come to follow such different paths in our use of and attitudes toward English? In the following section I offer explanations and examples that will help shed light on this key question.

LANGUAGE & EDUCATION IN THE INNER CITY

When I was young, me and my mama had beef
17 years old, kicked out on the streets
Though back at the time I never thought I'd see her face
Ain't a woman alive that could take my mama's place

Suspended from school, scared to go home
I was a fool with the big boys breaking all the rules
Shed tears with my baby sister
Over the years we was poorer than the other little kids

“Dear Mama”
Tupac Shakur

So just peep the game and don't call it crap, 'cause to me, life is one hard rap
Even though my sister smoke crack cocaine
She was nine months pregnant, ain' nuthin' change
600 million on a football team and her baby died just like a dope fiend

“The Ghetto”
Too Short

Observe as I strike a nerve, reach out and touch my kind
Open up ya photo album, man, and I bet you'll find
Folks that passed away, partners that been blasted away
I miss you; spill some liquor, man. Who got some tissue?

“1-Luv”
E-40

Cultural Capital

In inner-city schools, as well as in schools all across the nation, children from lower income homes are finding that they have acquired less-than-sufficient *cultural capital* from their homes and are subsequently arriving on the academic scene under-prepared for its demands and expectations. These children in turn often fail to reach the higher levels of academic study and communicative competence necessary for social mobility and corporate opportunity. Even as they succeed in their own cultural communities they are marginalized, most often without their knowledge, due to their lack of familiarity with the ins and outs, the “rules of engagement,” if you will, of the upper classes. And there does exist a tension between the different kinds of success. Imagine the energy in a crowded bar filled with ten carpenters and plumbers and ten engineers and architects. There would likely be some one-upping going on and some uncomfortable people on either side. But both sides would sooth themselves with their own measure of success or worth. The construction workers would likely tout their masculinity while not mentioning their level of formal education. Their white-collar counterparts would likely do the opposite.

Cultural capital, an idea conceived and made popular by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, consists of the unique worlds of experience, influence, practice, and character in which a child is socialized and acculturated; worlds to which a child is exposed in and about the home, school, and playground on a regular basis while growing into a young adult (1973, p. 488). These interwoven worlds later frame and define the knowledge and experience base with which a child begins the transition into young adulthood. Through cultural capital a child learns, among other things, cultural practices,

modes of socialization, behavioral norms, background knowledge, and **modes of speaking and speech registers** (meaning spoken dialects; the emphasis and this clarification are mine) that are passed along from one generation to the next (McLaren, 1998, p. 205).

It would be difficult to argue against the fact that the dialect of English (i.e. SE, AAE, or British English) used in a child's home while she or he was growing up, the dialect in which a child is taught to communicate the first and most basic wants and needs, will inevitably become the one which that child employs at school, until a different dialect is taught and learned, should that be necessary. And this *is* necessary for a native speaker of AAE who wishes to enjoy the fruits of the professional business world, membership in Congress, or the like. Parker and Crist (1995) state this directly when they write, "non-standard English is a professional liability" (p. 5). They go on to say that, "Minority children have mastered the language into which they were born, knowing it perfectly when they enter the first grade. This language is *different, not inferior* to Standard English" (p. 10). Shane agrees with this sentiment and even states that this fact is precisely why use of AAE should not be seen as a negative trait or used to judge someone unfairly.

Shane: But see, they (society) can't be like that. You can't be like that though (meaning having a blanket negative view of AAE speakers), I mean like me or you, we already know you can't be like that because, like I said, you walk into a school in Frisco and all the kids talk like that, dude, all races. So it isn't, you know, it's moved on now, it could be anybody [speaking AAE]. You can't stereotype it to a hoodlum, or like a street person... (p. 113).

He also shared his view on how he thought Rap music was the beginning of the presence of AAE in all cultures:

S: Yeah, yeah, straight nigga niggas, right (by this he means black dudes). Then it worked in to the fuckin uh, into other races but like the drug dealer ring, all the drug dealers and shit started next, you know, that wasn't just black people, other people picked it up. And now it's just fuckin, you know, it's from rap music too. It all started with rap, right. And that's how it spread out through the other cultures. And now it's at the point, to where, like I said, you walk in a junior high or a high school in San Francisco and *all* the kids talk like that. So it isn't, so people still see, you know, they're used to back in the day it started like with all, if you wasn't a nigga you was a drug dealer or a bad person if you was talkin [like] that (p. 112).

Bert echoes Shane's theory in this comment:

B: At one time, yeah I believed there was a difference, but now, not really, because you got CEO's, you got movie stars using slang, more like "rapper" slang what they would use to rap. So, you know, now it's become more common for everybody to break away from the school taught proper English. Of course, everybody can speak the proper school type of English that you learn in school but everybody can speak the slang too. And it's more common as you watch the Academy Awards and you see people from whatever, the Hamptons, the richest places, Beverly Hills and they can break down. And Snoop Doggy "izzy fo shizzy fanizzy" and all that (p. 98).

The forces that make learning SE a must are rooted in the fact that SE is what is employed in the upper echelons of business and bureaucracy by mostly white speakers. This fact is not a problem for the children of upper-middle and upper-class parents (most often white, less often minority), who are fortunate enough to have the dialect of English most often used in their homes match the one required of them in school for academic success. It is a problem, however, for the children of lower-class individuals (most often minority, less often white) who tend to inherit from their homes a dialect that is deemed

inappropriate for academic applications and is often even devalued by academia. “Upper-class students, by virtue of a certain linguistic and cultural competence acquired through family upbringing, are provided with the means of appropriation for success in school” (MacLeod, 1987, p. 13). Basil Bernstein (1973), the British social theorist, has spoken of the differences in these two dialects (SE vs. AAE) as being a difference in the use of “elaborated and restricted linguistic codes” (p. 478), with restricted codes being employed most often in lower-class homes and elaborated codes being used in upper-class homes. He states that in restricted codes:

the intent of the other person can be taken for granted as the speech is played out against a back-drop of common assumptions, common history, common interests. As a result, there is less need to raise meanings to the level of explicitness or elaboration. There is a reduced need to make explicit through syntactic choices the logical structure of the communication. [In elaborated codes, on the other hand] The speech shows careful editing, at both the grammatical and lexical levels, it is no longer context tied. The meanings are explicit, elaborated and individualized (p. 478, 79).

What this means is that:

working-class children generally grow up in homes where common circumstances, knowledge, and values give rise to speech patterns in which meanings remain implicit and dependent on their context (a restricted code). Middle-class families, in contrast, use elaborated codes to express the unique perspective and experience of the speaker; meanings are less tied to a local relationship and local social structure and consequently are made linguistically explicit (MacLeod, 1987, p. 17).

In their introduction to *Power and Ideology in Education* Karabel and Halsey (1977) offer this eloquent summary of Bernstein’s theory:

Participation in working-class family and community life, in which social relations are based upon shared identifications, expectations, and

assumptions, tends to generate a “restricted code,” for the speaker who is sure that the listener can take his intentions for granted has little incentive to elaborate his meanings and make them explicit and specific. Middle-class culture, in contrast, tends to place the “I” over the “we,” and the resultant uncertainty that meanings will be intelligible to the listener forces the speaker to select among syntactic alternatives and to differentiate his vocabulary. The result is the development of an “elaborated code” oriented to the communication of highly individuated meanings (p. 63).

Other authors, Shirley Brice Heath, Geneva Smitherman, John Rickford, and Russell Rickford among others, have addressed these issues of disparity. What their work demonstrates is that those children who grow up in homes where the dialect of English used for daily communication purposes parallels the one demanded of them by schools, are more likely to succeed academically. Those children raised in homes where an academically unacceptable dialect is most often in use (usually children from families of lower-middle and lower socio-economic standings) tend to display difficulty in adapting to SE and subsequently fail to achieve on par with their wealthier counterparts. And this is not due solely to the fact that they have not learned SE satisfactorily. As the quote above explains, it is also because they have not learned that being flexible in their use of language, and shifting their use as context shifts, can be advantageous, and does not betray the “we,” or the group. Learning to shift identify in context is a cultural or practical aspect necessary to the decision making process of which dialect to use given some situation. This skill is most often learned (or not learned) in the home.

AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH

One way to get a real handle on the fact that there is nothing deficient in any way about Black English is to realize that just as one can be articulate in standard English, one can be articulate in Black English as well. . . . Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy are highly articulate speakers of Black English. Richard Pryor's old comedy albums are feasts of perfectly rendered phrases, stunning word choices, and masterful allusions—in Black English.

(McWhorter, 1998, 141-42)

I mean murderers. Do you hear me? Real live murderers. I thought Black people killed people by accident. No, these muthafuckas was murderers. I met one brutha, his name was Jay-Bo. Muthafucka lift weights, he was in charge. "Jay-Bo!" Muscles every muthafuckin' where. This muthafucka had muscles 'n... He was doin' a sentence: triple life! How in the fuck do you do triple life? I mean, that mean, if he die and come back, he got to go to da penitentiary. Right? They'll say, "Fuck kindergarten! Git yo lil' ol' ass back in the penitentiary, muthafucka. You know what you did last time you was here."

"Richard Pryor Live on The Sunset Strip"
Richard Pryor

One dialect found in widespread use in the U.S. today is variously referred to as "African American Vernacular English" (AAVE), "Black English" (BE), "Black English Vernacular" (BEV), or "African American English" (AAE). Throughout my research, and reading and writing on this topic my favorite acronym to refer to the dialect of English popular with youth of all flavors, but broadly associated with African Americans, has changed several times. In the end, I have become most comfortable with the last of the acronyms introduced here, (AAE). It is certainly one of the most widely used and will be the one I use throughout the remainder of this paper. Each and all of these terms,

however, have caused widespread misinterpretations about, not only their own meanings, but also about language at large.

Any of these acronyms spelled out could easily lead a layperson to believe one or both of the following statements:

1. African Americans are the sole speakers of AAE.
2. All African Americans speak or use AAE.

Neither of these statements is true.

In today's America, with its potpourri of cultures and ethnicities, school-aged children ever-searching for strong and individual identities, and the pervasiveness of Hip Hop culture, into all American culture, reaching an incredible level, neither of these statements could possibly be true. AAE is a dialect that is in use not only by African Americans, but also by Americans all across the United States and across all racial lines. Acclaimed author Geneva Smitherman (2000) speaks to this when she writes, "Black Language [is] emerging as the lingua franca of the working class" (p. 16). And we all know, of course, that African Americans are not the only members of the working class. H. Samy Alim (2006) noted, in his book, *Roc the Mic Right*, that not only Black males were using AAE and specifically the word "nigga," but that it was also used by "females of all ethnicities in the San Francisco Bay Area to refer to each other in much the same way that males do" (p. 78). He gave this example of a short conversation between a White female teenager and a Black one:

Black Female: Call me, nigga!

White Female: Yeah, nigga, you know wassup. I'ma call you (p. 78).

AAE can be heard and seen alive and well in the schoolyards, homes, hangouts, and on the street corners of urban youth; this means youth of all races who are being raised in the inner city, who are from lower-income households, and whose parents possibly are not college educated. But young American students are also being exposed to this dialect through pop-culture. Hip Hop music, most of which is heavily laden with AAE speech characteristics, has very much crossed-over into mainstream culture (in case you've been asleep for the past twenty or more years and *you don't really know wassup!*). AAE is everywhere and almost all of America, to some degree or another, is using it. And I say, "Why not?" It is a wonderfully expressive language full of creative and effective quips and catchphrases; *you know what I'm sayin?* As a matter of fact, *peep this out*, I'd like to challenge anyone reading this paper to tell me honestly that they would not know how and in what context to correctly use at least half of the following phrases: "Don't go there," "It's all good," "What it be like?," "Don't trip off that," "That's cool," "Why you trippin?," and finally, "I'm bout tah git me a fat sack so I kuh stack some papeh an' come up," (just having a little fun with you on this last one here). Now ask yourself in how many other languages you could use this many phrases.

But obviously, there is much more to speaking AAE than simply jazzing up your speech with a few phrases picked up from watching black sitcoms. "To be sure, lingo is one part—a vivid one—of Black English. However, the first thing we must understand is that the slang that African Americans use is just a sliver of what is meant by the term *Black English*" (McWhorter, 1998, p. 128). Authentic AAE speakers of all shades and shapes possess an essence palpable and unmistakable. In *Talkin and Testifyin*, Geneva Smitherman (1977) speaks of this when she writes, "Think of black speech as having two

dimensions: language and style” (p. 3). She goes on to say that the speech of AAE speakers “suggests a point of view, a way of looking at life, and a method of adapting to life’s realities” (p. 3). I know exactly what she means. As I said early on, language at large, and especially AAE, has intrigued me since long before I knew it had such an official name and had been studied and examined so extensively.

TESOL on AAE

Concerning the validity of AAE as a true rule-governed linguistic system, a predefined and known dialect, and not speech that is “simply sloppy and wrong,” or “evidence of carelessness and ignorance” (Fillmore, 1997, p. 1), the TESOL Executive Committee in March of 1997 released this statement intended to once and for all dispel that notion.

The Board of Directors of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) is committed to strengthening the effective teaching and learning of English around the world. Its mission is to develop professional expertise and foster effective communication in diverse settings while respecting individuals’ language rights.

In accordance with its Policy on Language Varieties (October 1996), TESOL affirms that the variety of English known as African American Vernacular English, Black English, Ebonics, and sometimes by other names has been shown through research to be a rule-governed linguistic system, with its own lexical, phonological, syntactic, and discourse patterns and, thus, deserves pedagogical recognition.

The Board notes that effective educational programs recognize and value the linguistic systems that children bring to school. These programs use these linguistic systems as an aid and resource to facilitate the acquisition of Standard American English. Research and experience have shown that children learn best if teachers respect the home language and use it as a bridge in teaching the language of the school and wider society. Likewise, if the children's cultural and social backgrounds are valued, their self-respect and self-confidence are affirmed and new learning is facilitated.

TESOL thus advocates that teacher education include instruction in linguistics and in developing partnerships between home and school.

Where languages are concerned, certainly anyone living in the U.S. for any amount of time today would say that the Spanish language is being spoken more and

more widely each day. Spanish though, is joined by many other languages spoken in the U.S. for which adjustments need be made. A review of the *U.S. English Foundation* website, at <http://www.us-english.org/foundation/issues/otherlang.asp>, would quickly corroborate my statement. It states, "According to 1990 U.S. Census Data, at least 329 languages are spoken in the United States." This is a seemingly endless list, with languages listed alphabetically from Afrikaans and Aztec, to Samoan and Spanish, and Yaqui to Yiddish. Certainly, with all of these distinct and varied languages come children who are equally distinct and varied.

Where dialects are concerned, the *American Dialects* website, at <http://www.evolpub.com/Americandialects/AmDialhome.html>, contains a page entitled *Linguistic Geography of the Mainland United States* that lists and describes eight dialect regions found in the United States. These eight sizable regions of land mass include sections such as western, upper Midwestern, mountain southern, and coastal southern and are surely meant to represent large sweeping areas where the populations share some common dialectal thread. These are most certainly not meant to represent the much smaller dialectal differences found in most states from city to city and, as often is the case in inner cities, even from neighborhood to neighborhood. This fact is evidenced by, for example, the generous grouping of states that make up the western region. In this region the states California, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, and Wyoming (amongst several others) are included. It is doubtful that anyone who has pondered this subject much at all would have to be told that a native Los Angeles, Californian will speak nothing like a native Rock Springs, Wyomingite. They will of course speak the same language; in this case English, and following a short period of acclimation should

find that communication proceeds with little difficulty. However, their distinct dialects are sure to call up a few smiles, giggles, and requests to repeat from one another.

