

1989

## Who's Zoomin' Who?: Black English in the Classroom

Kenneth C. Alford

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

---

### Recommended Citation

Alford, Kenneth C. (1989) "Who's Zoomin' Who?: Black English in the Classroom," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 5: Iss. 2, Article 7.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1679>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

## **WHO'S ZOOMIN' WHO?: BLACK ENGLISH IN THE CLASSROOM**

**Kenneth C. Alford**

Like almost all non-Standard American English (SAE) dialects (Hispanic, Japanese, even northern and southern), Black English is a highly contested, polemic, and, quite frankly, problematic topic in education today. Nearly everyone, when asked, has an opinion about Black English: "Black English is a rich, culture-based variety of English;" "Black dialect is merely a variety of English just as SAE is a variety of English;" "As a variety of English, Black English is in no way inferior to any other variety of English;" "Black English is careless and without rules; it reflects laziness on the part of its speakers;" "Black dialect is, in most circumstances, not appropriate in educational and occupational situations;" "The Black dialect should be eradicated;" "The Black dialect should be preserved and encouraged." Yes, nearly everyone has an opinion about Black English until asked to specify what they do about Black English in the classroom. The answer to that is a resounding "I don't know."

It seems there are basically two camps regarding Black English – for and against. These camps are given many titles: assimilationists vs. separationists, prescriptivists vs. descriptivists, linguists vs. grammarians; however, I prefer to call them "intellectualists" vs. "pragmatists."

The "intellectualists" camp is bound by a single notion that "a standard dialect (or prestige dialect) may have social functions - to bind people together or to provide a common written form for multidialectal speakers. It is, however, neither more expressive, more logical, more complex, nor more regular than any other dialect. Any judgments, therefore, as to the superiority or inferiority of a particular dialect are social judgments, not linguistic or scientific ones" (Fromkin and Rodman 263). In the "intellectualist" camp, one hears many points such as "Black English is simply a

dialect; a dialect is the variety of language used by a group whose habitual linguistic patterns both reflect and are determined by shared regional, social, or cultural perspectives" (CCCC 3). In short, "children learn to speak like those around them" (Peterson 53). "A black child raised in an upper-class British household will speak 'Received Pronunciation' (proper) English; a white child raised in an environment where Black English is spoken will speak Black English. Children construct grammars based on the language they hear" (Fromkin and Rodman 264).

As indicated, in the "intellectualist" camp one is likely to hear the argument shift to a discussion of grammar: "In the same manner as Black English, English began as a spoken, unscholarly language and was shaped over the centuries by use, not by rules" (Baker 93). "Black English follows rules; it is grammatical" (Dillard and Smitherman *passim*). In order to fully appreciate the rhetoric of the "intellectualists," one must realize that for them grammar is loosely defined as that which permits communication between speaker/listener or writer/reader. So, in other words, Black English conveys meaning; it just does so in such a convoluted, rappin', shuckin', signifyin' fashion that, unless one is hip to the jive, meaning cannot be inferred. Apparently, then, the "intellectualist" argument can be summarized to one objection: "It sounds funny to the ears of educated, White Americans when Black Americans talk in the native dialect" (Quinn 158-9).

In the "pragmatist" camp, whose position is based less on arguability than upward mobility, the arguments are unapologetically straightforward: "Black English is a barrier in the 'real world,' the middle-class world of college, employment, and upward mobility, a world where few are honored (or hired) for their ability to speak Black English or any other non-SAE. Despite its cultural ties, Black English is simply not accepted in the middle-class job market. Period."

Meanwhile, both camps trudge along, singing their respective songs, with legions of confused, uncommitted educators in tow, wondering, as I do, Who's Zoomin' Who?

I, for one, would like to see some unity between the camps. Therefore, I am proposing a compromise, detente in the guise of code-switching. Code-switching, by no means a novel concept, involves the use of whichever dialect is appropriate to the situation. For example, when I address this concept in my own classroom, I have students role play encountering a group of their

friends vs. a similar encounter with the principal, a minister, or a supervisor. Next, I have other members of the class observe differences in the manner of the greeting as well as what is said. It usually become apparent that the "Wha' sup" or "Home" used to greet friends is not appropriate when addressing those in more prestigious positions. I am able then to segue into a discussion of formal vs. informal and, by expansion, incorporate dialectical appropriateness. I tell them that in the home environment or among friends, the use of non-standard English, Black for example, is perfectly all right; however, I point out that school English (SAE) is usually more appropriate to educational or work environments.

