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AFRO-AMERICANS and LANGUAGE

by

Beverlee Bruce

*Thought is largely conditioned by reference; it is the result of consideration or speculation against reference, which is largely arbitrary. There is no one way of thinking, since reference (hence value) is as scattered and dissimilar as men themselves.*

Leroi Jones, *Blues People*

Language can be used, either as a tool of oppression or as a tool of liberation. In the case of Afro-Americans, language for the most part has been used as a tool of oppression. In the beginning slaves were separated not only from their families, but from their tribes as well. And so, Fulani and Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba were mixed, one with the other - disparate tribes which had not culture, not language, not tradition, not religion, not gods, in common; just skin color and the shared state of involuntary servitude in an unfriendly land. The slaves could not speak to each other, nor to the slavemaster who had arranged them thus. In time, of course, slaves "learned" the language of slavemasters and "forgot" their own. Forgot their own? But the language of slavemasters did not/does not seem the same when spoken by an African - soon, Afro-American. For forgotten structures influence the tone, the rhythm, the grammar of a new language; forgotten memories, dreams, beliefs, influence the development of new thoughts in a new language, a new country. Put another way, African philosophy influenced the interpretation of a new set of circumstances unfolding in a new environment, while at the same time the structure of African language influenced the development of Afro-American English. Afro-American English - which linguistic analysis shows to be similar to, but different from Euro-American English. The two language structures differ significantly in terms of syntax - the way groups of words are arranged to construct sentences; phonology - the sounds associated with the letters of the alphabet used to represent the sound system of the language in writing; and semantics - the meanings assigned to words.

Language reflects culture and as the names imply - one language structure, though American, was influenced by Africa; the other, though American, influenced by Europe. And in each case, the condition of being "American" though similar, has been/is significantly different. Consequently, we have the development of parallel cultures reflected by

parallel languages. And yet the myth has been perpetrated that on the one hand we have a "dominant" culture mirrored by the standard dialect of English, while on the other hand, a "sub-culture" mirrored by a "negro variety of sub-standard" English. When language is used in this way, to define and control another's attitude about himself and his environment, negatively, it is used as a tool of oppression.

*For the first time, it seems to me, a Negro poet has assimilated completely the full poetic language of his time and, by implication, the language of the Anglo-American poetic tradition. I do not wish to be understood as saying that Negro poets have hitherto been incapable of this assimilation; there has been perhaps rather a resistance to it on the part of those Negroes who supposed that their peculiar genius lay in "folk" idiom or in the romantic creation of a "new" language within the English language. In these directions interesting and even distinguished work has been done, notably by Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks. But there are two disadvantages to this approach: first, the "folk" and "new" languages are not very different from those that white poets can write; secondly, the distinguishing Negro quality is not in the language but in the subject matter, which is usually the plight of the Negro segregated in a white culture. The plight is real and often tragic; but I cannot think that, from the literary point of view, the tragic aggressiveness of the modern Negro poet offers wider poetic possibilities than the resigned patinas of Paul Laurence Dunbar, who was only a "white" poète manqué. Both attitudes have limited the Negro poet to a provincial mediocrity in which one's feelings about one's difficulties become more important than poetry itself.*

*It seems to me only common sense to assume that the main thing is the poetry, if one is a poet, whatever one's color may be. I think that Mr. Tolson has assumed this, and the assumption, I gather, has made him not less but more intensely Negro in his apprehension of the world than any of his contemporaries, or any that I have read. But by becoming more intensely Negro he seems to me to dismiss the entire problem, so far as poetry is concerned, by putting it in its properly subordinate place.*

Alan Tate, in the preface to  
Melvin Tolson's *Libretto for  
the Republic*

And for generations Niggahs were locked into whitey's definition of them: lazy, shiftless, dirty, don't wanna work, heathen, primitive, unable to wrap their thick lips around the pearly sounds of the English language, ignorant, inferior,

black, ugly, dumb, etc. And there were those who sought desperately to prove that the labels didn't describe all Negroes and so some became proper, dicty, siddity, and hancy - severed, in other words, from their roots. And these were no longer able to shout and get happy on Sunday morning at Mt. Shiloh Baptist Church, nor sing the blues, nor eat chitluns and hogmaws, nor play bid whist, nor play the dozens, nor remember shine, stack-lee, or the signifying monkey; no longer able to tell a story with the rising and falling inflection on a single word - gu-rrr-ll! No longer able to do the Bugaloo, nor to recognize the soul songs currently popular.