Where, though, do languages end and dialects begin? Are they parallel or dimensional in quality? How can a language be distinguished from a dialect and vice-versa? Apparently these are questions that are so thoroughly vexing (as are the subsequently arising issues) they were enough to rock the Oakland, California School District to the core in December of 1996. While entangled in the “Ebonics” debate the district struggled to define these seemingly elemental words to no avail. Even Charles J. Fillmore (1997), professor of Linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley, who shared his insights in an effort to clarify the terribly muddled debate, felt it necessary to begin his comments with a disclaimer: “The words ‘dialect’ and ‘language’ are confusingly ambiguous. These are not precisely definable technical terms in linguistics, but linguists have learned to live with the ambiguities” (p. 2). To a linguist, no language is “better” than any other language. Even more so, whether something is deemed a language or a dialect means nothing significant to a linguist. One is not more valuable than the other. That idea is akin to asking a dentist, “Which teeth are better, molars or incisors?” and expecting an honest answer. “I believe it is our wisdom teeth that would fetch the highest bid, my boy.”

Different dialects, and teeth as seen here, may serve different purposes or even be preferred for one reason or another, but none is inherently “better.” When a comparative adjective is widely used to refer to a specific language or dialect it is done solely on a social and personal preference basis.

Open any dictionary and you will find offerings of definitions very similar to these which were found at the website <http://www.dictionary.com>.

Language —

- a. Communication of thoughts and feelings through a system of arbitrary signals, such as voice sounds, gestures, or written symbols.
- b. Such a system including its rules for combining its components, such as words.
- c. Such a system as used by a nation, people, or other distinct community; often contrasted with *dialect*.

Dialect —

- a. A regional or social variety of a language distinguished by pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary, especially a variety of speech differing from the standard literary language or speech pattern of the culture in which it exists: *Cockney is a dialect of English*.
- b. A variety of language that with other varieties constitutes a single language of which no single variety is standard: *the dialects of Ancient Greek*.
- c. The language peculiar to the members of a group, especially in an occupation; jargon: *the dialect of science*.
- d. The manner or style of expressing oneself in language or the arts.
- e. A language considered as part of a larger family of languages or a linguistic branch. Not in scientific use: *Spanish and French are Romance dialects*.

Even from these denotative definitions it is not possible to make a clear distinction between a language and a dialect. The definition of language here actually (in section c) contains a reference to the interchangeability of the two terms. One thing that does ring clearly in these definitions, however, is that the word *dialect* has a more definite regional and group-specific connotation.

Mike agrees to this when he says:

Mike: I guess, I think a dialect means... I think a dialect is where you're from and who you're talking to.

Joe: Okay, okay. So, you think we speak a dialect, in the neighborhood?

M: Uh, yeah...

J: Okay. So, [you think a dialect is] depending on where you're from, the style of your speech or language style?

M: Yeah, there's a difference from neighborhood to neighborhood (p. 84).

This last statement that Mike made is very true. Often times in my life, while outside of the Excelsior and in the company of other young San Franciscans, my residency in and nativity to the Excelsior neighborhood has been easily guessed after just a few sentences. Mike goes on to say that people outside of the Excelsior likely make use of language unique to us:

J: So there's definitely a specific dialect associated with our language group?

M: Let's see, yeah there's a certain dialect because every neighborhood is different, you know.

J: I've heard a lot of people say in my life, I've heard people say, "Damn, them Excelsior niggas speak funny" or "Them Excelsior niggas speak weird" or somethin' like that, you know, cuz we use shit that I don't think other people use.

M: Yeah, off the wall or off the Richter shit. We come from left field on these niggas out here, man. We've made up a lot of words. Neighbors prolly (probably) pick up on it and then they use it too, 'n shit. Yeah (p. 94).

Denise E. Murray, a past president of TESOL, makes an important point regarding the dilemma of which of these terms is appropriate to use when she writes, "As linguists always point out, whether a variety is called a language or a dialect is a political, not a linguistic, decision" (1997, p. 1). Therefore, when AAE is termed a dialect and SE a language, it is due to political preference and pressure and not to the natural or innate qualities of language. Claiming to speak "proper English" and not a dialect of English has come to mean that one holds a prestigious position in society or is a member of the

upper-classes. Outside of the world of linguistics, a dialect has somehow come to be recognized and regarded as something that is lesser-than a language and even as a collective corruption of a language. But is this distinction necessary in order to clearly define the issue (why many children of urban and inner city cultures are failing to gain an adequate grasp on SE)? Is this distinction necessary in order to make the necessary progress toward acceptable management of SE? I would say emphatically, no. Instead, we should consider how children who maintain more than one code do so. If we discover how they learned the prestige form, we might be able to help others to do so.

LEARNING TO VALUE LANGUAGE: HOME

Somebody wake me, I'm dreamin', I started as a seed in the semen
Swimmin' upstream, planted in the womb while screamin'
On the top was my pops, my mama screamin' stop
From a single drop this is what they got

Not to disrespect my peoples but my papa was a loser
Only plan he had for mama was to fuck 'er and abuse 'er
Even as a little seed, I could see his plans for me
Stranded on welfare, another broken family

Now what was I to be? The product of his heated passion
Mama got pregnant, and papa got a piece a ass
Look how it began; nobody gave a fuck about me
Pistol in my hand, this cruel world could do without me

How can I survive? Got me askin' white Jesus
"Will a nigga live or die?" 'Cause the Lord can't see us
In the deep dark clouds of the projects, ain't no sunshine
No sunny days and we only play sometimes

When everybody's sleepin'
I open my window jump to the streets and get to creepin'
I can live or die, hope I get some money fo' I'm gon'
I'm only 19, out tryin' to hustle on my own
On this block where everybody and they pops tryin' to slang rocks

Rather go to college but this is where the game stops
Don't get it wrong 'cause it's always on, from dusk till dawn
You can buy rocks, glocks, or a herringbone
You can ask my man, he's a mind reader, keep my 0.09 heater

All the time this is how we grind
Meet up at the cemetery, den git smoked out
Pass the weed, nigga
That Hennessey 'a git ya keyed, nigga

Everywhere I go, niggas holla at me, "Keep it real, G!"
And my reply till dey kill me, "Act up if you feel me!"
I was born not to make it, but I did
The tribulations of a ghetto kid, 'n still I rise

"Still I Rise"
Tupac Shakur

Payin' Attention

I realized at a rather young age that I was interested in language. I noticed myself considering and pondering words and phrases and how the slightest nuance of a change in tone, spelling, word order, etc. could make a considerable difference in what was ultimately conveyed. Once, at the age of four or so, while several members of my immediate family and I were counting to ten out loud in Spanish, I stopped them at the number four *cuatro* and commented that it and the word for room *cuarto* were the same. I was quickly corrected, “No, José. No son iguales. Uno se dice cua-tro y el otro se dice cuar-to.” “No Joe. They’re not the same. One is pronounced cau-tro and the other is pronounced cuar-to.” I understood, but I remember thinking it interesting that such a small change in sound and spelling (switching the position of the r and the t) could produce such a huge difference in meaning. Another time, when I was possibly eight years old, I witnessed a confrontation/argument at a clothing store. It was a Latin American-owned store, and two African American women had asked to try something on in a dressing room. While in the dressing room they behaved in such a way that suggested they were perhaps not completely “on the up and up.” The ensuing argument at the cash register, with me standing just feet away, went something like this:

Owner: You have something in you bag.

Patron: Watchu talkin' 'bout?

Owner: I see you put something in you bag in the room.

Patron: How you see me?

Owner: I see because it's open.

The owner spoke of an opening in the bottom of the wall of the small dressing room. The door of the dressing room was full size. Often times dressing room doors are cut short on both ends leaving a person's legs and head visible while concealing everything from their knees to their shoulders, the most sensitive parts. In this case the door was full size, but there was a permanent square hole no larger than two feet by two feet cut in the bottom of the wall. This made a person's legs visible to, basically, the general public because it faced out and stared at anyone who walked in the adjacent aisle. The owners believed they had witnessed, through this square hole, the two ladies conducting some shady activity – specifically, concealing some bedding in their bags. The ladies, of course, denied any wrongdoing. The only reason that dressing room doors are ever cut short is to deter theft. Leaving the head and legs of a person visible makes it very possible to determine if a person is doing something other than trying on clothes.

What makes this linguistically interesting is that while I listened to the exchange between the Latin American owners and the African American patrons, I knew that I, perhaps more so than anyone else standing there, understood both sides better than their respective intended audiences. What I mean to say is that because I speak Spanish (my parents were both born in Nicaragua), and because I was born in inner city San Francisco, I understood both dialects of English that were being spoken (a noble attempt at SE by the owner and the AAE that was being spoken by the patrons) as well as the Spanish that the owners spoke between each other.

As the argument developed right there at the cash register, with other patrons, including my mother, waiting, I watched and listened.

Patron: You was lookin' at me changin'?

At this point, not quite understanding what the patron had said, the owner turned to another Spanish speaking employee and asked,

Owner: ¿Qué dijo? (What did she say?)

The employee responded,

Employee: Creo que dijo qué si la estabas viendo cambiarse. (I think she asked if you were watching her change.)

This went on for a while, and eventually the police were called to the disturbance. While I watched and listened, I knew that if I could have been allowed to talk during the debate (this would have never been allowed given my age and very typical Latin American upbringing where children are to be seen and not heard), I could have clarified some key points. The patrons clouded the issue of whether or not they had anything not belonging to them in their bags. They did this by suddenly exaggerating their opposition to the hole in the wall and asking that the police be called so that they might press charges of invasion of privacy. The owners were stuck trying to defend the hole in the wall and 'round and 'round and 'round they went.

Owner: No, I no watch you but I see you take something.

Patron: How you see me if you ain't watch me?

The patron was, at this point, clearly taking advantage of her superior English skills and even possibly *purposely* embedding more features of AAE into her speech to

more thoroughly confuse the owner. Again the owner asked the fairly bilingual employee:

Owner: ¿Qué dijo?

She responded,

Employee: ¿Qué cómo la viste si no la mirabas? (How did you see her if you didn't watch her?)

Owner: I see you put something in you bag.

Well, the owner couldn't have actually seen the patron put the item into her bag because the hole in the wall was too low and would not have allowed for such a steep angle of sight. But the owner could tell by what the patron's feet were doing that she certainly wasn't simply trying on clothes. She just didn't have the language (in English) to say what she needed to say. This allowed the patron to continue to tie the owner up in unnecessary dispute.

Patron: How you see me if you wasn't lookin'?

Owner: I see you. Open you bag!

Patron 2: She ain't gotta open 'er bag!

Patron: What, did you put your head up there? Is that what you use that hole for, to watch people change?

This time the owner got the help of the other employee with simply a nod of her head.

Employee: ¿Qué si usas el agujero para meter tu cabeza allí y mirar a la gente cambiarse? (She asked if you use the hole to put your head in and watch people change.)

Owner: No, I no put my head in there.

The police officers intervened at this point and told both parties that a judge would laugh this out of court so they might as well just let it rest. The officers ultimately forced the women to open their bags and the bedding that was found inside was returned. The patrons were allowed to leave because as they had never left the store they hadn't actually shoplifted yet. While I watched and listened to the exchange, I was dying to say, "No, she didn't put her head up there, but you don't need to do that to be able to see when someone is doing something that they're not supposed to be doing. You can tell a lot of what's going on by simply seeing someone's legs. That's what the hole is for and that's how she knew you were putting things in your bag." Now, I, of course, didn't have any personal feelings against these customers, but I was eager (even at this young age) to clarify the issue that the customer had purposely muddied.

This innate interest in language may have played a role in my ability to shift between the languages of home, school, and the streets.

LEARNING TO VALUE LANGUAGE: SCHOOL

If I apply for some work, let's make a bet
I get denied, 'cause I don't know about the Internet

“Things'll Never Change”
E-40

My third year into adulthood, and still a knucklehead
I'm better off dead, huh, that's what my neighbor said

“Everything's Gonna Be Alright”
Treach/Naughty By Nature

And who'd think in elementary, hey
I'd see the penitentiary, one day

“Dear Mama”
Tupac Shakur

School Daze

I started my formal schooling in Catholic school, but in the sixth grade, because of money (there wasn't enough), I began attending public school in inner city San Francisco. The enrollment at Epiphany, the Catholic school where I spent the first five years of my education, was probably only somewhere between one and two percent black, and the rest was a fairly equal mix of Latino, white, and Asian. The enrollment of Aptos, the public school where I began attending my sixth grade year, was probably 60 percent black and the rest a fairly equal mix of Latino, White, and Asian. I noticed two things directly (besides the demographics): One, the kids at Aptos were quite a bit more, let's say, rambunctious than my Catholic school classmates. Secondly I noticed a difference in the speech and the sounds of the school. I remember that I enjoyed hearing

the sounds of this distinct speech and it interested me immediately. But I enjoyed *watching* the speech just as much. I saw lively kids grouped in circles talking loudly and laughing crazily. Then, without notice, they would erupt into laughter after some clever quip had been made and they would then throw themselves to the floor convulsing all the while. This might take place several times in a single conversation, especially if the group had been engaged in a “cap session.” A “cap session,” known in different regions of the United States as “playing the dozens,” or “soundin’,” is a kind of rhetorical battle where the participants try to outdo each other with, what was called in our case, “caps.” A cap is a joke, often a ridiculous in-no-possible-way-true joke that is said about another person in the group. After a person is “capped on” it then becomes their obligation to try to cap back and draw the larger laughs from the crowd. These rhetorical battles often start with “yo mama” jokes. An example of a cap that could very well start off a full-blown cap session could be: “Nigga, yo mama so hairy, Big Foot was seen takin’ pictures of her, an’ shit!” The retort might be: “Nigga, yo mama so old, she played tag with Jesus!” Cap sessions often started with “yo mama” jokes but their scope was unlimited. Anything and everything under the sun was fair game. You won the session when the other person was left speechless or when a cap was so hilarious that the audience was effectively disbanded due to excessive convulsing.

In my peer group in the Excelsior, it was very important to be able to cap, and especially to be able to cap back when capped upon. Cap sessions were very much a part of our social culture and even a way to establish Alpha male standing and the group’s pecking order. If you could cap well that fact would often supersede the status of your personal physical toughness. You often wouldn’t have to get into a fight. You could just

out cap the other person and that would serve the same purpose. Capping had that much power. One of the best cappers in the neighborhood is Dirk Vanderheiden, whose specialty is likening people and their characteristics to animals and other seemingly unrelated things in uncannily pointed and riotous ways. One day years ago, after I had finally put on some weight and wasn't so quick to take off my shirt in public, I was playing football in the street with a few other guys. When Dirk saw me with my shirt on (and because he knew why) he yelled at me from across the street and for all to hear, "Hey, take off your shirt so we could see your banana tits!" By "banana tits" he meant of course "man boobs" but what is most hilarious is that even if you had never been struck by the likeness of bananas and man boobs, you understood the joke instantly upon hearing it. Needless to say, the crowd erupted in boisterous laughter and, of course, I had no retort. I was too busy laughing myself. Another time, talking about a young attractive woman we know he said, "Her eyes are hell of on the side of her head like a shark." As I said, this woman is attractive but there was something "weird" (for lack of a better word) about her looks that was difficult to put your finger on. Dirk's comment was so dead on it was eerie. Again, he brought down the house. In this final example he says his line as if he were his victim. This guy had a very large beer belly and Dirk pretends that he is at a clothing store trying to buy a shirt. While exaggerating a beer belly walk he said, "Uh, hi, do you have anything that'll fit a kegger?" There was no come back.

