

The Creole Conundrum:  
Bilingual education and the issue of "Official Languages"  
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*This paper expands on a brief column, "Spanish/English Bilingual Education," published in The Clearing House, in 1994. This expanded version explores consequences of one of the basic assumptions underlying effective bilingual education: classroom teachers must be comfortable with their students' home language(s). In the United States, however, relevant educational systems recognize neither Ebonics nor Spanglish as "official" home languages. School districts, as a result, do not seek to hire teachers proficient in Ebonics or in Spanglish. In both cases, such unwise rejection results from political reservations, not linguistic ones. In 1979, the "Ann Arbor Decision" recognized (inner-city Detroit, Michigan,) Black English as a Federal Government "official language," eligible for bilingual education. Yet recently, when the Oakland, California School Board tried to implement bilingual education for its African-American students, public outcry ensued: the Ann Arbor decision went ignored. Recent research indicates that Spanglish also meets the linguistic requirements for "language" status. However, the Texas Education Agency lists Spanish as an official language—but not Spanglish. The paper ends with a plea that bilingual education, if its goal is to teach a national written standard, needs to address the presence of creoles and creolized languages—such as Ebonics and Spanglish.*

### **Bilingual Education/ESL in Texas**

In Texas, Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1968 (popularly known as the federal Bilingual Education Act) served as the impetus for a sustained and positive emphasis on bilingual education. When that Act was officially eliminated on January 8, 2002 – replaced by the No Child Left Behind Act (popularly known as the English Language Acquisition Act – Texans demonstrated little,

if any, loss of support for the State's attempts to accommodate the continued need of students whose heritage language was impeding their understanding of English.

The switch from a bilingual emphasis to an English language acquisition emphasis, in other words, had little effect on the underlying desire to mainstream immigrant children as quickly and as efficiently as possible.

In fact, the public hardly knows the difference. For example, "Unless specifically exempted by the State Board of Education," writes a local resident to the San Antonio Express News in January of this year, "districts with more than 20 English learners in the same grade are required to offer bilingual education or another special Language Program" (White, 2007, 3H). Mr. White knew the law (somewhat), knew that the same two alternatives (bilingual education or ESL) still existed, but gave a plea that the State of Texas to use the latter – the "Special Language" - alternative.

In fact, the cited "20-student" concept reflects Mr. White's understanding of the old Bilingual Education Act. The present policy has no such quota: "It is the policy of the state that every student in the state who has a home language other than English and who is identified as limited English proficient shall be provided a full opportunity to participate in a bilingual education or English as a

second language program, as required in the Texas Education Code, Chapter 29, §1.002(a), ..." (Chapter 89, §89.1201(a)).

Our present code, does include a exceptions to this "every student" mandate - if art, music, physical education (and the like) are the courses being taught (Chapter 89, §89.1210.(f)).

Ascertaining which students qualify for the bilingual/ESL aid, predictably, involves specific procedures: "The home language survey shall be administered in English and Spanish; for students of other language groups, the home language survey shall be translated in the home language whenever possible. The home language survey shall contain the following questions.

- (1) "What language is spoken in your home most of the time?"
- (2) "What language does your child (do you) speak most of the time?" (Chapter 89, §89.1215.(b)).

Spanish is clearly the dominant home language. The non-Spanish speakers, however, do gain recognition – even if the assessment lacks the rigor of the Spanish: "If the home language of the students is other than Spanish, the district shall determine the students' level of proficiency using informal oral language assessment measures" (Chapter 89, §89.1225.(b)).

The Texas Education Agency keeps precise records of the number of limited English students. The most recent figures available

to the public are from the Spring 2000 state-wide implementation of a standardized test. In grades 3-8, Spanish was the official language of 999, 012 students; 11, 851 had "other than Spanish" home languages (Chapter 89, Appendix G). Close to a million Texas students, in other words, participated in the Spring 2000 Bilingual Education/ESL program.

