Ebonics, to Be or Not to Be? A Legacy of Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

Michael Takafor Ndemanu

Abstract
This article discusses the historical underpinnings of Ebonics as a product of linguistic influence of Bantu languages spoken in West Africa today. Many teacher educators preparing White pre-service teachers for linguistic diversity in public schools tend to focus mostly on respecting culturally different students' home languages without employing historical, lexical, grammatical, and phonological evidence to challenge students' deficit thinking about Ebonics, which is often associated in the mainstream with a physiological deficiency. Thus, the study uses several Niger-Congo languages to explain the origin of Ebonics and the influences of the Niger-Congo languages on the grammatical and phonological structures of Ebonics, and concludes by defining it as a respectable variety of English with its own sophisticated grammar.

Keywords
Pidgin, Creole, Niger-Congo languages, Ebonics, Kamtok, Ngwe, Cameroon

Introduction
Ebonics, which literally means Black sounds, is the combination of Ebony (Black) and phonics (sounds) coined at a conference in St. Louis Missouri in 1973 by a team of American scholars in psychology led by Robert Williams, an

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African American psychologist (Williams, 1997). Prior to the new nomenclature, all sorts of condescending terminologies had been used to define African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Deficit-prone scholars have traced the origin of Ebonics to a deviant form of English language, which evolved from British dialects that was used by the East Anglian rural communities in the south of the United States during the period of colonialism (Schneifer, 1993). As the Anglian theory intimates, Ebonics is a mere residue of outdated English that working class African Americans are stuck with due to their marginal educational attainment. Unlike Anglian theorists, this article embraces and foregrounds historical underpinnings of Ebonics, linking it to West African languages. Although there have been several precedents to these historical connections between Ebonics and Niger-Congo languages of the Atlantic coast of Africa (Dilliard, 1972; Schneifer, 1993; Turner, 1949), none of those studies have been conducted by a native or fluent speaker of any of the West African languages that influenced Ebonics. My knowledge of linguistics and my personal experiences as a fluent speaker of three West African languages Ngwe, Yemba, and Kamtok (Cameroon Pidgin/Creole English) and two Latin-based languages, English and French, have afforded me the opportunity to examine the correlation between Ebonics and a West African Pidgin English (hereinafter, WAPE), a lingua franca in many West African countries today, which has had the most influence on Ebonics. It is worth mentioning that there are many dialects of WAPE in West Africa because of linguistic interferences resulting from the varieties of Niger-Congo languages spoken in the region. Kamtok, which is one of the varieties of WAPE spoken in Cameroon and other West African languages that I also speak, will be used in this article to elucidate its influences on Ebonics.

There is an inherent higher status that is ascribed to English that implicitly and explicitly creates a stigma on the other nonstandard varieties of English. The study employs Niger-Congo languages to define Ebonics as another variety of English that has been influenced by West African languages.

**A Brief History of Kamtok, One of WAPE’s Varieties That Influenced Ebonics**

Kamtok is one of the varieties of WAPE spoken by over 50% of Cameroonians. It emerged from Africans interacting with European during ivory and slave trade in the 1400s on the coast of West Africa (Mbassi-Manga, 1973; Ngefac, 2009). It is also called Cameroonian Creole, Cameroonian Pidgin, Cameroonian Pidgin English, or simply Pidgin. For a layperson in West Africa, the word *Pidgin* is not loaded; it is a mere nomenclature ascribed to another dialect of English. Colonialists referred to this respectable lingua franca as pidgin (justifiably so then) and so the colonized embraced it and have continued to embrace it without understanding the condescending undertone of the terminology. The word
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*Kamtok* was coined from *Cameroonian Talk* to correct the misconceptions associated with the pidgin label. WAPE as a whole is an English-based language that has long attained a Creolistic status, spoken predominantly in English-speaking countries of West Africa such as Nigeria, The Gambia, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Cameroon. Some French-speaking countries like Togo, Ivory Coast, Gabon, Senegal as well as a Spanish-speaking Fernando Po (now known today as Bioko in Equatorial Guinea) in West Africa still speak Pidgin English (Ihemere, 2006) because English and native West African languages had come into contact prior to what historians have termed the *scramble for Africa* by Europeans in the last quarter of the 19th century.

Among the Europeans, the Portuguese were the first European traders to arrive in the coastal region of Cameroon in the 15th century. Cameroon owes its origin to the Portuguese equivalence, camarão, meaning shrimp. The Portuguese named Cameroon after shrimps when they discovered an abundance of mud shrimps in the River Wouri and called it in Portuguese *rio dos camarões*, which is literally translated as *river of shrimps*. The arrival of the English slave merchants in the 1600s to the coast of West Africa eventually supplanted the Portuguese-based Pidgin with WAPE. However, there are still Portuguese language influences in WAPE today. For example, the Portuguese equivalence for the verb to *know* is *saber* [sabi], which is similar to *sabi* in WAPE. WAPE later became the middle ground language which consisted of drawing grammatically and phonologically from African languages and lexically from English. It also became the language of communication between West Africans and the slave merchants.