Getting back to my experiences at Aptos, I began to take mental note right away of the many differences I could hear in the speech of my new schoolmates. Their language was spoken with an emphasis and energy that made everything said seem important or urgent. It also usually came out louder and faster than the English I was

used to hearing at school. It was fascinating and I listened intently. And I said above, *watching* the exchanges was just as intriguing. The kids who used it were alive and kicking. They were vibrant and bursting. Their heads rocked and tilted as they spoke, they used many facial expressions and gestures for effect, and would move closer and closer to their intended audience as the conversation went on. They would slap the back of one hand into the palm of the other whenever they wanted to give emphasis to several words in succession or simply count off points they were making. They animated nearly everything they said with a gesture or physicality of some sort. I wanted to be able to speak just like them. These speakers were not solely African American. This speech came from the mouths of Latinos, Whites, Pacific Islanders, and Asians as well. More notably, these other-than-black AAE speakers were not just employing the language aspect of this speech. They also possessed the *style* and the *essence* necessary for true fluency in this dialect. It was 1981. This was the year—I was eleven—I started using some aspects of AAE myself. How could I not have? It was inevitable. It was way too cool to leave alone.

My late uncle Earl used to tell us boys (my two cousins and I were about ten, eight, and ten respectively at the time) about “jive talk.” He said that you should use this talk if a guy challenged you to a fight, or if you somehow found yourself about to be in a fight with a guy that you thought was probably going to kick your ass. He said you should talk yourself up and tell the guy how he’d just made a huge mistake and how you had just beaten up two guys bigger than him for breakfast that morning and all that kind of stuff. He said to talk loud and fast, use a few good gestures, and make like you just couldn’t wait to start so that you could unleash an ocean of “whoop ass” on this person.

At the time, having no other framework to situate it in, I thought the language that I was seeing and hearing at my new public school was this “jive talk.” I even witnessed this language being used for the purpose of jive talk, at least in the way my uncle had described its purpose: making someone, who you didn’t want to fight, think that they were the ones who shouldn’t want to fight you. I saw many fights quelled by jive talk, from both parties, after some shoving but before the first punch was ever thrown. The word “nigga” and other verbal taboos are used in these situations to create a self-image that then conveys to others who you are and that you are not to be messed with. A typical verbal exchange that could quell physical violence while allowing one to maintain their dignity could go much like the following dialogue. While I am going to simply create this piece of dialogue, I can assure my readers that I have witnessed exchanges like this hundreds of times. These exchanges are the lore of public middle and high school locker rooms and ball fields. They take place in the concealed corners of long hallways and on public street corners dotted with liquor stores. I have watched them take place and have taken part in my own fair share of them for most of my life. Much of what I create here will certainly be phrases and sentences that I have actually heard spoken by peers and acquaintances in the past. But exact orators, times and dates escape me. The following dialogue might start possibly after one party either hit, shoved, or somehow or another “messed with” the other. Both of these speakers could be of any race.

- 1: Quit playin wit me, nigga.
- 2: Fuck you, nigga, whatchu gon’ do?
- 1: I’ma fuck you up, nigga, that’s what. Watch.
- 2: Do some’n den, pussy-ass, nigga.

At this point, both parties involved would possibly come chest to chest as they continued to rant at each other. Both parties were likely hoping at this point that other peers would intervene and stop them before the altercation lead to full-on physical violence. If this happened, in essence, their reputations would be saved without them having to actually be proven. It is my experience that very few people (regardless of what they would have you think through their use of jive talk) actually *like* or *enjoy* fighting bare-knuckled in the streets and only do so if forced. This is because, of course, fighting bare-knuckled on asphalt and concrete is one tough sport.

1: You da one fuckin playin, bitch. Handle yo buizness, nigga.

This would have been a pretty good retort because it effectively put the responsibility of making the next move squarely back on the shoulders of the second speaker. The ball, if you will, was effectively put back in his court. It is also well done because it was done without being too aggressive, a key point. It is a direct challenge without being an explicit one. It is tricky because any group member present would have heard and taken that statement as somewhat of a challenge, but it wasn't said in such a way that #2 could use its power or potency to fuel his own attack. This is to say, #1 did not say something like:

1: Do some'n? I'ma do dis. Say one more fuckin word an I'ma punch you in yo fuckin mouth (again, or mouf, depending on the speaker), nigga. Now what?

You see, in this case #1 would leave the pressure on him because he would have to act immediately with a strike, or risk being considered "weak," if #2 so much as

uttered even one word of a retort. His hands are somewhat tied to becoming violent at this point because his words left him no option but to take prompt action. If he didn't start punching at the first sound of a word, he would, for all purposes, lose not only this battle but also some street credibility along with it. The way that it was handled in the original example allowed #1 to save all of his own face while slyly shifting the responsibility of having to "do some'n" back over to #2. Until this point speaker number one had been on the defensive side of the confrontation. He was now suddenly in the driver's seat thanks to his cleverly strong response and it would be the second speaker's job to try to handle this situation while neither losing any face nor having to actually get into a fight (supposing of course that he is not one of the few who enjoys fist fighting bare-knuckled in the street). To accomplish this he may have said,

2: Yeah, fuck you den, weak nigga (now walking away).

He used not a direct threat here but something that could be just kind of released out into the air that was neither a call for action nor strong evidence of backing down.

1: Nigga, fuck you, nigga.

2: Yeah, whatevah, nigga.

At this point it would be over and both parties could feel fairly intact after this particular exchange. Unfortunately for some, this was not always the case. The good thing about performing your jive talk successfully is that you get to leave the scene with your pride, reputation, and nose intact without ever having to throw, and more importantly, dodge any punches.

The delicate part of these exchanges is to handle them while all the time standing your ground, not losing any face, and ultimately not actually having to get into a fight. Some friends of mine, from the Excelsior District, where we spent most of our adolescence and young adulthood, have built up pretty doggone good reputations for themselves for being ferocious fighters not to be messed with but have only had a handful of actual recorded, verifiable fights over the years. They have accomplished this effectively through their use of jive talk. If you come to achieve mastery of this particular rhetorical element, then almost no one will ever want to test you to find out the truth. You might *just be* telling the truth and then they (some person who decided to test you) would find themselves in a perilous predicament. The reason it works is the impression that no one who could talk the game that well could possibly be a fake. There do exist, nonetheless, those rare few, the Dirk Vanderheidens, Jimmy Fords, Fred Keys and Steve Adams (even their names sound honestly tuff) who are not jive talkers at all and have had as many as a hundred or more fistfights, easily verified because most took place in public in front of large crowds with eyes and mouths opened wide. These rare few are not considered to be jive talkers at all. Because if you are perfectly willing to get into a fight anytime you make a threatening remark, then that makes you a bona fide brawler instead of a jive talker. If this is the case, then what you said prior to the actual fight (no matter how the story goes words always precede the punches) was either a warning or bullshitting (depending on how you fare in the fight).

Now, I should state clearly here that jive talk (the way my uncle meant it) and AAE are not the same thing though both can have features of the other and can be used together. A speaker employing jive talk to defuse a situation could use some AAE dialect

to give his spiel an added degree of toughness through the street credibility that using AAE brings with it. In turn, a native speaker of AAE could use jive talk to greater effect than a SE speaker because AAE sounds tougher to begin with. In essence, that is what jive talk is—sounding tough. It is important to note that the option of suddenly infusing one's speech with AAE qualities is only available to those who already speak AAE *natively* at least to some extent. Someone who began to infuse their speech with AAE attributes for added linguistic effect and potency, possibly to take advantage of AAE's "toughness" qualities when the situation called for it (i.e. just before a fight), would sound absolutely ridiculous if their speech sported a discernable "accent" and lacked "realness." This person would immediately be ousted as a fake and would relinquish any and all credibility at once and would likely be pounced upon to boot. To highlight this point, take this line from above as an example: "You da one fuckin playin, bitch. Handle yo buizness, nigga." Imagine this same line spoken like this, "You are thee one fucking playing, bitch. Handle your business, nig-gah" (I changed the spelling of this word here because people who were not raised in a place where this word was part of their lexicon never say it correctly. A person like this should never try to say this word because, as you might imagine, saying this word in particular with an "accent" could be very offensive to anyone). As you can see, it does not carry nearly the same weight when spoken non-natively. You could no more expect to immediately sound native in this language than you could French or some other language you did not speak. And possibly more so than any other language, speaking AAE with an "accent" could be considered downright offensive. This is because fluency in this language conveys more than just the sum of the words spoken. Fluency here conveys membership in the low middle and

lower classes of society and the common thread of a daily struggle to survive bonds members. But this daily struggle to survive produces grittiness, realness, and a “hipness” that makes the culture appealing to the public at large. Thus purposeful attainment of AAE (by someone in their mid-teens or beyond) can be seen as an effort by an outsider to exploit the attractive aspects of the culture (for one, the “hipness” factor that use of this language brings with it) without having had to first become privy to, or get up close and personal with, the harsh realities of life with less and the daily grind of life in the inner city. In short, if your AAE speech sports a detectable accent, you should not be using it or you may risk finding yourself in a situation where you will need to know some *jive talk* in a hurry as well! Ya nah’ ah mean?

Personally, while it was important for me to function well in school, it was also very important to show—through language—that I belonged in my neighborhood. I built credibility with language in both worlds simultaneously and had to assess constantly what worked best where.

My English, though, still sounded “fairly standard,” at least through high school. Politeness was always a major focal point in my typical Latin American household. And I’ve always felt that those initial years of schooling, which I spent in private school, helped to lay a solid foundation for language. I believe very strongly that being multi-lingual is an enormous benefit in all aspects of life. And multi-lingual is exactly what I became. I now speak SE, AAE, and Spanish. I use my Standard English, of course, in nearly every daily activity that I perform, being that I am living in the Mid-west section of the United States. But my Spanish comes in very handy for me because I happen to be a 7th and 8th grade Spanish teacher at a private elementary and middle school in

Indianapolis. And finally, my firm grasp of AAE allows me to relate to my young students in a way that is unavailable to many educators.

During my pre-teen and teen years, the report that my mother would get from other parents after I visited a friend was always, “Oh, Joe speaks and behaves so politely.” It wasn’t until years later that my speech would be quite saturated with the features of Black English. And by this I certainly don’t mean to say that, by any measure, AAE is something impolite by nature. On the contrary, AAE is a language with spirit and soul that has the capacity to be used by a deft speaker in situations ranging from bleak to blissful, loving to lewd, and raging mad to respectful. AAE speakers frequently massage meanings and nuances out of words that they were never meant to have. It is the most engaging speech I have ever heard or *watched*.

The issue with my speech becoming saturated with AAE is that people unfamiliar with this dialect, especially those people of generations past, might hastily think of it as rude or “un-classed.” I can recall that on more than one occasion during this period of a somewhat gradual transformation in my speech that peers and others made comments about the changes they heard in my speech.

In some circles it is often the case that the first phrases of a new language that a person learns or is curious about are either nasty or full of cussing, etc. If I had a nickel for every time a male monolingual English speaker asked me how to say, “Suck my dick,” or some other trite insult, in Spanish, I could afford to pay someone to write this paper for me.

The gradual transformation of my speech, however, was likely owed to at least two main factors. One of these is surely my simply getting older and being less afraid to

say what I wanted. A larger part of the story, however, is that I, perhaps like millions of other young people who grow up in an urban setting, took to this dialect consciously for its “toughness” quality. This quality often came in handy in the hallways of San Francisco public schools as well as on her street corners. The speech of a native AAE speaker, particularly one who is in an angry or agitated state, simply sounds “harder” and more intimidating and less “square” and conservative than the speech of a native SE speaker. Take for example the following statement in SE: Hey man, if you don’t back up I will (or I’ll) punch you. Now look at the same basic sentiment in AAE: Hey dude, if you don’ back the fuck up off me, my nigga, I’ma punch you in yo fuckin’ mouf. In addition to just the actual words being stronger, the volume of the AAE example would invariably be louder, the rate at which it was said faster, and the words themselves would be said with more oomph, more heart, and more emotion. This gives the sounds of AAE speech an implicit power not available to the SE speaker. Native-like use of AAE carries with it an implied street credibility that in turn carries with it a tacit toughness. This is part of the allure of attaining and assimilating to this language, especially for youth like me who were the farthest thing in the world from tough when they were at home at the dinner table with their single mother and older sister. There is a definite survival quality to the use of this language. To urban male *and female* youths lacking role models, support in school and sports, and safe places to learn and play, this language can serve as a defense mechanism necessary for subsistence in their less-than-rosy eco-niches. The use of AAE thrives in the face of imminent violence or threat.

In the following example I cuss profusely Shawn for antagonizing me. In this example my speech also reflects many AAE traits. My dear, late friend, Shawn, reacts with surprise and amusement at hearing the change in my use of speech.

Me: Quit fuckin' wit me, bitch, 'for I fuck you up, nigga!

Shawn: (Looking at me, shaking his head and smiling) It's hella (hell of, meaning: very; this is a very Californian term) funny to hear Joe talk like that.

On another occasion, Shawn's father, Mr. Murphy, let me know that I needed to watch how I spoke in the presence of other family members.

Me: (Telling a story to Shawn in earshot of Mr. and Mrs. Murphy) Hey blood, that party last night was hella tight, nigga. There was hella niggas from da hood there an' *hella* fine-ass bitches. Where was you at?

Blood, again, is a term used in California in very much in the same way as man, bro, dude, homie, etc. "Tight" is used here to mean good or cool and is now used this way, especially by youths, very widely in the United States. Hood, of course, is short for neighborhood. My personal use of bitch to refer to women was usually reserved for situations like this one when I would attach a positive adjective to it to convey that there was a large group of attractive women at some gathering. Now, I am not professing to have never used it to describe an individual girl or woman as an insult and, or out of anger but at this age, I am 38 now, I understand the terrible and damaging negativity of using terms like this and I no longer take its use lightly. This example is from at least 18 years ago. The sight of my usage of *bitch* in print made me cringe a little and caused me to ponder it and that subsequently prompted this clarification.

Mr. Murf: (half smiling all the while) Hey, what is this shit? Watch ‘er mouth around my wife, boy. Don’ be cussin’ so much (Mr. Murphy could cuss when he felt like it).

Me: (smiling hard) Sorry about that, Mr. Murf.

The way the two worlds of SE and AAE came together for me may have started as a way of “getting over,” a way to dupe the law, specifically. The language I learned, and made my own in school, came in handy in the interactions friends and I had with the police.