### **"Official" home languages**

This effort to mainstream non-English speakers into functional Academic English speakers (at least in Texas) has met with commendable success. The word "commendable," of course, implies that more success is possible.

One major concept that eludes preciseness, a concept that has the potential of moving us beyond "commendable" lurks inside the word "language."

Merriam-Webster's Third New International Dictionary provides a prevailing definition, the definition that clearly underlines the concept of *language* in the concept *home language* within the No Child Left Behind Act: "the words, their pronunciation, and the methods of combining them, used and understood by a considerable community and established by long usage."

An updated definition, from Wikipedia, provides a comforting echo: "a system, used to communicate, comprised of a set of symbols

and a set of rules (or grammar) by which the manipulation of these symbols is governed. These symbols can be combined productively to convey new information, distinguishing languages from other forms of communication” (Wikipedia, March 15, 2007).

Linguists, of course, have found that such definitions totally miss the constantly changing nature of language. These definitions try to stabilize human behavior, which by its very nature is in constant flux. Even so, if one really chose to accept these definitions, each of the terms involved – *words, pronunciation, community, long usage, communication, symbols, grammar, and manipulation, governed, information* – defy precision. (Take the concept *symbols*, for example. Is the -s at the end a word? It means more-than-one! And why is it pronounced as a /z/ instead of an /s/?)

Linguists commonly cite Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish as examples of dialects of Scandinavian, on the grounds that speakers of these “codes” understand each other better than English dialect speakers from inner London and English dialect speakers from inner New Orleans can understand each other.

**Local Education Agencies do not seek to hire teachers proficient in Ebonics or in Spanglish**

Most colleges and universities in Texas require four years of a foreign language – if not for entrance purposes, for graduation purposes. Most college-bound secondary school students, therefore, opt to study that foreign language. The Texas Education Agency’s curriculum website for “Languages other than English” charmingly defines those language as “Any language other than English” (TEA. 3/13/2007 <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/curriculum/lote/lotefaq.html>).

In reality, students in Texas can meet their “foreign language” requirements by studying Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish – or Spanish. They cannot, however, meet that requirement by studying Cockney or Ebonics - or Spanglish.

Without any precise linkage between TEA’s Languages-Other-Than-English curriculum and its Bilingual-Education/ESL curriculum, the inadequate, yet common-sense, definition of “language” appears to prevail.

Long-standing research by linguists, however, clearly establishes that both Ebonics and Spanglish constitute home languages in Texas. Both “codes,” moreover fit even Merriam-Webster definition of a language because “the words, their pronunciation, and the methods of combining them, [are] used and understood by a considerable community and established by long usage.”

## **Ebonics**

Any discussion on Ebonics must recognize two different phenomena. The first phenomenon encompasses an ethnic marker – a unique sentence intonation that even educated African Americans employ in their various acrolects. The second phenomenon – the one that receives the majority attention, encompasses the basolect associated with uneducated, inner-city, speech.

My own interest in Black English (African American English, Ebonics, etc.) began with the research on east Austin, Texas, speech – resulting in my 1969 doctoral dissertation. While doing no further research myself (I spent 1969 through 1974 research Japanese dialects, in Japan, instead), I have kept up with the research.

During those thirty-seven years, the two major events that brought that research, albeit briefly, to public scrutiny were the 1980 ruling by the District Court in Michigan that inner city Detroit Black English constituted a unique *language* that deserved recognition by the Bilingual Education Act (Ann Arbor Decision, 1980) and the decision by the Oakland, California, school board to utilize *Ebonics* in its effort to teach standard English (Oakland Unified School District, 1996, 1997). (Because I participated in the discussion and the vote, I also like to think that the Linguistic Society of America's unanimous resolution to endorse the Oakland ISD decision also impacted public awareness.

The research on Ebonics during the past thirty-five years has been constant and insightful.

From my perspective the best single source for capsulating that research exists in the 2001 publication of the 1999 Georgetown Round Table on languages and linguistics (Alatis and Tan) I specifically refer to the articles written by Mufwene, by Fasold, by Murray, and by Wolfram.

