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## CCCC Position Statement

A statement on an education issue approved by the CCCC Executive Committee

### CCCC Statement on Ebonics

*by the Conference on College Composition and Communication  
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The Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), composed of 5,100 scholars who teach at colleges and universities across the nation, is deeply committed to the development of literacy for all students. The “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” resolution and the “National Language Policy,” passed by CCCC in 1974 and 1988 respectively, continue to be strong organizational statements for appropriate pedagogies to ensure that all students are afforded the same opportunities to realize their potential as learners and citizens. Given continuing myths and misconceptions in the media and in the nation’s schools about the language many African American students use, the public deserves a statement reflective of the viewpoints of language and literacy scholars on Ebonics.

*Ebonics* is a superordinate term for a category of Black Language forms that derive from common historical, social, cultural, and material conditions. It refers to language forms such as African American Language, Jamaican Creole, Gullah Creole, West African Pidgin English, and Haitian Creole, as well as Afro-Euro language varieties spoken in European countries. The term “Ebonics” was created by Black psychologist Dr. Robert Williams in 1973 to identify the various languages created by Africans forced to adapt to colonization and enslavement (Williams, 1975).

The variety of Ebonics spoken by African Americans in the United States—known as Black English Vernacular, African American English, U. S. Ebonics, African American Language, among other names—reflects a distinctive language system that many African American students use in daily conversation and in the performance of academic tasks. Like every other linguistic system, the Ebonics of African American students is systematic and rule governed, and it is not an obstacle to learning. The obstacle lies in negative attitudes toward the language, lack of information about the language, inefficient techniques for teaching language and literacy skills, and an unwillingness to adapt teaching styles to the needs of Ebonics speakers.

#### Brief, Selective Historical Walk through Ebonics

We offer the following summary for readers interested in the issue of U. S. Ebonics over the centuries, including attendant language education issues. In 1554, William Towerson, an Englishman, took five Africans to England to learn English and serve as interpreters in the slave trade and in Britain’s colonization campaign on the west coast of Africa. Three of them returned to the African Gold Coast in 1557. “It is reasonable to accept this as the date from which the African use of English began” (Dalby, 1970, pp. 11–12). During the centuries of enslavement and colonization, “Negro English” (and other Ebonic language forms) was primarily of interest to historians and folklore scholars, the former principally concerned with the linguistic origins of the language (e.g., Harrison, 1884; Krapp, 1924; Mencken, 1936), the latter with what was perceived as its exotic appeal (e.g., Bennett, 1909; Gonzales, 1922). Although these early scholars acknowledged the African language origin of the U. S.

variety of Ebonics, most considered the Africanness pathological, inferior, and “baby talk” (Harrison). Gullah Blacks were considered “slovenly and careless of speech” with “clumsy tongues, flat noses and thick lips” (Gonzales). A critical exception in the early twentieth century was Black linguist Lorenzo Dow Turner, born in North Carolina in 1895. Turner’s lifelong study of the Gullah language was motivated by a chance encounter with two Gullah women students in his class at South Carolina State College in Orangesburg (Holloway and Vass, “Lorenzo Dow Turner: A Biographical Dedication,” 1993, p. ix). Believed to be the first U. S. Black linguist, Turner mastered several African languages to help him in his quest to uncover the origin and system of Gullah and other varieties of U. S. Ebonics. His decades of research on Ebonics, which included making his own phonograph recordings of speech in Gullah communities, was published in his *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* in 1949. Countering the “baby talk” and intellectual inferiority myths about Black Language and its speakers, he described linguistic processes such as sound substitutions of Africanizing English, which resulted under conditions of foreign language acquisition and the experience of enslavement and neo-enslavement. He thus demonstrated the African language background of Gullah and its connection to other varieties of U. S. Ebonics.

The legacy of Beryl Bailey, believed to be the first Black woman linguist, is critical to this twentieth-century historical account of Ebonics. Bailey was the first linguist to apply Chomsky’s new syntactic theory paradigm (known in those years as “Transformational-Generative Grammar”) to an analysis of Ebonics, in this case to her native Jamaican Creole. She published her work in *Jamaican Creole Syntax: A Transformational Approach* in 1966. Professor and Chair in the Black and Puerto Rican Studies Department at Hunter College in New York, Bailey theorized and was beginning to validate the conception of a Black linguistic continuum from the Caribbean to the United States (“Toward a New Perspective in Negro English Dialectology,” 1965). However, this line of research was cut short by her untimely death.