THE SFPD & ME

I said “Fuck the po-leese!” comin’ straight from the underground
A young nigga got it bad ‘cause I’m brown
And not the other color so police think
They have the authority to kill a minority

But fuck that shit ‘cause I ain’t the one
For a punk-muthafucka wid a badge and a gun
To be beatin’ on and throwin’ in jail
We can go toe-to-toe in the middle of a cell

Fuckin’ wid me ‘cause I’m a teenager
Wid a little bit a gold and a pager
Searchin’ my car, lookin’ for the product
Thinkin’ every nigga is sellin’ narcota

You’d rather see, me in the pen
Than me and Lorenzo rollin’ in a Benzo
I’ll beat a po-leese outta shape
And when I’m finished, bring the yellow tape

“Fuck The Police”
Ice Cube/NWA

Beating Cops

Another aspect of language that piqued my interest at a young age, was that I realized that the way I spoke had a great deal to do with how I was treated, how people reacted to me, and even who I could talk to and who would listen. Considering I was raised in inner-city San Francisco by a single mother, it should not come as too much of a surprise to anyone that I came into contact with the police a time or two in my teens. I noticed right away that the speech they used was quite esoteric. The names they used for different offenses or charges were often times words that a fourteen or a fifteen year old (or even an older person who was not terribly well-read) wouldn’t understand. For

example, I know for sure that the first time that I saw a sign that read “No Loitering” somewhere, I thought that the word “littering” had been misspelled and made sure to take all of my trash with me so as to not get into any trouble. At that age I also may not have known the meaning of words such as *trespassing*, *larceny*, *conspiracy*, *brandishing*, *incarceration*, and *extortion*. And it was not only the names of these offenses that made their language difficult to decipher. They also, it seemed to me, tried to “speak over us” in general by using words and phrases that they probably knew would escape us. In other words, they would purposely use elevated speech in an attempt to keep us off balance and even intimidate us. Now, while I am saying the phrase “elevated speech” here, please keep in mind that at that time we were young urban kids who were not the best or most dedicated students, and it would not have been too terribly difficult to speak over us. It is no secret that beat cops are not the most educated people out there. At *this* point in my life, of course, police officers are no longer able to speak over me (nor, though, do I come into contact with them with the same frequency I did in those days).

So as to avoid allowing police officers to talk over me in those, my younger days, I began to use whatever terms they used, whether they were specific police terms or simply just terms of elevated speech. If they used a term such as “auto tampering,” I would use it, too, as opposed to saying something like “messing with a car.” In other words, I would make a very conscious effort to say something like (if the situation arose, not that this is an actual memory), “No, I was not auto tampering, officer,” as opposed to something like, “Naw, I wasn’t messin’ wit no car,” which could have come out of me very easily if I were not paying attention to how my speech might affect my situations. Nick and Gill agree that using SE when dealing with the police is both a necessary and a

wise choice to make. Scruff adds that the threat of being arrested or incarcerated is sufficient enough to make one mind their speech.

Joe: When do you speak Standard English? When do you have to speak Standard English? Do you ever make a choice, where you think... Do you ever come across a person where you make a choice...

Nick: Hell yeeah, when the police come (p. 110).

J: Oh, alright, you change your speech for the police?

N: Well, I don't be like, "my nigga" and I don't cuss. I be like, "Oh, hello, how are you doing officer."

J: Oh, do you really? That's funny to me, dude. That's interesting to me because, you know, that's what I say what made me ever start to trip off the different languages, you know, different dialects. Because when I was young I saw if you talk to the cops, you know, "Woo woo woo woo, nigga this, nigga that," you know they fucked you up. But if you talk to the cops cool, the way they talk, then you got straight love, you know I always saw that. That was the first thing that made me even ever trip off of that, you know what I mean? Do you talk different when you talk to the cops, or do you talk the same?

Gill: Everybody talks different [when they talk to the cops].

J: What do you do to your language? What do you do to it? What do you fuckin' change about it?

Scruff: Cuz that muthafucka's right there can change your life, nigga, so you gon' change your words.

[Laughter from all]

J: What do you change it to?

S: Cuz he can lock you up, nigga, you talk hella ghetto to a muthafucka [a cop] he got the authority, nigga, thow yo ass in jail and do whatever the fuck he want. So I'm goin, yeah, you know, "I ain't doin nothin officer, woo woo woo woo." Nigga, I'ma change my way. Just for the simple fact, nigga, that he's a whole different-ass person, he's another side of life, you feel me? (p. 110).

G: I throw out (meaning: refrain from using) every single Ebonics I ever learned (p. 110).

I noticed, as time went on, that I began to be treated differently by the police than how a certain number of my peers were treated. While they would be thrown around and even slapped around by the police, I was never mishandled. Now, I know that this was not due solely to their language use or my own, but I am sure that speaking SE in the presence of the police benefited me to some extent. I'm also sure that the tendency of some of my peers to, not only *not* speak SE in these situations, but also to be downright disrespectful, contributed to them getting what they got, namely being thrown around or arrested.

As I got older and smarter, I even became a little brash in my dealings with the police, and my humbleness was replaced with self-assuredness once I was confident about my language use. I would never argue with them, but I would not let them put words in my mouth or make me say untruths. Once, when I was about 28, my friend Tony Colón and I were pulled over for rolling a stop sign (at least that's why they said they pulled us over) in a somewhat shady neighborhood. I was driving. Three uniformed officers in an unmarked car approached my vehicle. An angry-at-the-world very large Samoan police officer asked me if I had anything illegal in the car. Our conversation went something like this:

Officer: You got any guns or dope?

Me: No sir.

Officer: Can I search you and the car?

Me: You can search whatever you want.

I know some people would ask why I would allow the officer to search my car with no reason. The answer is that because if I had said “no,” he would have found something or made up something to arrest me for, and then he would have searched my car and me anyway *and* I would have had to spend the night in the holding tank. I knew, or at least I thought I knew, that I didn’t have anything illegal on me or in the car, and so, just to be allowed to go about my way, I allowed the search. This is how it goes sometimes when you are a young man in the inner city.

Officer: Get out.

Tony and I got out of the car, and the two other officers (a black man and a white woman) patted us down while the Samoan officer searched my car. He was in the front seat when I heard him say, “I thought you didn’t have no dope in here.” My heart jumped for a split second (was he going to “plant” something?) but then I remembered that there was only a small “roach” (the butt of a marijuana cigarette) in my ashtray. I knew that it was small, and I knew for sure that there was only one. He continued:

Officer: Why you lyin’ to me? You said you didn’t have no dope, but you got roaches in the ashtray (this offended me because I knew for sure that it was only one, and so I spoke up quickly and assuredly).

Me: NO! I do not have *roaches* in my ashtray. I have *a* roach, *one*, singular not plural.

He gave me a glare that cut the San Francisco fog, and I thought to myself “uh, oh.” I thought that maybe I had been a little too brash, but then nothing. When I thought about it later I felt like he couldn’t *really* have been mad at what I had said because number one it was true, and, secondly, because I hadn’t really been rude. I had been

strong and confident but not rude or dismissive. Next, the other male officer started to ask some questions.

Officer: Whatchu guys doin' over here?

Me: Officer, we live in the Excelsior, and we're just coming back from Stonestown (a nearby mall), and we're just cuttin' through here to get home (for the record, that was the honest to God truth).

Officer: I think you guys are over here tryin' to buy some more weed.

Me: We're not tryin' to buy anything officer. We're just goin' home.

After they finished "tossing the car" (this is what a vehicle search is called on the streets), they let us go. I have always felt good about this transaction because I stood my ground, and when the officer tried to make the situation sound worse than it was to try to intimidate me (which is something they did often), I was able, through the use of my language and the confidence that came with it, to defuse the situation. And certainly the fact that there was nothing in the car helped too (in San Francisco, a roach is nothing). As we drove away Tony commented, "Dude, you made him hella mad, but he couldn't really say nuthin' though. That was good. I like that."

LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, AND THE USE AND MISUSE
OF VERBAL TABOOS

A “nigga” is your main man, or one of your close companions, your homie. Recently the term has been generalized to refer to any male (one may even hear something like, “No, I was talkin about Johnny, you know, the white nigga with the hair”) though it usually refers to a Black male.

(Alim, 2006, p. #)

Because of the way that “nigger” was used in my household I learned at an early age that it could be said in many ways, put to many uses, and mean many things. Big Mama peppered her speech with references to “niggers” by which she meant discreditable Negroes, a group that, in her view, constituted a large sector of the African American population. If Big Mama saw blacks misbehaving she would declare in a mournful tone, “Nigguhs!”

(Kennedy, 2002, p. xv)

Say What?

I realize that many people reading this thesis would find the language that I am quoting throughout it as offensive and even vulgar. This language, though, serves important purposes for individuals who grow and live in speech communities where its use is prevalent and who learn to take advantage of its strengths and situational purposes. As I say at the bottom of page 52, the use of AAE thrives in the face of imminent violence. This is because the natural tendency, when one is facing imminent violence, is to avoid it. The strength of language, inherent to AAE, serves this purpose more effectively than standard dialects do because of the inherent correlation that the use AAE has to the inner city and general toughness. AAE therefore can, at one and the same time,

serve survival purposes *and* as an identity marker for those who have it at their disposal and are able to use it natively.

In the opening pages I explained that the word “nigga” (and its many variations) was a word that, more than any other, illustrated membership in AAE speech community. In the following section I explain how “nigga” differs greatly from “nigger” as well as when and why the former is acceptable and inoffensive to AAE speakers, and why the latter is strictly unacceptable.

I can remember experiences with these two words from back as early as the second grade. I used to get pulled out of class a few times a week to work with a speech therapist that helped me with my stuttering. I no longer stutter in English but the problem still haunts me occasionally when speaking Spanish. Once, while reading with my female, middle-aged, white speech therapist, the country *Niger* came up. I knew that it did not say *nigger*, and I knew the difference, but “nigger” was what I read. I somehow already knew, at age seven, that it was very taboo to say this word and here I was staring at a perfectly good free pass to go on ahead and say it. When I said it, I looked up slowly and cautiously at my instructor, curious to see what her reaction would be. I thought she might go as far as calling the principal, if she hadn’t bought for a second that I had honestly confused a cuss word with a country. I guess I will never know what she really thought but all she said, while half-grinning was, “No, Joe. It’s *Niger, Niger.*” I knew that I had just taken advantage of my situation (the fact that I was young and innocent and not to mention the fact that I could still have very well argued that I had simply made a mistake), to do something that was otherwise not allowed. I could already sense that this word was charged up with a strong power.

A couple of years later, when I was around ten years old, I can remember using the word derogatorily in front of Robert, an older kid (probably 16) that I was desperate to impress. At the time, I had no idea whatsoever of the seriousness, the ramifications, or the social impact of using this word. Earlier that day, I had been shoved around a little bit by an older black kid (probably 14 at the time) we called Jr. He had shoved my head against a wall hard enough that it was left with a small knot on it. It really was pretty small, though. A youngster on the streets of San Francisco has to either get tough quick or get used to being shoved around by the older kids. I did a little bit of both. I took some lumps, as I did, literally, in this example, and later, as I got older, I learned to stand up for myself as well as somehow or another diffuse threatening situations. Later, back at Robert's garage, while sharing my war story and rubbing the back of my head Robert asked me what had happened. I said something similar to, "Fuckin' Jr. pushed me against a wall." After feeling the lump on my head for himself, Robert asked, "Jr. did that?" I replied, "Yeah, he's a fuckin' black nigger." Robert, who was often sarcastic with the younger kids and took advantage of being the oldest/smarest/biggest in the group said, "Well, yes. Niggers are usually black." That left me feeling stupid. I had tried to act cool by doing some serious cussing but I ended up feeling a lot like exactly what I was: A stupid young kid, running around on the streets and trying to measure up. At this point in my life I had no idea that there was another word, "nigga," that was used very commonly in San Francisco and that was most often not meant or taken as an insult.

As I got older and especially when I started attending public school in the sixth grade, I came into much more contact with this "other" word that sounded very much like an insult but was rarely taken as one. The public school that I attended was primarily

made up of African American students and they said “nigga” to each other nearly every other word. I often heard sentences like, “Naw nigga, fuck that shit, nigga, I ain’t doin’ that shit, my nigga,” and/or “Ay, my nigga, that shit was funny as fuck, nigga.” I was intrigued by this language usage use and even more intrigued by the fact that youth of all races employed it without offense. Even with this early influence, *nigga* didn’t become part of my lexicon until a couple of years later when I began attending eighth grade at Luther Burbank Middle School in the heart of the Excelsior. This was where I encountered *nigga* being used by every race imaginable whether or not there were any African Americans present. The youth in the Excelsior used *nigga* like it was ours, like it belonged to us, and all of us used it.

We used it, seemingly, without inhibition, and we used it as genuinely as any Black person I had ever heard uses it. What I wanted to know, though, was did youth/young men who were not African American use this word with care, and/or *not* use it strategically in the presence of African Americans. In the following example, Mike, who is white, talks about his personal experience with *nigga*. He makes some interesting comments about when he uses *nigga* and when he does not as well as the importance of the word coming out of his mouth genuinely. He alludes that *genuine* use of *nigga* affirms one’s membership in the culture that employs it and thus makes it acceptable. He also makes it clear that “nigga” and “nigger” are two very different words and are not interchangeable.

J: So, in this neighborhood, the Excelsior, people of all different races use the word “nigga,” right?

M: Yeah (p. 89).

J: We all use the word “nigga” in the way “dude” or “man” would be used. Why do you think we can do that? Do you use the word nigga to address your friends?

M: Yeah.

J: And obviously you’re not black. Why do you think that we can do that? Do you use that in front of black people you don’t know?

M: Yes.

J: So, obviously, if used wrong, that word can be used offensive, so what do you think... so what do you think makes it so we can use it and not be offensive? Has a black person ever asked you not to use that word?

M: Uh, I’m pretty sure... yeah, during my life.

J: Couple times, yeah?

M: Yeah.

J: So, most of the time when you use it in front of black people you don’t know, no one sweats you? (p. 89) (To be “sweated” means to make someone angry at you or have someone call you on something).

M: Most of the time, yeah.

J: Do you ever not use it in certain situations? Are you sensitive to that word?

M: Not really.

J: So you use it no matter what? Do you ever *not* use it in some situations? Do you ever think, “I’d better not use that, I’d better say ‘homie’ or ‘dude?’” Do you ever make a conscious decision not to use that and use something else?

M: Exactly. Yes, yes!

J: Based on what?

M: Based on their age, probably, you know, because I have respect for older people so I won’t probably use that word in front of older people (p. 90).

J: So, what if it’s young niggas, do you use that word?

- M: Yeah, young niggas, I don't care.
- J: So basically, it's age.
- M: Like I said before, I respect elders.
- J: But would you call me "nigga" in front of black people you don't know, or in mixed company?
- M: Yeah, no matter what. But it depends on age, dude.

Tony (who has been in the car with us, though sitting silently, throughout the entire interview) felt compelled to interject at this point.

- T: Mike, dude, you ain't gonna say, "What's up, niggas?" to some niggas around you don't even know, are you? Niggas be gettin' mad about that shit (p. 90).
- M: Not really. It's just how you say it.
- J: What do you mean, "How you say it?" How do you say it?
- M: I'm not gonna say "Hey nigger."
- J: Well that's different, that's a different word.
- M: Exactly!
- J: What do you think lets you use that word, "nigga"? Not anyone can use it, right? Who can use it and who can't?
- M: Well, fuck, you know, I'm from the inner city. I mean, I was raised saying that shit. So if I seen a typical white muthafucka say that, be like, "Hey nigga, what's up?" You know, they don't... it just don't fit in 'em, you know what I mean?
- J: Then it could be more offensive or less offensive?
- M: That could be more offensive if it comes from a suburban white, you know.
- J: And if it comes out what way, not authentic?