“Salikoko Mufwene addresses one reason inner-city Ebonic speakers struggle against embracing “school” English. Citing Bailey and Thomas (1998), Baugh (1998), Delpit (1998), Mufwene (1996a, 1996b, 1997, 1999a, 1999b, in press a, in press b), Poplack, (1999), Schneider (1995), Smith (1998), Smitherman (1997, 1998) and Williams (1975) among other scholars, Mufwene argues that “Vernaculars have their own social identity function; and many speakers are not ready, and certainly not eager, to renounce that social-indexing role of their vernacular” (2001, p. 260).

Ralph Fasold attacks the inadequacy of a meaningful understanding of language. Citing Asante (1997), Blackshire-Belay (1996), Fasold and Nakano (1996), Green (1998), Mufwene (1992), Rickford and Rafal (1996), and Rickford, Ball, Blake, Jackson, and Martin (1991) among other scholars, Fasold argues that the *yawning*

*gap* between the linguistic and the folk ideas about *standard* and *dialect* “starts us off immediately with a double handicap. Somehow, we [linguists] have to dislodge the idea of minimum standard as applied to language and replace it with the alien concept arbitrary standard. (2001, p. 277). [underlined emphases mine]

Denise E. Murray echoes Fasold’s concern with inadequate concepts of language, but also attacks the limiting concept of bilingualism. Citing Adger (1997), Adger and Wolfram (2000), Auerbach and Burgess (1985), Baugh (1998), Delpit (1997), Labov (1972), and LoBianco (1997) among other scholars, Murray makes two distinct arguments: (1) our understanding of what we mean by *language* impacts “our decisions about which variety or language should be taught explicitly, which should be the medium of instruction, what are the socioculturally appropriate situations for using one variety or language or another” and (2) educators need to focus on “intercultural communication, rather than multi-cultural education” (2001, p. 288).

And finally, Walt Wolfram reminds us that existing mythologies tend to fight scientific breakthroughs – using the ongoing debates over evolution as an analogy. Citing Adger (1999), Baugh (1998), Bridgeman (1998), Lippi-Green (1997), McWhorter (1998), Matsuda

(1991), Mufwene (forthcoming), Rickford (1997), Ronkin and Karn (1999), Wolfram (1976, 1999a, 1999b), and Wren (1997) among other scholars, Wolfram reminds us that linguists' understanding of the changing nature of language, like all scientific growth, will need generations to pass before overcoming the reigning mythologies regarding languages being stable and definable.

Perhaps I do all of the research on Ebonics a disservice, by focusing on this one (most recent) anthology by Alatis and Tan. For novices, however, these four scholars (Mufwene, Fasol Murray, and Wolfram) have assembled in their arguments not only their own, highly respected, research, but also that of the major scholars in the field – certainly more than the couple of dozen that I have chosen to highlight.

### **Spanglish**

Unlike Ebonics, the consideration of Spanglish as a unique language has gained popular support from a significant portion of the North American population, a population certainly not limited to the United States.

In October, 2006, for example, a Google search for the key word *Spanglish sample* resulted in 187,000 hits (in 0.11 seconds). Here in San Antonio, we have two television stations and six radio stations that broadcast a mixture of Spanish and Spanglish. We also have two

weekly newspapers, written in a mixture of English, Spanish, and Spanglish.

For over two decades, I have been studying the patterns of immigrant languages into English, as revealed on gravemarkers in South Texas (Baird & Duncan, 1985; Baird, 1991, 1998, 2002).

“Accepted” languages involved in the assimilation, in addition to the expected Spanish and German, include French, Italian, Czech, Polish, Swedish, Norwegian, and Arabic.

Important to this conference’s focus on “home” languages, families of the deceased erected these gravemarkers—reflecting a hodgepodge of heritage languages.

During the summer of 1999, I completed a sociolinguistic analysis of the estimated 3,500 gravemarkers in San Antonio’s oldest cemetery, San Fernando #1.