In this respect, code-switching is a compromise, a moderate opinion. Unfortunately, moderate opinions don't always get the air play (or written space) afforded to emotive debates. Moderate opinions are too bland. Remember, it is the squeaky wheel which gets oiled first. In the continuing debate over Black English in the classroom, code-switching is not the squeak, but the oil – not the cause, but, perhaps, the cure – a resolution. Already I can hear reactionists' cries (nay, shrieks) in the distance. There are radical factions amid both camps who perceive personal affront at the notion of compromise. However, code-switching is a viable alternative to continual debate. Code-switching is important because it provides a nearly perfect option in the classroom by recognizing the merits of all dialects. By expansion to the "real world;" it gives students options in different situations.

Dialects are not indicators of intelligence; they are simply a reflection of a student's social and cultural environment. When children who are speakers of a dialect different from Standard dialect land in our classroom, they do not need to be informed that their dialect is somehow inferior; they do, however, need to realize that their dialect, just as in the case of Standard, is not always appropriate to the situation. They need to realize that their personal dialect, just like Standard, has merit. They need to realize that the way we (humans) write and speak determines how we are perceived by others. They need to know how to switch codes (adjust) in speaking and writing in order to match differing situations.

Incorporating code-switching into the classroom usurps the "difference-equals-deficit model" (Smitherman and others) which says that dialects, by being different from Standard English, are inferior to it. Code-switching does not imply that one dialect is superior to another; it suggests that different dialects are appropriate in different situations. We need only

consider the Standard English version of "How 'bout dem Tigers" to realize that in most situations such a translation just ain't very appropriate. Code-switching is race neutral; it is applicable to Black, Appalachian, Southern, or Northern dialects, as well as to varying stylistic levels of Standard English. In addition, code-switching reinforces the notions that language is dynamic; it changes. Code-switching is applicable to most classroom situations from the elementary level on. Lucas and Borders conclude that the sixth-graders who were the subjects of their study "clearly demonstrated awareness of the situational appropriateness of dialect and its usage" (134). If by sixth grade students are aware of the situational appropriateness of dialect, then by the time students reach high school, code switching should not be insulting. For these reasons, code-switching has profound implications in all English language-related classrooms.

Code-switching is applicable to all representations of any dialect, spoken or written. In using code-switching in the language arts class, our role, as teachers, is to provide an array of contexts, both oral and written, in which situationally appropriate dialects occur. For example, we might give an assignment for students to write a letter to a close friend, thus encouraging informal dialect. On the other hand, we might consider having our students form an opinion on topical issues in their community and prepare an argument which could be presented at a city council meeting. The impetus for such assignments would not be to emphasize the superiority of one dialect to another but to exemplify the appropriateness of different dialects to differing situations.

If the impetus of incorporating code-switching in the classroom is not only to emphasize appropriateness ("pragmatist") but to reveal significant differences in Black and Standard English ("intellectualist"), it may be helpful to keep in mind the following distinction which Geneva Smitherman makes in her text, *Talkin' and Testifyin'*: Standard English is the product of print-oriented European culture; Black English is the product of orally-oriented African culture. The implication of this distinction for the classroom is that speakers of Standard English tend to put more emphasis on writing, and speakers of Black English tend to put more emphasis on speaking. Therefore, we may want to consider assignments which feature both speaking and listening as well as writing; even better, we could design assignments which focus on the overlap between speaking, listening, and writing. Again, role-playing exercises could be beneficial in exhibiting this relationship, exercises

in which some students respond to differing situations (job interviews vs. sports discussions, for example), while others observe changes in delivery and dialect. Also, an excellent venue for exploring dialectical nuances involves the art of rappin'. Permit students to select topical issues, authors, or pieces of literature to write raps about; then, have these delivered orally in class in both Standard and Black English dialects; it won't take long to reveal that Standard English is not conducive (appropriate) to that art form. This exercise will also demonstrate the rhythmic cadence and richness of the Black dialect.

In addition, we might want to incorporate Zoellner's method of talk-write, wherein students are placed in groups and encouraged to talk out what they intend to write by posing questions or suggestions to one another as ways of improving writing. In other talk-write situations, students talk about what they have already written, indicating strengths or weaknesses, as a means of clarifying writing. Other students could provide immediate feedback to speakers, including any problems with dialect interference, and suggest ways in which writing and speaking could be improved. Such combined oral and written exercises are beneficial because they place emphasis on speaking (reading aloud what had been written) as well as listening, which indicates differences between simply talking vs. reading aloud. Again, students should perceive dialectical shifts because, as the comparison will show, talking is more informal, more spontaneous, more immediate, more alive than writing; it comes more easily and requires less thought.