- M: Yeah, not genuine. When I say “nigga” it’s like “that’s my friend, my homie,” you know what I mean, that’s just how I say it.
- J: But it’s because it comes out genuine is what you’re saying, when you use it, since you’re from the inner city, since you’ve been using it your whole life, you said that, then when it comes out it comes out genuine so that most of the times it’s not offensive.
- M: Yeah.
- J: But then if someone uses it who hasn’t used it all their life, I mean, you can’t start using it at 20, right?
- M: Hell naw.
- J: Can you start using that word at 20?
- T: If you wanna get beat up quick (p. 91).

Gill agrees that there is a definite difference between the two words when he says:

- Gill: It’s personal, it’s like he says, it’s personal. It’s, “Wassup, my nigga,” and then, “Wassup nigger.” You feel me? There’s a difference (p. 106).

In an interview conducted by Tabitha Sorenson from MTV, discussing his time in jail, Tupac Shakur also made it clear that he saw an important difference between “nigga” and “nigger.” Speaking about how he was treated by correctional officers at Clinton Correctional Facility in New York, while incarcerated there for 11 months, he stated:

- Tupac: Jail was the first place that I can go and they just went... well as soon as I got there they went, “There he goes.” ‘N he goes, “Who?” ‘N he goes, “There’s the rich nigger” (Tupac says this clearly pronouncing the hard “r” sound at the end of the word).

I was like, “Aw shit! He said *nigger!* He said *nigger!*” ‘N everybody was lookin’ at me like, “So.” I was like, “Oh my God! This is where I’m gonna be stayin’? He just said *nigger!*”

Tabitha: Well you’ve got “niggas” in one of your records.

Tupac: Ni- *GGAS*.

Tabitha: Different.

Tupac: He’s talkin’ ‘bout, ni- *GGERS*. Ni- *GGERS* was the ones on a rope hangin’ like a bitch. Ni- *GGAS* is the ones *with* gold ropes, hangin’ out at clubs.

Tabitha: Well, maybe not everyone’s aware of the differentiation.

Tupac: They don’t have to be. Everyone... if you not a nigga, don’t worry, you don’t have to understand it. It’s just not one of those things.

Tupac, conspicuously pronouncing the “*gga*” in “nigga,” was making it clear that the last syllable of this word was most the key. In doing so, he is obviously saying that *nigga* is okay but *nigger* is not.

In his book titled “nigger,” Randall Kennedy (2002), repeatedly misquotes a signature skit performed by the famously hilarious comedian Chris Rock. The author states that the opening line of this skit is:

“I love black people, but I hate niggers” (p. 33).

Clearly though, when I recently listened to and watched this skit in its entirety, Rock is not pronouncing an “r” at the end of the word that he repeatedly says throughout his performance. His opening line is actually:

“I love black people, but I hate niggas.”

Mr. Kennedy makes the same mistake when quoting the late great Richard Pryor, who also very rarely pronounced an “r” at the end of this word in spite of the fact that one

of his most famous albums is titled, “That Nigger’s Crazy.” In Richard Pryor’s day the new spelling: “nigga,” was not yet popular but sensitivity to the hard guttural “er” sound at the end of the word had already given birth to the new “nigga” pronunciation. All one needs to do is listen closely and it is very clear that there is no hard “r” sound coming out of the mouth of either of these talented performers.

Imagine though, if we could change out every “nigga” for “nigger” throughout either of these performances. It would change the entire feel of their acts. I am sure that I would cringe every time the hard “r” sound was pronounced as I do when I watch the infamous skits performed by the also hilarious Dave Chappelle who does not shun away from saying “nigger.” In these cases though, “nigger” is not a word that is used casually or as a sidebar, instead, it is the very shock value of the word itself that is the comical key to the skit. For example, one skit features a Black, White supremacist named Clayton Bigsby. During the skit Mr. Bigsby yells at a car playing loud rap music and carrying three white teenagers, “Hey, why don’t you jungle bunnies turn that music down? Niggers make me sick! Woogie boogie, nigger. Woogie boogie.” This use, while still difficult to listen to without cringing, does not offend as much as a Pryor or Rock act might, if they were to clearly utter the word “nigger” each time they wanted to say “brutha,” “man,” or “dude” etc. A skit like that would be exceedingly difficult to swallow for most Americans. The reason I say the Chappelle skit is more palatable is because it is obvious that he is purposely trying to raise eyebrows as he raises awareness.

I understand perfectly the argument that the n-word, in any form or version of itself, is unacceptable. The truth, however, is that *nigga* is being used across the United

States by men, women, and children of every creed. This usage is most often meant to be endearing, and not offensive. The “r” makes all the difference in the world.

THE ISSUE

I never thought it could happen, this rappin' stuff
I was too used to packin' gats and stuff
Now honeys play me close like butter play toast
From the Mississippi down to the east coast

Condos in Queens, Indo for weeks
Sold out seats to hear Biggie Smalls speak
Livin' life without fear
Puttin' 5 karats in my baby girl's ears

Lunches, brunches, interviews by the pool
Considered a fool 'cause I dropped outta high school
Stereotypes of a black male misunderstood
And it's still all good

“Juicy”
The Notorious B.I.G.

What's Really Goin' On?

In U.S. schools today, there exists an ever more pressing urgency for the youngest of children to begin their quest for literacy. These young students must begin competing and performing well in their academic arenas or risk falling behind in their academic endeavors. Falling behind at a young age could have far-reaching consequences and could also, later in life, leave one feeling under prepared. Mike speaks of feelings such as these.

J: Was there a time ever you think someone acted negatively towards you, because of how you spoke?

M: Oh, of course (p. 87).

J: Like, when? Like, how do you mean?

M: Like, trying to apply for a job. Like, maybe I didn't know the proper way to say something. And they looked at me kind of funny and I knew he did.

J: Oh really?

M: You know what I'm saying? It's just situations like that.

J: Was your language too thuggish or did you just not have the right words?

M: Maybe it was my fault, I wasn't educated [enough] to say what I wanted to say.

J: And you got a negative reaction...

M: Yeah, cause I felt like maybe I didn't know how to say something that's why I had to go and choose my way of saying things. And maybe that didn't cut it for me (p. 87).

Gill speaks specifically of his language use being "ghetto," being aware of it, and not being able to change it. He goes on to call his personal language use "Ebonics," and to convey (possibly subconsciously) that that is not a good thing. The question begged is: Who has made him feel like "Ebonics" or AAE is not okay in schools, and why?

G: I don't be tryin' to talk like that at school but I talk straight ghetto, basically, that's what I do (p. 108).

J: If you're out here [on the streets]?

G: Naw, at school too. It's like I try to talk cool like, you know ah mean, [because] like, I'm at school but I still come off across with all that Ebonics 'n shit (p. 109).

Although many elementary and middle school-aged children today are computer savvy Internet experts, bi- and trilingual speakers, and in possession of a wealth of information that demonstrates wisdom far beyond their years, many of these students, most notably those in inner-city schools, are failing unnecessarily due to language and

communication issues between them and their teachers. These children, combined with all children in U.S. schools today, embody a vastly diverse community that boasts a variety of cultural backgrounds, economic statuses, social classes, and native languages and dialects spoken.

Where languages and dialects are concerned, command of the English language, is of course, necessary for academic success in U.S. schools, though not just any dialect of English will do. In order to achieve, and more importantly, to sustain academic success in school, children must acquiesce and employ the language of schools, which means SE. Some have also referred to SE as “textbook English” and even, by such prominent writers as Geneva Smitherman (1999), as “‘White’ English” (p. 15). Students’ use of SE is regularly critiqued by their teachers and must be produced to their liking. This, in essence, means that any work of speech or writing that the students produce must adhere to the rules of SE if that work is to receive a passing grade and the children to be perceived as moving along well in their comprehension of English. Students’ writings are rigorously inspected for grammatical glitches, and their speech scrutinized for any departures from the norms and guidelines of this one sole dialect of English. Any departures found are of course most often (except in the most sensitive and conscious of environments) considered to be “mistakes.” This fact, however, is posing a growing pedagogical problem as K-12 teachers in the United States, whether in urban or rural settings, are finding an increasingly large number of distinct languages and dialects in use in their classrooms. “I am also fully aware that American educational systems continue to struggle with ways to develop language and literacy skills in culturally and linguistically diverse populations” (Alim, 2004, p. xiv). This fact, moreover, is making it

impossible to teach effectively without taking into account, planning for, and being sensitive to and accepting of the many languages and dialects used by American students today.

Switching Codes

Many studies have been done in an attempt to ascertain the reasons for lower-than-average test scores by children in urban settings. But why does it prove so difficult for African American English *speaking* students of any cultural background to “adapt to,” meaning, for example, use to respond when used with one, SE—the language necessary for school success? Have we not all been witness to foreign students who arrive in the U.S. and achieve academic success in a relatively short period of time, even with the obvious language/cultural barriers present? The reason for this apparent lack of ability (or perhaps desire) to employ either AAE or SE, depending on the situation, is certainly not due to a lack of exposure to Standard English. Through their educators, other adults, reading materials, and responsible media, these students have ample opportunities to model their speech after sound examples of SE. Why, then, do they not master these two dialects more naturally and why do they not slide from one to the other more often, especially when it would benefit them to do so (i.e. in school, in job interviews, at work)?

The systematic devaluing of non-standard forms of English, by educators at all levels, causes an incredible backlash. This is a large part of the reason that a substantial portion of this language population is not using SE. They are doing so mindfully. They are in fact rejecting SE. They feel their language is being devalued while another is being touted and they hold on to their own all the more. Parker and Crist (1995) speak of how to avoid this devaluing when they write:

Minority children can be motivated to learn Standard English if the starting point of instruction is that of dignity and respect for them as persons, and an awareness of the richness and complexity of their own language patterns, forms which are not “incorrect,” or “ignorant,” but simply different (p. 10).

The rejection of SE by AAE speakers is an elicited response to the devaluing of their native language. This response may occur consciously or unconsciously. When their language is devalued in educational institutions, and SE is hailed as the “right way,” AAE speakers (like speakers of any language, I’m sure, whose language was being attacked) naturally “hold on” to their language with a tight grasp and immediately put up a wall against SE. The intensity of this reaction is fortified by the fact that to devalue a language is, in turn, to devalue the very cultures and peoples that employ that language. Therefore the resistance of these particular youth to adopt Standard English is rooted in the fact that their language is not simply some quirky tendency that is employed to annoy the faculty of institutions; it is intrinsically tied to their identities as individuals. *Dare language iz dem and dey is it.* It is through this language that they express their individuality and uniqueness. Asking these youth to abandon their speech is, in essence, asking them to abandon their culture, personality, and character. The task of getting these youth to use Standard English, especially while devaluing AAE (which is most often what happens: “Don’t talk that way,” “That’s not ‘right,’” “Speak ‘proper’ English”) and while not assuring them of its inherent worth (“That’s a wonderful way of expressing that but for the purposes of *this assignment* why don’t we try to use Standard English,” or “Wow, that’s great, you’ll be bilingual once you learn the Standard English dialect as well as your own”) will be met, and only met, with rebellion and rejection of the very thing that is being attempted to be taught. Only through genuine and outwardly shown appreciation of non-standard forms of English by their educators can these youth be taught Standard English without this teaching being perceived by them as an attack on their identities and culture. Smitherman (2000), writing in her trademark dialect style,

sums this up nicely when she writes, “what we bees needin is teachers with the proper attitudinal orientation who thus can distinguish actual reading problems from mere dialect differences” (p. 58).

What children need to be taught here is that whatever dialect they speak, it is a perfectly valid and worthy one because all languages are valid and worthy. Fillmore addressed this notion directly in an article concerning the “Ebonics” debate when he wrote, “For a linguist to describe something as a dialect is not to say that it is inferior; everybody speaks a dialect” (1997, p. 3). In English classes, all students should discuss and be taught lessons on the current positions and ideas about the differences and similarities between languages and dialects so that they may have a sense of how the conversation around them is unfolding. AAE speakers (who even themselves often privately believe that there is something “wrong” with their speech) would be able to read writings by many well-educated authors explaining very clearly that there is absolutely nothing wrong with AAE.

There are several thoughts and theories as to why children from lower-class families battle with language issues in the academic institutions in which they attempt to learn. One of them is not that they are simply illiterate; the matter happens to be much more complex than that. They are, more often than not, perfectly literate, but they are literate in another language. Renowned linguist Noam Chomsky points this out directly in his conversations with the French linguist Mitsou Ronat that were published in the book, *Language and Responsibility*. He states, “I had believed it should no longer be necessary to say that the spoken language of an urban ghetto is a real language” (1979, p.

56). A real language indeed, unfortunately not the language required in the school setting.

The key here may be teaching these students the ability to “code switch,” that is, to alter between, when the situation calls for it, two or more linguistic varieties (dialects, in this case) that they are familiar with. Through the teaching of code switching, the children will not have to feel as if they are abandoning their own dialect; in contrast, they will be taught to be bilingual. While some people would call this act “selling out” I believe that, “In reality, code switching is not about race; it is about survival” (Parker & Crist, 1995, p. 6). There is nothing at all wrong with (and I actually consider it a gift to be able to do this) speaking one dialect in the classroom, another dialect in the schoolyard, and yet another dialect in the home. This may be, in fact, what is necessary for effective communication to take place by the same individual traveling through these different situations and niches.

Possibly more so than any other single factor, mastery of SE plays an immense role in children’s potential for scholarly success. Children are consistently taught and tested, and then, subsequently, located and led forward based on their use and production of SE. SE, however, does not allow for, or acknowledge, many of the language conventions learned and practiced by children of lower income homes and from families with lower socio-economic statuses. Conversely, lack of mastery of SE is often misinterpreted as a language deficiency or a learning disability, which, in turn, may lead to children being placed erroneously in special education classes when, in fact, the problem may be one of language.

CONCLUSION

And The Beat Goes On

By the time I was in my early thirties (I am currently 38, Fall 2008), I had no problem at all shifting codes. I could talk to the police, and I even had a laugh or two at how easy it was for me to make them feel like everything was all right, even if it wasn't. I had found that speaking SE was effective, but it was sometimes a little too stuffy for me and my purposes. I thought that police officers might think I was being a smart-ass and that my strategy would backfire, and I would be punished even more severely than I would have been originally. I started using some "country" like words and phrases such as "Howdy," and "Pert near," and "I reckon so," to give my speech some non-threatening character. This also worked well for getting a laugh out of my audience. For example, if someone said something that was very obvious, I might say, "You ain't just whistlin' Dixie, pal," as opposed to saying, "You got that right." I did this with everyone, but I made a conscious effort to use some of these whenever I had to speak to an officer for some reason or another. I think I should say here that while I am talking a lot about dealing with the police (especially the examples from my late twenties and early thirties) and using my speech in such a way so as to keep myself out of trouble, I am only talking about maybe avoiding a ticket or at worse spending a night in the drunk tank. I've gotten many, many tickets in my day (my SE did not *always* work) but I've only spent one night in the drunk tank. My speech usually worked well for me, but I am sure that what was most in my favor was that I was never doing anything too terribly wrong. It was not as if

I was out robbing houses and committing assaults and then getting away with it because I spoke SE when questioned by officers.