<b>Monolingual</b>	
Spanish	1,664
English	1,421
Italian	22
French	12
German	7
Polish	<u>1</u>
	<i>SUBTOTAL 3,127</i>
<b>Mixed Code</b>	
Spanish & English	97
Spanglish	95
Arabic & English	6
Italian & English	2
French & English	2
German & English	<u>2</u>
	<i>SUBTOTAL 204</i>

**TOTAL 3,331**

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**Table 1: Summary of a Sociolinguistic Analysis of all legible Gravemarkers in San Fernando Cemetery #1**

The complete census revealed 3,331 markers (see Table 1) containing data from seven languages. The majority of the markers (94%) had all data in one language; 204 (or 6%) of the markers, however, had their data in a mixture of English and another language

The research had three purposes: (1) to test the hypothesis that on monolingual gravemarkers a predictable language pattern of mourning--involving name, death date, age, kinship, and creative epitaph data--would appear on more than fifty percent of the gravemarkers; (2) to test the hypothesis that on the Mixed-Code gravemarkers items appearing in English would follow the same pattern (with other items remaining in the non-English language; and (3) to test the hypothesis that a significant number (more than twenty percent) of Spanish/English mixed code markers would break that pattern.

My reasoning was (and is) that if the sociolinguistic analysis supported these three hypotheses, advocates of Spanglish as a unique language might use the results to support their claims. That is Spanglish gravemarkers would display the same pattern as monolingual gravemarkers – not Mixed Code gravemarkers.

The sociolinguistic data supported with ninety percent (90%) accuracy the predictable language pattern: if only four of the five basic semantic items of *name*, *death date*, *age*, *kinship*, and *epitaph* appeared on a monolingual marker, the *epitaph* would be missing; if only three of the basic five semantic items appeared, the *epitaph* and *age* would be missing; if only two of the basic five appeared, the *epitaph*, *age*, and *kinship* information would not be present; and if only one of the basic five appeared, that would be the *name*.

Spanglish markers fit the same 90% pattern.

### **Importance of Creoles in Bilingual Education**

My immediate concern focuses on what we might learn from the heritage languages of that six percent of Mixed Code gravemarkers that exist in San Fernando Cemetery #1. I am concerned that in all of this fuzzy thinking about "language," educators might be overlooking a significant number of children (and parents) who think they are speaking a "recognized" language (say, Spanish) and are not (speaking Spanglish instead) – or know that they are not speaking a recognized language, (say Ebonics

My concern rests partly on what appears to have happened to English speakers in England during two hundred years between the thirteenth through the fifteenth century.

I'm thinking particularly of the year 1215, when King John accepted the Magna Carta (which was written in Latin, not English); of the period between 1215 and 1274, when most petitions and bills to Parliament were written Latin; of the period between 1274 and 1386, when most petitions and bills to Parliament were written in French (not Latin); of 1386, when the London Mercers Guild sent Parliament the first petition written in English; of 1423 when significant numbers of petitions to Parliament were written in English; and of 1489, when English finally became the only language used in Parliament (Williams, 1975, pp. 70-73).

The disregard for English, the prevailing home language during those 200 years, parallels the current disregard for Ebonics and Spanglish, two prevailing home languages during the early twenty-first century.

A recent problem in North East Independent School District, one of the affluent Local Education Agencies in San Antonio, can best illustrate the destructive nature of ignoring both Ebonics and Spanish.

As mandated by NCLB, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) produced a Performance-Based Monitoring System, which was to be implemented by all Local Education Agencies beginning the 2004-2005 school year.

Of special concern to NEISD was the 2005-2006 Bilingual Education/ESL Monitoring System. That system indicated that the District had significant State Test Scores gaps between Limited English Proficiency and Non-Limited English Proficiency speakers in seven of its High Schools, eleven of its Middle Schools, and nine of its Bilingual Elementary Schools.