They were overheard at cocktail parties saying things like - "well, one nevah\* knows, do one?", and "I laughed\* and I laughed\* til I couldn't laf no mo." And they used the same labels as did the white boy in describing those other Negroes who persisted in using Afro-American English.

But that will soon be history. For there are those of us who intend to formalize and thereby reinforce that which the people have always known to wit - access to housing, jobs, and higher education rests in larger part on the color of one's skin than on the degree to which one "talks white". Which is not to say token Negroes did not/do not receive token rewards for their note-worthy efforts. We will point out to the people how Madison Avenue uses the product of lazy-lips and sloppy speech to sell its material - Maverick - it ain't no big thing! Kent-'s got it all together.

*Caliban and Prospero:*

*As O. Mannoni and George Lamming have pointed out, the relationship between these two characters in The Tempest can be interpreted as similar to the relationship of two opposing sides in a colonialist society.*

*If Caliban (who has learned Prospero's language) is no more than a part of nature, he will never be able to break out of the prison of Prospero's language: all the culture he can obtain, as is Prospero's intention, must then derive from Prospero's language and mentality; and everything Caliban does will be derivative.*

*But suppose Caliban is also part of a culture, a different culture unfamiliar to Prospero. Caliban remembers this but can grasp it only in images, not words; he is imprisoned in Prospero's language and his own servility.*

*(Eventually) Caliban captures in his own and Prospero's language, a culture Prospero did not create and cannot control, which Caliban has recognized as his own. In the process the language is transformed acquiring different*

\*British pronunciation

meanings which Prospero never expected. Caliban becomes "bilingual". That language he shares with Prospero and the language he has minted from it are no longer identical.

Caliban continues to understand Prospero's language, but Prospero will have only a partial grasp of the language which is now Caliban's own, so long as he retains his old attitudes. He is bound to miss essential parts, nuances, and references, everything that relates to that different cultural background, and so he will misunderstand Caliban's new language.

Prospero can have himself initiated into the new language which has been extended by Caliban to take in new fields of experience. The condition for this is that Prospero asks Caliban questions, that he is willing to be instructed and is instructed. He must abandon his colonialist arrogance, shed his claim to be the master race, and consort with Caliban on the same level.

Caliban's liberation gives Prospero too a great opportunity: the chance of turning from a tyrant into a humane person.

Janheinz Jahn in *Neo-African Literature: A History of Black Writing*

But these are tryin times

Looks like we always end up in a rut  
Tryin to make it real,  
but compared to what?

Come together

I just wanna testify

Can I get a witness?

Thank you for lettin me be myself again

I'm black and I'm proud

Everything I do gon be funky  
from now on

To be young, gifted and Black  
that's where it's at

Tobacco Road, tear it down

*Build it up all over again*

*Seize the time, the time is now  
and you know how*

*We'll just have to get guns and  
be men*

*Black is Beautiful*

*Dare to struggle, Dare to win*

*Revolution in our lifetime*

We will listen to the words of our people and we will act, for the word, the thought precedes the deed. We will listen to the words of our people and we will act: Up against the wall mutha fucka. Right on. We will listen to the words of our people and we will act, for we know that when language is used to define, to describe, to hypothesize about, to control, one's environment, it is used as a tool of liberation.

Dr. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. (Chairman of the 1964 March on Washington) - You may proceed, Sir

MR. BRUCE: Sir, I thank you very much. I would like to say that, that my national language is Portuguese, and I would like to speak Portuguese, but in order to get more understanding, I will try to speak English.

First, I would like to salute the people of Guinea and Cape Verde, on behalf of all my fellows, to salute you and the committee and to thank you very much for this opportunity to inform you about the situation in our country, the attention of our people.

We have been for 7 years fighting a very hard fight against BEVERLEE BRUCE recently received her M.A. in Education from UCLA. She is currently doing her doctoral studies at Harvard.

The American people. We think the entire part of the American nation is with us in this hard fight against colonial rule. And it is very good for us to tell you that we are fighting, and are following the example given by the American people when they launched a great struggle for the independence of this country.

We would like also to thank you very much, and this committee, for the work done in Africa about the African problem for your last visit in Africa to a special study mission, and to tell you that while it was enough to make our agreement with the cancellation of your report, but it is necessary to inform you and to help you in order that you may help us.

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