I moved to Indianapolis in late December of 2002 to begin my Master's program in English. I drove an old Honda civic that had some sort of problem with the headlights that caused the brights to remain on at all times. I was pulled over twelve times in the first six months and never received a ticket. Late one night at about two in the morning, I was having a little fun in the snow pulling the emergency brake on the car as I came to stop signs or red lights. The car would fishtail smoothly back and forth on the fresh snow. Because I was born and raised in San Francisco, I had hardly ever been in the snow except for a couple of times. I remember that any time some friends and I would go up to Lake Tahoe in the winter, one of the most fun things for us to do was to slide our cars around in the snow. We just loved that kind of stuff. As I said, this night, it was two in the morning, and there didn't seem to be a soul on the road. To my surprise, though, after I did my very next maneuver, I was being pulled over by no less than three police cars. Where they came from I have no idea. They were nowhere to be seen just seconds earlier. I had had a few beers, but I was certain that my condition related to that fact would not be a problem as long as I could get the officers to believe that the sliding was unintentional. One officer approached my car while the others stayed back. I cleared my throat and did a couple of mouth stretches and the ensuing exchange went as follows:

Me: (Looking up at him slowly and trying to look apologetic) How's it going officer?

Officer: Pretty good. Why are you all over the road like that?

Me: You know, officer, I just barely touched the brakes and the dang thing almost got away from me (at this time I still had a California license and California license plates).

Officer: You from California.

Me: Yes, officer, I'm a student here. I go to IUPUI (I wanted to say, "Hey man, you do the math").

Officer: Can I see your license and registration?

Me: Yes, of course, officer.

By now I already felt like I had soothed his concerns somewhat, but I wasn't quite out of the woods yet. I was hoping that he would not ask me to get out of the car in case I was not as sober as I felt. He was at his car for several minutes as the other cars waited near-by, as well. All of them kept their flashing blue and red lights on the whole time.

Officer: (Returning with my license and registration and handing them to me)
Here you go.

Me: Thank you, officer.

Officer: Well, I bet you're not used to this snow being from California and all.

Me: (Laying it on a little thick now) I'm sure not, officer. It's doggone dangerous out here.

Officer: Yeah, well, just watch your speed a little and you'll be all right.

Me: (doing my best Eddie Haskell) Thank you, officer. You have a good night, now.

Officer: You do the same.

And off I went feeling a little drained but confident that my language skills had just saved me a ticket and possibly even worse.

Of the most interesting questions that I pondered during my research and reading was, “Did youth/young men who were not African American use the word “nigga” with care, and/or *not* use it strategically in the presence of African Americans?” Through the interview responses that I received I am surprised to say that “no” they don’t. It is clear that genuine pronunciation, more so than race, trumps any question as to one’s authority or street credibility in regards to license to use this word. As we saw in the interview snippets, young men of differing races use “nigga” without hesitation or trepidation because they use it authentically.

Another key point was discovering the usefulness of having several dialects at one’s disposal when travelling from one eco-niche to another. Again, as we saw from the interview snippets as well as from my own linguistic autobiography, it could be quite helpful to be able to call up some “jive talk” or some well-authored AAE in the face of danger or simply just walking around in the inner city.

Moving Forward

If the language of all children were celebrated and rewarded respect, many of the problems that I have outlined here would cease to exist. Teachers and administrators around the country need to recognize that any language a child speaks is *that* child's language and should never be regarded as a "bad" way to talk. Certainly, to devalue a child's language is to devalue the child. No learning can take place when a child is feeling like his very nature; his very culture is being marginalized and perceived as inferior.

If teachers and educators can learn to be sensitive to these complicated language issues in which the self esteem and respect of their students is at stake, those students will feel encouraged and inspired to achieve their potential. They will know that they can make the journey towards higher education without having to feel like they had to change their essence or "sell out."

I am hopeful that the arguments and examples that I have presented here have been clear and compelling enough that they may have a positive impact on the young, urban students of our U.S. schools.

APPENDICES – INTERVIEWS

Interview with Lil' Mike

Joe: So first off, we basically grew up in the neighborhood. (Meaning San Francisco's Excelsior District)

Mike: I'm from Southeastern which is right over the hill from the Excelsior.

J: And you hung out, a whole lot, in the Excelsior. You went to school where? What high school?

M: What? Yeah, I went to John O'Connell.

J: Okay. Did you finish at John O'Connell?

M: Uh, no.

J: Okay.

M: I had to go to alternative school. I got kicked out.

J: Oh really? So did you finish at alternative school?

M: Yeah.

J: Alright. So let me ask you some questions [about language]. What do you think the difference between a language and a dialect is? If there is a difference? A dialect is what?

M: I guess, I think a dialect means... I think a dialect is where you're from and who you're talking to.

J: Okay, okay. So, you think we speak a dialect, in the neighborhood?

M: Uh, yeah...

J: Okay. So, [you think a dialect is] depending on where you're from, the style of your speech or language style?

M: Yeah, there's a difference from neighborhood to neighborhood.

J: Okay, yeah. So, you think that someone who's from the Excelsior speaks differently, of course, than someone that's from the Mission or another neighborhood, right?

M: Exactly!

J: Yeah, for sure, right?

M: No doubt about it! No doubt.

J: Have you ever heard someone say that people in the Excelsior speak a certain way? That we speak funny? People from the Excelsior speak funny?

M: I don't know, it's just... I don't know that we speak differently. I don't know that we speak as different as nobody else. We just have our own ways of saying little things that make us not be other people. .

J: Right, right. Okay, okay. What languages were spoken in your home growing up?

M: Straight English. (Straight is often used to mean something similar to "totally," "total," or "absolutely." This is very common. Anywhere where non-standard varieties of English are being used the word "straight" may be put to use in the following way: "He's the straight smartest guy in the class," "Man, I straight passed out last night," and "She's straight pretty as hell.")

J: Straight English? How about... what dialects do you think were spoken?

M: More, I mean...

J: Okay, go to the next question. Next question, what does the term Standard English mean to you?

(Chuckle)

M: I don't know what that means.

J: Well, what do you...? You can tell by, "Standard English." Who speaks Standard English do you think?

M: Maybe the books in school. That's proper English.

J: Was the language you spoke in your home different from what you spoke with your friends or with your peers?

M: I mean, of course, it was different. You gotta talk to your parents or your family a different way but. . .

J: So how was it different? Between how you spoke to your parents and how you spoke with your peers?

M: Well, I mean, there was probably not a big difference, you know what I'm saying, whatever I did out there, I brought it home with me.

J: Right, right, right. That's true, huh?

M: I've pretty much talked the same way I talked to my parents, in a more respectful way. Like, like... I don't cuss all the time, like I would do around my peers.

J: Can you remember a time when you felt like your own personal language use, the way you spoke, was not appropriate for some situation?

M: Yeah, probably when I was a little bit younger. . . Probably said some things I should have thought about! I should have thought about that before I said it!

J: Was there a time when you ever thought, like, whatever dialect you spoke, like out on the streets, was wrong for some situation?

M: Oh, of course. Like, you know, maybe at the workplace.

J: Ah, okay, okay, okay.

M: Like, maybe my boss told me to do something at the workplace, and I'm like, "Man, I already did that." And that's probably not the proper way.

J: Do you make adjustments to your language for situations? Do you speak differently around people who are older?

M: Yes.

J: Bigger? Or higher position?

M: Depends on the person. I feel I can talk to anybody. That's the good thing about this city, you know? You get to meet different kinds of people... different nationalities; you have to have respect first of all. You just gotta know how to talk.

J: So you make adjustments depending on the situation?

M: No problem. Like, if I talk to a cop for instance. Like, if it could be cool, I could talk to him. Or I could talk to a lawyer or a teacher or some kind of educator. Like I said, I'm versatile.

J: Do you think the way you talk influences the way people act toward you or treat you?

M: I mean, they might look at me a little differently.

J: What do you mean?

M: Like maybe I might dress too thuggish for ‘em, you know, but I can talk real good.

J: Was there a time ever you think someone acted negatively towards you, because of how you spoke?

M: Oh, of course.

J: Like, when? Like, how do you mean?

M: Like, trying to apply for a job. Like, maybe I didn’t know the proper way to say something. And they looked at me kind of funny and I knew he did.

J: Oh really?

M: You know what I’m saying? It’s just situations like that.

J: Was your language too thuggish or did you just not have the right words?

M: Maybe it was my fault, I wasn’t educated [enough] to say what I wanted to say.

J: And you got a negative reaction...

M: Yeah, cause I felt like maybe I didn’t know how to say something that’s why I had to go and choose my way of saying things. And maybe that didn’t cut it for me . . .

J: You’re conscious of your language use? You say something and someone doesn’t . . .

M: Yeah, I try to be proper.

J: [You] try to speak Standard English when you need to. Going through middle school and high school, where you already speaking the dialect you speak in the neighborhood, which is most closely what linguists call African American English, how we [might] say, “I be / we be / she be,” instead of, “I am/ he is / they were,” or whatever. Do you remember a time in school when a teacher said not to speak that way?

M: Oh, of course.

J: What did they say?

M: You know, you gotta use proper language. . .

J: What would they say about the dialect you spoke? Would they say, “That’s wrong.”? Or would they say. . .

M: Yeah, they’d be like, um, for instance...

J: That's not correct.

M: Like, you know, instead of saying, "I am gonna do something," or "I'm not gonna do it," nicely, like, you know, I'd say, "I ain't gonna take this shit."

J: But teachers would say "That's wrong," or, "That's incorrect."

M: Yeah, or, "Speak this way instead."

J: Exactly. A teacher said that to you?

M: Yeah.

J: Did you ever feel like you were being asked to speak and learn a language that was different than your own at school? Did they make you feel your language was wrong?

M: No.

J: So what did you think about when they asked you not to speak that way?

M: Pretty much, in my mind, I'm gonna talk the way I talk.

J: That's what I mean; did you feel like they were trying to get you to learn a language other than your own? That's your own language, right?

M: Not necessarily my own, but I was brought up... Once you start... talking the same way, you start always talking like that.

J: Do you feel like your language is part of your identity?

M: I guess you could say that.

J: Has anyone ever said you talk like a black person because of phrases or words that you use?

M: Uh, yeah?

J: Who has said that, black people or other people?

M: Mainly white folks. Uh huh, you know what I'm saying.

J: Because of phrases, or words that you use.

M: Yeah. So if someone does have a problem with me saying something that might be negative towards somebody, most likely it'll be kinda like a white person.

J: So people associate the way that we speak with black people? Do you think that more than just black people speak that way?

M: Of course.

J: So, in this neighborhood, the Excelsior, people of all different races use the word “nigga,” right?

M: Yeah.

J: We all use the word “nigga” in the way “dude” or “man” would be used. Why do you think we can do that? Do you use the word nigga to address your friends?

M: Yeah.

J: And obviously you’re not black. Why do you think that we can do that? Do you use that in front of black people you don’t know?

M: Yes

J: So, obviously, if used wrong, that word can be used offensive, so what do you think... so what do you think makes it so we can use it and not be offensive? Has a black person ever asked you not to use that word?

M: Uh, I’m pretty sure... yeah, during my life.

J: Couple times, yeah?

M: Yeah.

J: So most of the time when you use it in front of black people you don’t know, no one sweats you?

M: Most of the time, yeah.

J: Do you ever not use it in certain situations? Are you sensitive to that word?

M: Not really.

J: So you use it no matter what? Do you ever not use it in some situations? Do you ever think, “I’d better not use that, I’d better say ‘homie’ or ‘dude?’” Do you ever make a conscious decision not to use that and use something else?

M: Exactly. Yes, yes!

J: Based on what?

M: Based on their age, probably, you know, because I have respect for older people so I won't probably use that word in front of older people.

J: So, what if it's young niggas, do you use that word?

M: Yeah, young niggas, I don't care.

J: So basically, it's age.

M: Like I said before, I respect elders.

J: But would you call me "nigga" in front of black people you don't know, or in mixed company?

M: Yeah, no matter what. But it depends on age, dude.

Tony (who has been in the car with us, though sitting silently, throughout the entire interview) felt compelled to interject at this point.

T: Mike, dude, you ain't gonna say "What's up niggas?" to some niggas around you don't even know, are you? Niggas be gettin' mad about that shit.

M: Not really. It's just how you say it.

J: What do you mean, "How you say it?" How do you say it?

M: I'm not gonna say "Hey nigger."

J: Well that's different, that's a different word.

M: Exactly!

J: What do you think lets you use that word, "nigga"? Not anyone can use it, right? Who can use it and who can't?

M: Well, fuck, you know, I'm from the inner city. I mean, I was raised saying that shit. So if I seen a typical white muthafucka say that, be like, "Hey nigga what's up?" You know, they don't, it just don't fit in 'em, you know what I mean?

J: Then it could be more offensive or less offensive?

M: That could be more offensive if it comes from a suburban white, you know.

J: And if it comes out what way, not authentic?

M: Yeah, not genuine. When I say “nigga” it’s like “that’s my friend, my homie,” you know what I mean, that’s just how I say it.

J: But it’s because it comes out genuine is what you’re saying, when you use it, since you’re from the inner city, since you’ve been using it your whole life, you said that, then when it comes out it comes out genuine so that most of the times it’s not offensive.

M: Yeah.

J: But then if someone uses it who hasn’t used it all their life, I mean, you can’t start using it at 20, right?

M: Hell naw.

J: Can you start using that word at 20?

T: If you wanna get beat up quick.

J: Can you remember a time thinking that someone must be really smart or stupid because of how they talked?

M: Of course.

J: What do you mean? What kind of language, when someone’s really smart, what kind of language have they been using?

M: I don’t know.

J: So, you said we do have our own dialect here in the Excelsior? What are some of the characteristics of our dialect in Excelsior? You think it’s most like what?

M: It’s different.

J: Have you heard people make comments about the language in Excelsior? What kind of comments have you hear people make about the dialect we speak in the Excelsior?

M: (No comment)

J: Do you think some languages or dialects are considered better than others?

M: No.

J: So, to you, all languages or dialects are worthy to you?

M: I mean, everybody talks the way they wanna talk.

J: Do you think people look down on people who speak a dialect like ours in Excelsior? Do people think that proper English is better than what we speak in Excelsior?

M: But I think we have character 'doh. I mean, it's not always negative shit that we say. For the most part, you know, we're just havin' fun and, you know, clownin' around.

J: Yeah, I think our language has character too, a lot of character. Do you think being bilingual is an asset?

M: Oh, of course, yes.

J: What are some of the stereotypes you think people have about the language we speak?

M: Well, you know, some people might think, "oh these brothas" you know, are kinda stupid in a way for sayin', you know, what they say.

J: Is there a connection between your language and your identity?

M: Of course.

J: What do you think it is?

M: Well, it's they way, fuckin', I carry my life.

T: It's based on props and how you carry yourself.

J: When you meet someone for the first time, especially if they're your age, are you paying close attention to how they speak and what words they use?

M: Yeah.

J: Are you assessing or judging or trying to figure out... what are you trying to figure out by how they speak?

M: Well, the first words that come out of their mouth, you know, I already know what's going on with them, so...

J: By the first couple words, by the first sentence?

M: By the first words that comes out of their mouth, I know how to talk to 'em.

T: The first words!

J: What do you know about 'em?

M: What do I know about 'em? I can tell, you know, whatever, pretty much, like...

T: Whether they say, “Hi...” or “Wassup?”

M: Yeah, yeah, you know, shit like that.

J: Like what?

