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Students' Right to Their Own Language

CONFERENCE ON COLLEGE COMPOSITION
AND COMMUNICATION COMMITTEE
ON LANGUAGE POLICY

copy
for
PVC

EXPLANATION OF ADOPTION

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To Readers of CCC:

This special issue of CCC includes the resolution on language adopted by members of CCCC in April 1974; the background statement explaining and supporting that resolution; and the bibliography that gives sources of some of the ideas presented in the background statement, besides offering those interested in the subject of language some suggested references for further reading. This publication climaxes two years of work, by dedicated members of CCCC, toward a position statement on a major problem confronting teachers of composition and communication: how to respond to the variety in their students' dialects.

A first draft of the resolution on language was presented to the Executive Committee at its meeting in March 1972, by a committee specially appointed by the officers in the fall of 1971 to prepare a position statement on students' dialects. After some amendments adopted by the Executive Committee at its meeting in November 1972, the resolution reads:

We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language.



student texts were not down-graded because of the use of Black discourse features, a fact that suggests that teaching African American students—especially or including basic writers—to develop their voices within the context of their own literacy and rhetorical traditions can help them to avoid the tangled discourses famously alluded to by Mina Shaughnessy in *Errors and Expectations*.

The most frequently used Black discourse features were “cultural values,” “community consciousness” and “field dependency.” The nature of the prompt, its basis in the Black experience, seems to have influenced the students’ heightened involvement. Among the many Black discourse features, it is interesting to note the employment of field dependency. Generally, field dependency functions in opposition to the “objectivity” and “neutrality” that characterize academic discourse. Field dependency is the hallmark of the Black style, a signature feature. It is as salient a Black discourse feature as “zero copula” is for AAVE syntax.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Instead of analyzing a single text or concentrating on a single student, we will look here at several samples from various students’ texts in order to convey a feel for the Black discourse-styled texts produced.

Student #1 Winter 97

By feeding into the stereotypes that America has created the African American race will never advance being ignorant, militant, and extremely violent because all that is just adding fuel to the fire. Instead we need to take that same energy and convert it into something positive and productive for the upliftment of our race. By creating wise, well researched criticism America [have] no choice but to listen especially if the information that is being presented is reaching through to miseducated Americans, (not only the African-Americans) and is *turning them on to the light*. Causing positive ruckus is far more beneficial than negative ruckus and you can’t go to prison for speaking the truth. That’s a right we are protected under by the Constitution. *By enlightening the darkened* we will be threatening the “secure” establishments America has created to prolong oppression.

There are several Black discourse patterns that can be discerned above. One pattern above is *rhythmic, dramatic, evocative/magistic language* use. Notice the play above on “light.” The “miseducated Americans” are those Blacks and non-Blacks who have bought into racial stereotypes. The rhetor has turned this stereotype upside down and inside out, revealing another Black language pattern, *signifying*. The “darkened” or the “miseducated” will be “enlightened.” The quality of light has been traditionally associated with “knowledge,” “goodness,” and, hence White folks. Darkness has traditionally been associated with a “state of ignorance,” or “evil,” and consequently, Black folks. But here, the Blacks possess or will possess the qualities of knowledge and light. This is an instance of signifying, also known as semantic inversion.

Student #2 Winter 97

Unity consists of several movements that need to take place within the African American community. I believe first and foremost we, as a people, must deal with the disease of Black on Black crime. We must cry out to our young brothers out there who are destroying themselves, and everyone around them, by murdering one another. I remember very recently hear a quote on the radio stating that the number one killer of young, Black men today is young, Black men. When we begin to really take militant steps in an effort to stop the murder rate in our communities, then we will begin dealing with this deep seeded self-destruction and self-hate that has planted its poisons into the hearts and souls of our young adults. . . .

There are several Black discourse patterns that can be identified from the above essay excerpt. This essay demonstrates “direct address/conversational tone)” in that it assumes an immediacy with the audience. The rhetoric is directed toward Black people. For this reason, the writer uses the pronoun “we” and the ethnolinguistic idiom “brothers,” which is a lexical item for Black men. Also interesting is the rhetor/writer’s incorporation of a narrative interspersed as a testimony to Black-on-Black crime. The most interesting Black discourse pattern here though is the use of rhythmic dramatic, evocative/magistic language: “. . . [W]hen we begin dealing with this deep seeded self-destruction and self-hate that has planted its poisons into the hearts and souls of our young adults. . . .” “Deep seeded” is itself an instance of “verbal inventiveness.” The standard term that this item brings to mind is “deep seated.” However, the writer here creates “deep seeded” as it is more in line with the writer’s meaning expressed through the metaphor of poison garden. This garden has been grown through the seeds of “self-hate” and “self-destruction” that have been planted in Black communities.

Student #3 Winter 97

Trust and honor make up the soul of African-Americans. Is that trust and honor still with us? Where did it go? During a time when we were lost in a strange land some four centuries ago the only face to bring comfort was that of another African lost in the same wilderness far from home, far from our roots. Within those last four hundred years we have struggled to gain our freedom and our African hearts. The price we paid for this American freedom was our ability to trust and the fire to come together as one. Our satisfaction with freedom in America overshadowed our dream to be Africans again. Four hundred years of losing our languages, morals, and originality has reduced us to rearrange our ways to seek the same gods that caused Europeans to bring us to this country, such as money, cars, and a million dollar home. I say, head for the underground railroad one more time African, because you are not free if you can’t love your brother.