In Colonial America and after 1776 in the United States of America, there was no concern about the denial of education to Africans. Education was not essential to the performance of slave labor; in fact, there were laws making it illegal to teach the enslaved to read and write. Then, in the post-Emancipation era, Jim Crow emerged and with it the establishment of “separate but equal” education. Hence, the relationship between U. S. Ebonics and the education of U. S. slave descendants only began to be addressed in the aftermath of the Supreme Court’s 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the subsequent push for school desegregation and equality of education for African Americans. Further, it was not until the emergence of the Black Freedom Struggle of this era that White scholars began to publish scientific, linguistic studies of the rule-governed system of U. S. Ebonics (e.g., Stewart, 1967; Dillard, 1967; Labov, 1970).

The pedagogical issue in the latter half of the twentieth century and continuing into this second decade of the twenty-first century continues to be how to achieve maximum language and literacy skills for African American students who use U. S. Ebonics, in speech and in writing, and in and outside of the classroom—and at the same time, enhance their sociocultural, intellectual self-esteem and community rootedness. This challenge was addressed in the *King v. Ann Arbor* federal court case (1977–79) and in the Oakland, California School Board’s Ebonics Resolution (1996), available here: <https://www.linguistlist.org/topics/ebonics/ebonics-res1.html>.

### From *King v. Ann Arbor* to the Oakland Ebonics Resolution

*The King ruling established the legitimacy of African American Language/ “Black English” within a legal framework and mandated the Ann Arbor School District to take “appropriate action” to teach the Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary school children to read in the [standardized English] of the school, the commercial world, the arts, science, and the professions.”*

—Smitherman, 2006, p.12

The parents of the children in the Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School who brought a federal lawsuit against the Ann Arbor School District were a small group of single female heads of households. While there were some other Black children at King School, they were middle class, like the White children at King School. The children from the Green Road housing project, being both Black and poor, were thus a minority within a minority at King School. Their U.S. Ebonics presented a variety of English that King School teachers had

negative attitudes toward, and these teachers had not been trained to teach the “three R’s”—and reading was crucial for the mothers of these children—to young children who did not use Standardized English in the classroom. Because of their language—“Black English”/U. S. Ebonics—the children were classified as learning disabled and assigned to speech correction classes. Judge Charles Joiner ruled in the parents’ favor, finding that the Ann Arbor School District had failed to provide equal educational opportunity to the children by not “taking into account” the language barrier presented by their “Black English.” The mandated remedy was ongoing training for the teachers at King School.

In the case of the Oakland, California Unified School District, Blacks were not a minority. Rather, they comprised 53% of the school district population. Students K–12 were all adversely affected by Oakland’s lack of a language education policy around the issue of Ebonics. The Resolution sought to address the problem by providing education in Ebonics, using the students’ primary/home language as a bridge to teaching them “Standard English.” This is the situation of twenty-first-century African American students in urban districts nationwide. (See United States Senate Hearing on Ebonics, available here: <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-105shrg39641/pdf/CHRG-105shrg39641.pdf>.)

Despite the national uproar and negative, distorted media treatment around Oakland’s Ebonics Resolution, the District was on the right track, according to UNESCO, for example—that is, using the students’ home/mother tongue to teach them language and literacy skills.

### The Way Forward

Teachers, administrators, counselors, supervisors, and curriculum developers must undergo training to provide them with adequate knowledge about Ebonics and help them overcome the prevailing stereotypes about the language and learning potential of African American students (and others) who speak Ebonics. CCCC thus strongly advocates new research and teaching that will build on existing knowledge about Ebonics to help students value their linguistic-cultural heritage, maintain Black identity, and to read, write, speak, and listen with critical discernment and power.

Ebonics reflects the Black experience and conveys Black traditions and socially real truths. Black Languages are crucial to Black identity. Black Language sayings, such as “What goes around comes around,” are crucial to Black ways of being in the world. Black Languages, like Black lives, matter.

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