M: For instance, if an A-rab guy comes up to me and he’s talkin’ Arabic, I know how to come, like you know, I’ll just shine him off because I won’t understand him you know what I mean. But I won’t disrespect him.

J: But how about young guys your age, what can you tell?

M: Well then, I’ll try to teach ‘em how we talk. But, I don’t know what you tryin’ to aks me Joe.

J: Do you think being a good speaker can help you?

M: Hell yeah! That can advance, fuckin’, your career. I mean, you know, if you know more words...

T: [You can go] sky high!

J: So there’s definitely a specific dialect associated with our language group?

M: Let’s see, yeah there’s a certain dialect because every neighborhood is different, you know.

J: I’ve heard a lot of people say in my life, I’ve heard people say, “Damn, them Excelsior niggas speak funny” or “Them Excelsior niggas speak weird” or somethin’ like that, you know, cuz we use shit that I don’t think other people use.

M: Yeah, off the wall or off the Richter shit. We come from left field on these niggas out here man. We’ve made up a lot of words. Neighbors prolly pick up on it and then they use it too, ‘n shit. Yeah.

J: That was Lil’ Mike and were signin’ out.

Interview with Bert

Joe: Ok, so you went to area schools and you graduated from Bal (Short for Balboa High School)

Bert: No, I graduated from Independent Studies.

J: Are you bilingual, you speak some Spanish, right?

B: Yes, well I wasn't bilingual until the age of 13.

J: So in your home, you never grew up with anyone in the house that spoke anything other than English? I mean, I know your dad spoke Spanish.

B: But he never spoke it in the house.

J: But you never grew up speaking Spanish in the home?

B: No, never.

J: Always English?

B: Yeah.

J: What kind of English would you say was spoken? We spoke a little bit earlier about Standard English (SE) and other dialects...

B: Standard English.

J: Did you speak anything other than Standard English with your peer group?

B: Yeah, but that was later, towards the teens. Then it was, you know, a lot of different groups of people in the neighborhood together, some blacks, some Spanish, Filipino. Everybody was mixed together and some of the Filipinos couldn't speak English all that properly. Some Spanish people had their broken English, so and then you had the African Americans speaking their type of English. So it all tied together.

J: What do you think you spoke with your peer group? The main guys? Who you hung out with growing up?

B: A lotta different slang. We used several different terms, you know, to remember all of them... to remember some: killer, awesome, you know, the bomb. You know, several different slang words were used.

J: Would you say, “I go to the store everyday?” or “I be goin’ to the store every day?” Which would you use?

B: I would say, “I go to the store everyday.”

J: Not even out on the street when you were younger?

B: Even today. I was never brought up [to talk] that way.

J: What does Standard English mean to you?

B: Proper English that they teach in a school.

J: Can you remember anytime when someone “tripped off” how you spoke, or made a comment about your speech or language use?

B: Yeah, a lot of people always thought that I had a back east [accent].

J: Back east?

B: Maybe it’s that broken English.

J: What does broken English mean to you?

B: Too much slang, too much side talk.

J: Side talk, slang, that’s good. Did you ever try to make adjustments to your speech? Are you conscious of your language use?

B: On the job I have to be, because I was the shop steward, and I have to deal with union and management. And yeah, you have to be cautious of your language while you’re, you know, while you’re talking to, while you’re involved with disputes and whatever, or you know, contractual issues.

J: So you speak differently, of course, in different situations, then.

B: Yeah

J: I mean, if you’re with the fellas, your speech is a little looser.

B: A lotta more...a lot more foul language.

J: A lot more slang. Can you think of a time when your language use was a help to you? I mean you, personally, because I know you well, personally...you're a good speaker. With your voice, your loudness, and the way you talk, and your language use, your quick tongue, you gotta sharp tongue. To me it's hella interesting. Was there a time that you ever noticed that your ability to use your language was a help? Like whether it was talking to bosses, or whether gettin' jobs, or interviews or whatever?

B: No, more like on the streets.

J: On the streets, your language use was a help, like in what way?

B: Well, in different parts of the city, growing up, you're in the projects...you know you have to adjust to their environment sometimes.

J: What would you do to your speech?

B: Well, a lot more foul language, and fast and ready for, you know...you have to be more aggressive.

J: From my point of view, that was easy for you to do. It wasn't a problem.

B: No, it wasn't.

J: Do you consider yourself a gifted speaker?

B: Not really...an average speaker.

J: Even on this level? Even on the street level, you know what I mean?

B: Yeah, personally, you know, it hasn't took me over the top and it hasn't buried me neither [both laughing].

J: Do you react to people who speak different languages and dialects than your own; do you react to them differently?

B: Sometimes, it's annoying, you know, if you're uhhh, say for instance, you're at the job, you have people from different countries, you know, and they're gathered together, they're grouped, and they have their own group. And they're talking uhh, different languages, of course you feel like well, "What, are they talking shit about me?" Cause that happens, we have a lot of Filipinos on the job. They congregate together, and then who knows what they're sayin, but you know. Really, it doesn't affect me, you know, but it would be nice if uhh, I can understand what they're saying too.

J: Do you think being bilingual is an asset? If you could be perfectly bilingual, and like, if you could speak another language, would you like to have...

B: Most definitely, yeah.

J: You speak Spanish fairly well though!

B: Yeah, it's broken though, you know. But, uhh yeah, it can help you a lot in life you know, job opportunities and you know, and when you travel then when you meet people at least you can have a conversation and it's easier to get around.

J: About the language and the Excelsior, so what do you think of it, how do we speak in Excelsior? Do we speak our own dialect? Do we have our own terms or terminology?

B: We have a lot of terms that are kind of blunt that we would use towards other friends, you know, like "horse cock" and, you know, different terms that we would use..."trick!"

J: Do you think you made up a lot of them?

B: Well, some of 'em, some of 'em other people had brought different ones into da neighborhood too. But yeah, other than that, no, the city is kind of uhh, everybody melts together I think, you know, you can go anywhere else...

J: Cause I've heard people from other neighborhoods say, "Damn, them guys from Excelsior they talk weird." Because I think we use a lot of jargon, we use a lot of slang, a lot of terms, and we have a lot of different interests I think. And we have a lot of different, like I said terms or expressions or shit.

B: Expressions!

J: Like, I've heard people trip off how we call cars "runners," like, if something's a runner, "Aww that shit's a runner." Like, what else'd we used to say?

B: Ponies, like, "He got ponies."

J: Oh yeah, "That shit got ponies!" (meaning horsepower)

B: There was a lot of different, uhh, gestures that we used. But basically they were gestures, they weren't any, you know, just made up gestures that were funny at that, you know. They would "cap" on somebody. "You fruit," "you homo," those are just... "Heshes," "sluts with nuts."

J: When you're having a conversation with someone, do things like age and gender have an influence on how you speak? Someone's physical size, if someone's smaller, might you change your speech for someone who's way bigger or do you change your speech for situations like that?

B: Naww, no not, no I don't think so.

J: So, do you think people consider some languages or some dialects better than others?

B: Well..that, truthfully, it's not...some people have a different English dialects than other, and that's just the way it is. And, they choose to take their dialect, their English dialect and alter it to the dialect that they like, with different terms that they use.

J: But do you think society in general looks at some dialects as better than others? Do you think society looks down on people who speak what we might call our neighborhood English, or African American Vernacular English as opposed to Standard English?

B: At one time, yeah I believed there was a difference, but now, not really, because you got CEO's, you got movie stars using slang, more like "rapper" slang what they would use to rap. So, you know, now it's become more common for everybody to break away from the school taught proper English. Of course, everybody can speak the proper school type of English that you learn in school but everybody can speak the slang too. And it's more common as you watch the Academy Awards and you see people from whatever, the Hamptons, the richest places, Beverly Hills and they can break down. And Snoop Doggy "izzy fo shizzy fanizzy" and all that.

J: So maybe [it's looked down upon] less and less all the time, because maybe cause pop culture is infiltrating into main stream, becoming main stream.

B: It's powerful, it's very powerful, and that's what's changing everything.

J: Do you think people have ever had stereotypes about how you speak or stereotyped you because of what's come out of your mouth? People ever treated you a certain way depending on your language use?

B: Yeah, it's happened, it's happened different times. Some people may stereotype me and say oh he looks Latin. Some people say oh, he's Italian, you know, they just jump back and forth, you know.

J: Has someone ever said you spoke like a black person? Has someone ever said that to you?

B: No

J: People have said that to me a couple times. How much of a connection do you think there is between your language and your identity? Is your language use part of your identity?

B: Yeah, of course, because you know, sometimes I'm very uhh, up front and that's the type of person that I am too, you know I actually...you know I race motorcycles, I have to be aggressive and sometimes I keep that aggression in my speech too, you know, so yeah it ties together.

J: Yeah, I think it's quite a bit, cause to me your language use sticks out about you.

B: It's aggressive a lot.

J: It's loud, it's funny, it's...it's magnetic.

B: It changes; it's a roller coaster. It's a roller coaster. I mean, sometimes I don't know if I'm comin' or goin'. (both laughing)

J: I've always liked your language use, it's always been funny to me. A lot of people let it get them upset or whatever, but I always thought it was funny, I always liked it... I always thought your shit was funny. Who do you think are the best speakers, or rappers or cappers or storytellers in the neighborhood?

B: Well, uhh, there's Moose, Moose gets off...Dirk comes up with some good ones.

J: Dirk gets down.

B: Tom B. comes up with some good ones. Most of, just about everybody in the neighborhood. Because that's part of their character, and actually that's a way to defend yourself.

J: Yeah, that's good.

B: You have to be on top of it. They're trying to come down on you. You gotta rebound. You too, you come down on me too. You know what I mean; you come up with some good ones every now and then too.

J: Yeah, but, you and Dirk and Tom, are like, you guys are probably like...that's the top level right there.

B: Moose, Moose comes up with 'em.

J: Oh yeah, Moose, Moose! Well yeah, but he ain't around so much no more. Like, our generation, oh man, you guys are just...

B: Mario can cap, Stroke Lacone, puts down a good one.

J: So do you recognize your language use as a tool? Do you feel like, if you walk into someplace, you got your mouthpiece on; do you realize or recognize that as a tool?

B: Most likely, yeah.

J: I mean your personal language use, like we talked about; do you recognize yourself as having...that's a tool for you? You walk in and you're a confident speaker, do you consider yourself a confident speaker? You walk right in and start talking, right?

B: Yeah, of course. You have to. In situations that I've been in, you know, uhh, you gotta do whatever you gotta do.

J: I think in this neighborhood most people have a pretty good language...pretty good language faculty. What about the language group that we belong to in the neighborhood? Do you think it's mostly the same racial background or what not, in this neighborhood? What do you think this neighborhood is mostly made of?

B: Well, it's been quite a few years since [that] I've actually been away...separated myself, and before I separated myself it was mixed, some blacks, some whites, some Filipinos.

J: Mostly Latin I think.

B: Well, at one time when I was younger it was not. It was a lot of whites, you know. And there was only maybe two or three black families in the whole neighborhood. And there was Latins, but there was a lot of Filipinos too. But it was more...it was at one time, we're talkin when I was six or seven years old, it was kind of more, there was more whites. A lot of Irish.

J: I noticed growin up [in] my peer group. Well, was some Latins, but I hung out with a lot of whites. The Murphys.

B: Yeah, the Murphys. Me, Jay...

J: You ain't white!

B: Well, I ain't white...

J: Well, you're half white.

B: Well, I ain't even half...my dad's Italian and my great-grandmother, I told you is from Spain.

J: So you're mom is white, right?

B: Italian, 100% Italian, on both sides.

J: Oh, your mom's Italian. So you ain't white at all.

B: Well, no I'm Latin all the way...Latin language.

J: Black? Did you say black?

B: No, I said I'm Latin. I'm only black from the waist down [both laughing hysterically].

J: And then Jay is white. Dirk is Latin.

B: But there was Latins too, but it was kinda...it was...

J: Mixed.

B: Nobody really spoke a different language on the street at all. When we grew up it was only English and that was it.

J: Yeah, if people spoke Spanish around you...

B: Wetback! "Hey, you wetback."

J: Right away, huh? I remember that yeah, I got it for that. Cause I never had friends that spoke Spanish growin up, but if I saw someone or I heard someone speak Spanish I would speak it. You know, like no problem, I never even tripped, but I would always get it [teased]. I remember one time we were at Alex's gym, and we were working out, and you had some cousins down or something, young guys like you, not your cousin Johnny, but someone else. Some other people that were with you, that spoke Spanish, we were young, it was...we were like maybe 18, 19 at the most, and we were in there, me, you, Morris...and you brought them down. And I was in there, Alex's gym, and you guys came walkin in, right, and they spoke Spanish and we were all speakin Spanish us three, right, and this and that and this and that. And you said, "Hey all right man, that's fuckin enough, this ain't fuckin Cuba." [Laughing]

B: I remember you were up on top workin out, up on the top, uhh, floor there and we came in on the bottom. And you were up there and then you came down.

J: And we were talkin Spanish and you go, "Man this ain't fuckin Cuba," that was fuckin hilarious. I used to get it for that though, if I spoke Spanish people would always like razz me for that, but I didn't trip. That's funny, that's funny. A couple last ones...okay, is there anyone whose speech you admire, or that you like? Whether they're famous or not, or someone you know in the past or present, someone whose speech you say, "Damn!" Do you trip off speech. I think you kinda must, because I think you use your speech.

B: You wanna know why, because you know, the honest to god's truth is speech brings power. Okay because uhh, when you have to go up against uhh, like I've been in, in Union negotiations and you're in front of the owners of a six billion dollar company okay, and they all have degrees and they're well educated older people, if you came in there talking trash around there, they just take it with a grain of salt, they [the speaker] don't have no emphasis. They won't take...your credibility will fall off and that's the truth. Cause you're working around attorneys too, you know, we have attorneys along side and they don't...you have to be cautious of what you say and how you say it. Now, possibility from my experience, if there was uhh, if say other blacks, which we *do* have in the Union, and if they were...

J: You got some of those in the Union there, huh?

B: Yeah, there is there's quite a few black, now, and well now it's everybody, since the war broke out, everybody's in the Union. They need as many men as they can get, but there are black friends of mine in the Union, and if they're on the committee, their English isn't the best, you know, the school's...actually taught from school, you know the majority. But, uhh, I would imagine that they would have to take...but, if they were speaking it [English], it'd be different from me speaking it.

J: Why is that? Why do you think that is? Speaking it, meaning, speaking like African American Vernacular English? Like, "I be, we be..." okay something like that.

B: Yes, yes.

J: I keep using that example, but there's many more different terms and examples.

B: Yeah that's the way it seems to...

J: But why though?

B: And you know how I know for a fact, because my boss, he tries to speak college master degree English in front of the company, and actually he's stupid, he can't barely read or write. But he makes sure that his speech is uhh, first class, to try to bring...I guess that's how he represents his self as being you know, uhh...that's they way he wants to represent himself. You know, he doesn't...[speak] no broken English at all. But, see he uses that for his own power to be able to you know, talk to business people that are higher up in the company, you know, some of the corporate people.

J: You said speech is power a minute ago, do you think that...so in your personal case has there ever been a time when you've gotten to a place where you had to go somewhere, talk to someone, or you felt like your speech was inadequate? Like when you didn't have, like, where the level of English was beyond where you felt comfortable usin or have you ever felt something like that?