The above writer/rhetor is clearly adopting the rhetorical strategy of directing his/her rhetoric to a Black audience. The discourse evidences no nonstandard Black vernacular syntax but is yet styled in AAVE discourse. Notice the conversational tone/direct address, the use of the questions, and

do not deal with ASC or AAVE Syntax scales so they will not be discussed any further. The present analyses deal most directly with the assessment of the students' writing and use of Black discourse features in the writing. These Black discourse patterns were also used to determine the level of AAVE in the students' writing samples. The primary data reported here focus on discourse and rhetorical analyses of an out-of-class essay, non-impromptu, where students had time to work outside of class on the essays for at least two weeks. This set of essays has been subjected to discourse/rhetorical analysis and compared with other studies of culturally different student writing with respect to the presence or absence of selected discourse features. Black discourse was assessed by measuring the frequency and distribution of such features as they occurred in students' texts. Discourse features were coded based on a modified version of Smitherman's (p. 191 in this book) typology. The researcher and an assistant independently coded essays and then met to compare and synthesize their findings. Forty-seven essays were given a discourse rating from five to one on a continuum from Black to European-styled discourse, with five representing a highly Black discourse-styled essay and one a European discourse-styled essay. Features of Black discourse that occurred in the data from this study are the following:

1. Rhythmic, dramatic, evocative language. Use of metaphors, significations, vivid imagery. Example: "Our history through the eyes of white America after it has been cut, massacred and censored is pushed down Blacks throat."
2. Proverbs, aphorisms, Biblical verses. Employment of familiar maxims or Biblical verses. Example: "... there is a time and place for everything."
3. Sermonic tone reminiscent of traditional Black church rhetoric, especially in vocabulary, imagery, metaphor. Example: "The man should once again be the leader of the household as God intended and the female... the help-mate."
4. Direct address, conversational tone. These two are not necessarily the same, but often co-occur. Speaking directly to audience. Also, can be a kind of call/response. Example: "Would you rather be respected as Aunt Jemima and Sambo or Queen Nzinga...? As yourself or someone else...?"
5. Cultural references. Reference to cultural items/icons that usually carry symbolic meaning in the AAVE communities. Example: "There are still those Uncle-Toms... out to get you."
6. Ethnolinguistic idioms. Use of language that bears particular meaning in Black communities. Example: "... Black english is a 'Black Thang' you wouldn't understand... That's on the real!"
7. Verbal inventiveness, unique nomenclature. Example: "... [W]e will begin dealing with this deep seeded self-destruction and self-hate..."
8. Cultural values, community consciousness. Expressions of concern for the development of African Americans; concern for welfare of entire community, not just individuals. Example: "Before Blacks can come together in racial harmony they need to strengthen their own people. Trying to unite... will only cause more problems if we have not taken care of our own business."

9. Field dependency. Involvement with and immersion in events and situations; personalizing phenomena; lack of distance from topics and subjects. Example: "... [w]e should first try to accomplish better race matters within ourselves. We can do this by patronizing and supporting our Black community."
10. Narrative sequencing. Dramatic retelling of a story implicitly linked to topic, to make a point. Reporting of events dramatically acted out and narrated. Relating the facts and personal sociopsychological perspective on them. Example: "I have learned... some things that never crossed my path in thirteen years of miseducation... This was very important for me because I... felt that [my] writing was wrong and far beyond improving..."
11. Tonal semantics (repetition of sounds or structures to emphasize meaning). Example: "European views are the rules..." "We are victimized..." [structure repeated four times in subsequent sentences].
12. Signifying. Use of indirection to make points. May employ oppositional logic, overstatement, understatement, and/or reliance on reader's knowledge of implicit assumption that is taken to be common knowledge (shared worldview). Example: "In light of having limited means of getting first hand information we then have had to rely on books and the media to provide us with an unbiased account of information... we know how honest the media is."
13. Call/response (structural). Writer returns repetitiously to the prompt as a structural device, checking for constant connection with the question or text at hand. A repeated invocation of the language from the prompt, manifested as a refrain. Example: "... be a member of the AAVE Culture and literate..." "Black and literate..." "... Blacks being literate" (repeated four times).
14. Testifying. Telling the truth through story. Bearing witness to the righteousness of a condition or situation. Example: "I use [the works of Angelou and Douglass] to liberate myself from my hardships to come."
15. Topic association. A series of associated segments that may seem anecdotal in character, linked implicitly to a particular topical event or theme, but with no explicit statement of the overall theme (Ball 1992).

Essays were analyzed for actual occurrences of the above-mentioned features and given an overall rating. The typology above is based on Smitherman (p. 206), except where indicated. All of the examples, however, were gleaned from students' essays.

Quantitative analyses focused on correlation of writing assessment scores and Black discourse scores. The demographic and language attitude questionnaires along with field notes are used to supplement analyses of texts and students' experiences in the course.

PROCEDURES

The research population of African American college students received training that involved four components: (a) instruction in academic writing/rhetorical practices incorporating rhetorical and discursive practices of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) culture, (b) examination of the African