I was asked to participate in a Community Committee, selected by the NISD to address the problem. The overriding cause for the problem lay in three linguistic phenomena: an unexpected influx of immigrants, the continued presence of Spanglish (defined as neither English nor Spanish) speakers, and the temporary influx of Ebonics speakers, from New Orleans.

Regarding the latter group, the Texas Education Agency issued a statement that "For 2005-2006 only, students identified in the Hurricane Katrina/Rita displaced student group are evaluated for articulation to determine whether the district or campus Meet AYP" (Adequate Yearly Progress Guide, 2006, p. 31)

Our committee decided to address the growing immigrant problem by agreeing that "Oral interpreters (Spanish, Vietnamese, Korean, Arabic, Japanese, Urdu) for parent conferences and communication b\will be available when campus requests are made using district procedures" (Continuous Improvement Plan, Bilingual

Educations/ESL Monitoring System, 2006-2007, p. 5 NEISD December 15, 2006). We acknowledged that immigration had caused the non-English proficient student population to grow by 11% each of the past three years 2003-2006).

We addressed the potential Spanglish problem by acknowledging that 16.9 % of limited English proficiency student's parents denied the use of a home language other than English.

And we, of course, ignored the Ebonics problem because the 2005-2006 school year was behind us.

This NEISD case represents a statewide problem. In November of 2006, for example, civil rights lawyers testified before a federal judge that "Texas middle and high school students who speak limited English lag some 60 points behind white children on the state's TAKS test, underscoring problems with bilingual education (Sharber, 2006, 3B). Laura Ayala, an official with the Texas Education Agency agreed with the numbers (Sharber, 2006, 5B)

Last year Kells published an article (referencing five other scholars) that places part of the problem, again, on educators in Texas not understanding the group-bonding function of a heritage language. "The exodus of Mexican-origin and Latino students from secondary schools and higher education appears to be linked to issue of ethnolinguistic identity and language attitudes" (p. 193).

Before I leave this discussion of creoles, I wish to cite one other finding. "Of the 35,305,818 Latinos in the United States in 200, 72% of those who speak Spanish report strong English proficiency while just 10% speak only Spanish, making English a very important language for US Latinos" (Garcia & Menken, 2006, 169). A close look at those percentages once again reveals a major gap in heritage language recognition. If 72% of the Latinos in the United States report "strong English proficiency" and 10% speak "only Spanish," then what "language" are the other 18% using? I suggest that those six million, three hundred and fifty-five people are using Spanglish.

**Classroom teachers must be comfortable with their students' home language(s)**

My proposal to addressing the immediate problem is simple: Local Education Agencies can easily expand on their present, somewhat tentative, hiring of teachers and instructional aids who not only recognize the use of Creole languages, they are comfortable using the Creole language.

As Douglas Brown succinctly writes: "Teachers, to be facilitators, must first be real and genuine, discarding masks of superiority and omniscience" (Brown, 2007, 97).

I have come to my conclusion gradually and over time.

Most of us who were initiated into the teaching of English as a Second (or Foreign Language) during the early 1960s embraced what was then the “new” method of teaching – one that emphasized oral proficiency over reading. That Audiolingual Method, which stressed little (if any) use of the students’ heritage languages, has become so “old” and “outdated” that present scholars tend to forget one of the most important lessons learned from that method: classroom teachers must be comfortable with their students’ heritage language.

Evidently, though, that lesson has still not penetrated the Bilingual Education/ESL field as deeply as I think it should. Less than ten years ago, Yvonne Freeman and David Freeman felt compelled to devote two entire chapters of their popular teaching-methods text to argue that “lessons should support students’ first languages and cultures” (1998, pp. 192-240).

My suggestion includes a coda; it would also help the immediate situation if all school personnel could have a simple workshop that explains the flowing, fluctuating, nature of language – especially appreciating the natural inclination of bilinguals to “engage in **codeswitching** (the act of inserting words, phrases, or even longer stretches of one language into the other), especially when communicating with another bilingual” (Brown, 2007, 72).

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