B: It's happened, well, as the more tension builds, then the English language changes with the anger. You use...you know sometimes you get out of focus and you start, you know, maybe swearing in your sentence...using bad words in your sentence. Like for instance, "Well, I don't like the way you fuckin treat us," okay, you see, and instead of saying, "I don't believe that we're being treated properly."

J: Right, right, right. Okay, okay, okay.

B: So that's happened quite a few times and I was told by the Union too, you know, you have to restrain yourself from any type of foul language when you have the opportunity to talk to the company in these negotiations, even when we have trustee meetings and stuff, because I was a trustee of the Union. And, that's just the way it is.

J: When you talk to someone for the first time, do you pay attention to their speech and are you making...do you think, like, automatically you're making assessments...

B: Judgments.

J: Judgments, yeah, exactly, very good. If you're making judgments, assessments, about their speech, like, do you think right away as soon as when someone opens their mouth are you taking in information and thinking okay, "They're from a place or they're from this." Do you think you make...decisions about their educational level?

B: You can...it's, it's...well, education level, no. But where they may have grown up or where they could have lived, you know. If it was San Francisco, what part of the city they grew up in.

J: Ahh, you think you can tell even what part of the city.

B: Yeah, possibility. Because if you go to the Marina and you go down, like...I used to go to Sunset Beach and boogie board with...you went with me, now I surf out there.

J: Yeah, you tore my towel off (laughter). "And the mother fucker..."

B: Don't write no books about that (laughter). But when I met those guys down there you know, they came from wealthy families, they lived in big homes, they went to better...well they had...their schools were better, better schools than what we had, what we had in our neighborhood. So there was a difference, you know, when you meet other people with their English.

J: Right. Social class, do you think you can tell social class from language?

B: You could, yeah, most definitely.

J: Yeah. Even today, even though I mean I've been at school for a long time, but even today if I'm talking around people and I feel comfortable and I get loose like I always hear later, oh yeah, where are you from, or yeah, we could tell, you know what I mean. They always comment on my, like when I get loose with them if I'm feeling good or whatever if I'm chillin or especially if we're out partying or whatever, and then I always hear things about...people always make comments about my speech, "where are you from," and, "oh yeah, you sound kinda like..."

B: They wouldn't think you're going for a master's degree.

J: Maybe that...

B: You already know that for a fact. If you're out on the street with...say we were down at a club, just use City Nights as a reference. And then a lot of us from the neighborhood are hanging out and then we see other guys and maybe you might say, "wassup, hey

wassup,” you know. And other than that with the way you say, wassup and the way you bullshit with them there, I guarantee you that they’re not gonna think you’re a Spanish major.

J: Right, right, or in school.

B: Yeah, or going for a master’s degree. But see, so you can’t always judge the book by its cover. Cuz you don’t know what people...how smart somebody is. None of us are geniuses, but some people are a little above the game more than others.

J: Right. One more question about the neighborhood language: So you think if we’re in a group we’re speaking, we’re having a conversation, as other people join the group so do you think conversation changes depending on who joins the group, like say if an outsider joins the group, do you think the language use changes? Because of course in our group, our peer group there’s a hierarchy.

B: It doesn’t...it doesn’t change. I hate to tell you. It just may get louder. You talk the same, you know, we speak the same. Well, if outsiders come, it wouldn’t be but one person or so. I’ve never been around where 7 or 8 people from a different neighborhood come up, then you know you’re figurin there’s problems, somethin’s going on.

J: So the language use probably stays the same.

B: It’s the same. For the better of the bay area...San Francisco I should say.

J: Right, okay. I think that’s good. We’re signin out with B. Thanks a lot, I appreciate that. We’re out.

Interview with youngsters from the hood

Joe: Start with the nigga shit.

Tony: The first page is what, like, deep shit?

J: So everyone knows that in this neighborhood we use the word, nigga, right? We all use the word nigga to talk to each other. So why do you think that we can use that? Do you use that in front of black people that you don't know?

Nick: Naw.

J: You don't?

Gill: Sometimes, yeah, it just come out.

Frank: My bitch is straight black and I always call her a nigga in front of everybody. We're at a restaurant and I'll be like, "wassup my nigga," fuckin wid her.

J: Check this out though, if you weren't standin right on this corner, cuz we're right in the hood...

F: Yeah, yeah, I remember being in juvenile goin' "Wassup my nigga?" you know you always say, "Wassup my nigga?"

J: Even to black dudes you don't know?

F: Yeeah.

G: Yeeah.

J: Like if it's black dudes you don't know?

F: I still do, like I told you, to hella black folks.

J: But people that you don't know?

G: I don't know 'em, I just meet 'em and then I still say it.

J: So right off the bat?

G: Yeeah.

J: Like you won't say dude or man first and then switch it up?

G: If it's a cool ass nigga, then you know, that's my nigga. That's my nigga right there.

J: Right, right. Has someone black ever asked you not to use that word?

F: No.

G: No.

T: No.

N: No.

J: In your life? It's happened to me twice in my life. But I...

T: But in younger crowds it's like more accepted.

J: You think?

T: When I was in high school I couldn't just say nigga around nobody, it was drama. Now it's more accepted.

J: Right, right. Why is that? Why do you think it is we can say that? Of course not anyone can say that in mixed company and not be offensive. So what is it? Is it color, what is it?

N: Hood shit.

G: It's personal, it is like he says, it's personal. It's, "Wassup my nigga," and then, "Wassup nigger." You feel me, there's a difference.

J: What does it though, what makes it that it's okay? What about you or how you say it...

N: Alright, when you're from the hood and niggas know you're *really* from the hood, you're a neighborhood nigga.

J: How do they know that?

G: Because they know you from the neighborhood.

J: How can they know? What if you're in another neighborhood, you'll say nigga to someone you don't even know, right off the bat?

(At this point another neighborhood guy walks up to the van where we have been conducting this interview. He is known as Scruff and he is half black.)

J: Scruff, has anyone said the word “nigga” in front of you and you felt it was disrespectful? Have you ever said to someone, “Don’t use that in front of me?”

Scruff: Fuck yeah!

J: You have, why, when?

S: I ain’t gonna let a nigga say “nigger.”

J: No, no no, I’m not saying that. I’m saying, “nigga.” I’m sayin “nig-GA, nig-GA.”

S: Ah, thas ah-ight.

[Everyone talking; inaudible]

J: So listen, so listen, listen my nigga! (laughter). So, someone ain’t never said, “My nigga,” to you and this or that...

S: Hey, yo, are you recording this, my nigga?

J: Yeah, this is my thesis.

S: Aw, fuck that. (Scruff turns and walks away frustrated)

T: (laughing) He’s always stressed out about shit.

J: Hey, come ‘ear, nigga.

T: He thinks he’s America’s Most Wanted.

J: Scruff ain’t wanted. Okay but what I’m saying...

T: Hey Scruff, come over here and answer these questions, dog.

G: Come ‘ear, nigga.

J: Hey, help me get my degree, nigga.

(Scruff, who had only walked several feet away towards the corner, returns and rejoins the conversation)

J: Naw, listen to this. You ain’t never been around...

S: It's the way you present yo'self, my nigga, to another nigga, you feel me? If you present yourself, nigga... as like a real nigga [inaudible] and if it's a square, if you's a square and the muthafucka walk up to a black person and's like, "Wassup my nigga?" (this is said in an artificially high voice) you know. They gon' be like, "Nigga who the fuck is you? You got me fucked up, nigga. You ain't a part of the game, you ain't a part of this street." [But] If you part of the street you could come any way you want to.

G: It's how you come, basically.

J: It's how you come.

G: Your attitude.

[Several seconds of inaudible speech, everyone talking at once]

J: So it's appearance and attitude. I feel like, I could like... someone who ain't from the hood; I could teach them how to say those few words and they could say it and not be offensive. I mean, I think it's all about how it comes out. If it comes out natural, then you in and if it doesn't...

G: It's a thug thing, though.

S: If you from the street, right, you gonna recognize a street person, my nigga. Now, if it's another-ass nigga, or a square or whatever you call it, nerd, whatever you want to call it, go and walk up to you and go, "I feel you my nigga, wooo, wooo, wooo." They gonna be like, "Nigga, hold on blood you ain't, you can't say that my nigga. What the fuck is you tryin to say?" It's all your personal attitude and the way you come at niggas and the way you [inaudible].

T: Joe, you're sayin you could teach somebody to say it and you don't think they'd get sweated? Hell naw!

S: I could teach anybody to say it, my nigga.

J: I think like, what makes me think that, what made me...

N: It ain't even something that's thought, it's that's taught, blood (I think that G spoke thought and taught backwards here). It's either you or it ain't. Some people's tryin to not be like niggas but that's just how you is. That's just by nature. You ain't tryin to come out the car like a hood nigga, you're not tryin to be cool, my nigga it's just you're another nigga, that's another nigga.

G: I don't be tryin to talk like that at school but I talk straight ghetto, basically, that's what I do.

J: If you're out here [on the streets]?

G: Naw, at school too. It's like I try to talk cool like, you know ah mean, like I'm at school but I still come off across with all that Ebonics 'n shit.

J: Do you get told at school not to speak that way?

G: Hell naw. This ain't nothin.

J: What about in younger classes?

G: Younger?

J: Like, when you was grade school, shit like that? I'm not just sayin "nigga," but what would you call Ebonics? What is Ebonics?

G: It's a lot of slang, it's you know, how we talk out here, how we talk everyday. That's Ebonics. We don't talk right.

J: Ah, who made you think, why do you think it's not right, though?

G: Cuz it's a school thing, that's the only reason, I go to school. School is different.

F: Man, once I seen Russell Simmons call Donald Trump, "my nigga," I knew it was over dare, blood.

J: Do you think you weren't exposed to Standard English enough?

G: No, I was. It's jus' I belong to both worlds and it just comes out when I try to like use Standard English in school. I'll come, when I participate in class, I'll use something like from the ghetto, basically. And then I have to retract myself and say, Naw this is what I really meant.

J: Do people ever say you talk black.

G: Hell yeeah, hella girls, hella girls tell me, "you're ghetto." I be like, "how am I ghetto? Like, that's the way I talk, don't hate me."

S: But I'm a ghetto ass nigga too. [But] sometimes I talk regular...

J: What do you say? What is regular to you though? What is regular? What do you mean by that?

[inaudible]

J: When do you speak Standard English? When do you have to speak Standard English? Do you ever make a choice, where you think... Do you ever come across a person where you make a choice...

N: Hell yeeah, when the police come.

J: Oh, alright, you change your speech for the police?

N: Well, I don't be like, "my nigga" and I don't cuss. I be like, "Oh, hello, how are you doing officer."

J: Oh, do you really? That's funny to me, dude. That's interesting to me because, you know, that's what I say what made me ever start to trip off the different languages, you know, different dialects. Because when I was young I saw if you talk to the cops, you know, "woo woo woo woo, nigga this, nigga that" you know they fucked you up. But if you talk to the cops cool, the way they talk, then you got straight love, you know I always saw that. That was the first thing that made me even ever trip off of that, you know what I mean? Do you talk different when you talk to the cops, or do you talk the same?

G: Everybody talks different [when they talk to the cops].

J: What do you do to your language? What do you do to it? What do you fuckin change about it?

S: Cuz that mutha fucka's right there can change your life, nigga, so you gon' change your words.

[laughter from all]

J: What do you change it to?

S: Cuz he can lock you up, nigga, you talk hella ghetto to a mutha fucka [a cop] he got the authority, nigga, thow yo ass in jail and do whatever the fuck he want. So I'm goin, yeah, you know, "I ain't doin nothin officer, woo woo woo woo." Nigga, I'ma change my way. Just for the simple fact, nigga, that he's a whole different- ass person, he's another side of life, you feel me?

J: But what do you do to your speech though, what do you do to your speech?

T: To you it might be cool but to him it's a nigga that ain't right.

G: I throw out every single Ebonics I ever learned.

J: What are Ebonics words? Like what? Like: I be, or he be, we be, is that part of it?

G: That ain't proper English.

J: Alright, you guys jammin? Alright, we're up.

N: Alright, we'll see you OGs.

Interview with Tony, Ron and Shane

J: So what do you think a dialect is?

R: A dialect is like, people who speak English in California have a certain dialect compared to people who speak English in New York. They tawlk like New Yorwkers, they have a different dialect.

J: That's not more of an accent?

R: There's different words that are, that they use over there that are more common than as words over here are more common to us. There's different dialects of English. What this guy's talkin is Ebonics.

J: That's not a dialect?

R: No! (emphatically)

J: What is Ebonics to you, what is Ebonics? What does that mean?

S: No really (directed at R). You think, what do you think, you think it's just niggas speakin Ebonics.

J: That's ok though.

S: No, no that's just how R is.

R: [inaudible] ... should learn proper English.

J: What's proper English?

T: So why is the Boston or New York way of speaking English, that's what everyone speaking [over there]. Why is that not proper English?

J: Good question.

R: It is proper English. It's a different dialect of English.

J: It's the way they were taught.

S: No, R is in a generation that would discriminate on you for talking like that unless he knew you good like he knows me or you to where I'm in a generation to where, you know, I know his way of thinking but then I'm right there on the edge where I got both places [inaudible]. But I wouldn't discriminate on a muther fucker because of that.

R: But it's still English, it's just a different dialect of English. Some words that they use there... If you go to England instead of saying I'm getting on the elevator they wouldn't know what you were talking about. You gotta say, "I'm getting on the lift." Or something like that, that's English, *true* English.

J: Why do you think that that's a dialect and what we speak in the neighborhood, young people of all race and color, why is that not a dialect?

R: 'Cause those words don't exist in the dictionary, in the English dictionary.

S: Yeah, but they (meaning AAVE speakers) have a dictionary, you could buy that'll translate every word (S. is right on the money, here. See: *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner*, by Dr. Geneva Smitherman).

J: Yeah, there is a dictionary.

T: They got it (meaning a AAE dictionary) now.

S: And it translates all this shit for the squares.

R: You can't go to a job interview and go, "Hey my nigga, gimme a job."

J: Ok, yeah, that's probably true too, though. But don't you think that if you went to a job interview here that if you spoke England English it would be just as ineffective.

R: If I spoke English?

J: *England* English or some other dialect of English other than... What you're talking about I think is African American English is what it's called like by linguists. What we would call Ebonics because that's what the media has called it.

S: No, you know what it is? This is basically the breakdown of it. It started off just straight niggas, right, talkin like that.

J: By "niggas" you mean black people?

S: Yeah, yeah, straight nigga niggas, right. Then it worked in to the fuckin uh, into other races but like the drug dealer ring, all the drug dealers and shit started next, you know, that wasn't black, picked it up. And now it's just fuckin, you know, it's from rap music too. It all started with rap, right. And that's how it spread out through the other cultures. And now it's at the point, to where, like I said, you walk in a junior high or a high school in San Francisco and *all* the kids talk like that. So it isn't, so people still see, you know, they're used to back in the day it started like with all, if you wasn't a nigga you was a drug dealer or a bad person if you was talkin [like] that.

T: That's why it's hated on.

S: So, the older generation still sees that.

T: That's why all the questions come up about it.

S: But see, they can't be like that. You can't be like that though (meaning having a blanket negative view of AAVE speakers), I mean like me or you, we already know you can't be like that because, like I said, you walk into a school in Frisco and all the kids talk like that, dude, all races. So it isn't, you know, it's moved on now, it could be anybody [speaking AAVE]. You can't stereotype it to a hoodlum, or like a street person...

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