If we want to focus on semantic and syntactical differences between Black and Standard English, we could design assignments for that purpose. We might want to issue a series of statements written in Standard English with instructions to convert the statements to correct Black English. Such assignments would provide a good point of departure for discussing verb usage in Black English and revealing characteristics such as zero copula (absence of the "be" verb), and habitual or durative "be" (use of the verb to imply repeated or continuous action), grammatical patterns which figure prominently in Black English. Lunsford (1979) suggests another helpful assignment which involves giving students three separate lists of verbs marked simply groups one, two, and three which correspond to present, past, and future. Students are then instructed to characterize the action being performed in each group and indicate when, in time, the action takes place,

patterns which form a major feature of verbs in Standard English.

Lunsford also suggests sentence-combining exercises in which a series of short, choppy sentences are combined to form one longer flowing sentence. In addition, we could modify the kernels to represent both Standard and Black dialect. For instance,

<u>STANDARD</u>	<u>BLACK</u>
My dad works in a factory.	My daddy he work in a factory.
He works really hard.	He be workin hard.
He is usually tired when he comes home.	He be tired when he come home.
(My dad works really hard in a factory and is usually tired when he comes home.)	(My daddy work hard in a factory and be tired when he come home.)

The motivation behind these types of assignments is to provide students with the opportunity to observe the semantic and syntactic workings of other dialects; this, in turn, helps the students understand code-switching. By learning the significant differences between dialects, the students recognize patterns necessary to approximate dialects. Again, by providing an array of contexts, we permit students to learn about dialects different from their own; also, we provide them with an opportunity to observe that any dialect is subject to situational appropriateness.

If our students are simply told that the dialect they are accustomed to using at home and other places is wrong, they are likely to develop a "who's-zoomin'-who?" attitude. As we know from the opening "intellectualist" vs. "pragmatist" discussion, wondering who's zoomin' who is not only confusing, it is frustrating. When trying to decide what to do about dialects in the classroom, we need to make choices not on the basis of personal opinion, like vs. dislike, but on the basis of what is best for the student. I consider code-switching, which enables them to get along in the world ("pragmatist") as well as to appreciate the grammaticality of their own dialects ("intellectualist") about the best we can do.

**Works Cited**

- Baker, Ronald L. "Folk Speech: Doing What Comes Naturally." *Contemporary Education* 59 (1988): 91-93.
- Committee on Conference of College Composition and Communication. "Students' Right to Their Own Language." 1974.
- Dillard, J.L. *Black English: Its History and Usage in the United States*. New York: Random House, 1972.
- Elbow, Peter. "The Shifting Relationships between Speech and Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 36 (1985): 283-301.
- Fromkin, Victoria, and Robert Rodman. *An Introduction to Language*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc, 1988.
- Hagaman, John A. "Readiness is All: The Importance of Speaking and Writing Connections." *Journal of Teaching Writing* 5 (1986): 187-192.
- Lucas, Cell, and Denise Borders. "Language Diversity and Classroom Discourse." *American Education Research Journal* 24 (1987): 119-138.
- Lunsford, Andrea A. "Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer." *College English* 41 (1979): 38-46.
- Peterson, Betty. "Why They Talk That Talk: Language in Appalachian Studies." *English Journal* 76 (1987): 53-55.
- Quinn, Jim. *American Tongue and Cheek*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980.
- Smitherman, Geneva. *Talkin' and Testifyin'*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977.
- Wixon, Vincent, and Patricia Wixon. "Getting It Out, Getting It Down: Adapting Zoellner's Talk-Write." *English Journal* 66 (1977): 70-73. Rpt. in *Theory and Practice in the Teaching of Composition: Processing, Distancing, and Modeling*. Ed. Miles Myers and James Gray. Urbana: NCTE, 1983. 129-135.
- Zoellner, Robert. "Talk-Write: A Behavioral Pedagogy for Composition." *College English* 30 (1969): 269-274. Rpt. in *Theory and Practice in the Teaching of Composition: Processing, Distancing, and Modeling*. Ed. Miles Myers and James Gray. Urbana: NCTE, 1983. 122-128.

**Kenneth Alford teaches English at Marlboro County High School in Bennettsville, South Carolina.**