In reference to the existence of Pidgin English and its communicative challenges with native English speakers, a British slave trader, John Matthews (1788), who was also a lieutenant in the Royal Navy, at the peak of slave trade, warned potential traders of European descent of an eminent serious breakdown in communication if they were to underestimate the differences between WAPE and British English. Here is an excerpt of his warning:

> Those who visit Africa in a cursory manner have few opportunities of acquiring any knowledge of the country or its inhabitants and are very liable to be mistaken in the meaning of the natives, from want of knowledge in their language, or in the jargon of such of them as reside upon the sea-coast and speak a little English; the European affixing the same ideas to the words spoken by the African, as if they were pronounced by one of his own nation. [This is] a specimen of the conversation which generally passes on these occasions will elucidate this observation [He cites]:

> Well, my friend, you got trade today; you got plenty of slaves?

> No, we no got trade yet; by and by trade come. You can’t go.
What you go for catch people, you go for make war?

Yes, my brother . . . gone for catch people; or they gone for make war. (Matthew, 1788, pp. 166)

In the foregoing quote, the slave dealer is telling John Matthews that his friend or brother has gone into the country to purchase slaves from the tribes that are at war. So, he would like the ship to remain anchored because his friend will surely return with prisoners of war as slaves to be sold to him. As it would be substantiated further along the line, the sentences in the quote are full of Niger-Congo language influences in terms of their syntactic structures. A detailed syntactic analysis of other quotes similar to the foregoing will be offered in the subsequent sections.

Today, most Western priests and pastors serving in West African English-speaking countries learn WAPE in order to reach a wider audience as they preach from the puppet (Kouega, 2008). Politicians use the language to canvass votes from the people with limited formal education, while traders use it for national and international trading with fellow West Africans in different countries.

Like Ebonics, WAPE is constantly disparaged by the educated class in the positions of power. It is the mother tongue to many children in the city. As mentioned earlier, it is an evangelical language in many denominations; it is not only a playground language for many children from working class families, it is also their mother tongue. Unfortunately it is not allowed in the school premises (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Wall-sign against WAPE on a public school building in Cameroon. Note: WAPE = West African Pidgin English.
English and French are the only two official languages of Cameroon even though there are over 240 local languages spoken over the national territory. It is worth noting that the hostility on this wall-sign is not only limited to Pidgin, but it is extended to local languages. It is frowned upon to speak a language other than French or English on the school ground (Ngefac, 2011). Given the linguistic diversity inherent in the geopolitical location of the school where this picture was taken, the authorities of the school could not have afforded the space to list the other languages they are opposed to students using on the school ground. Generally, in Cameroon, sanctions meted out for speaking a language other than French or English are similar irrespective of whether it was a local language or Pidgin. So, one could substitute Pidgin with any other local language and the message would not be strange to students.

Figure 1 is an example of a demeaning attitude of secondary school administrators toward WAPE in Cameroon. It is widely believed in West Africa that children who speak WAPE have difficulties communicating in Standard English. The cobwebs surrounding the wall-signs are indicative of the length of time signs had been on the wall. Despite the outrageous and condescending content of those wall-signs to many, the society at large does not find anything wrong in them. During the colonial era, the Germans despised WAPE. They banned it in Cameroon in the late 1800s upon arrival, but it never disappeared. When the French and the British took over Cameroon in 1916, they tried to no avail to discourage the use of WAPE (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Wall-sign against WAPE.  
*Note.* WAPE = West African Pidgin English.
Imagine the outrage and the backlash that would follow if an American of a European descent were to refer to Ebonics as “a monkey language” as in Figure 2. With the exit of Europeans from Africa, the elite class of Africans educated by the former ascended to power and so far have only enforced and reinforced most of the draconian colonial policies of local languages. Since 1960, the African governing classes in various African countries have been the overseers of the European’s sociopolitical and economic agendas; ensuring that European languages remain their official languages and sticking with currencies that are pegged to the French currency as it is the case with Communauté Financière Africaine (CFA) for 13 francophone countries in Africa and French francs (Agbohou, 1999). Today, Africans who successfully unlearned WAPE in order to be excellent English speakers, as it is often erroneously assumed, are surprised by claims of lack of intelligibility from native speakers of English in native and nonnative English speakers’ interactions. The notion that someone has to lose a language or not learn a language in order to be proficient in English is ludicrous. Yet, such a belief has become so engrained and pervasive in our collective psyches so much so that it is becoming pathological. As Ngugi Wa Thiongo (1986) asserted, although colonization has long ended in Africa, the minds still need to be decolonized. There is still a strong belief that what is White is right and standard, and what is non-White is inferior, suspect, and incompetent. Since WAPE is not a native language of any Western country, it is frowned upon by both school authorities and parents. Although the latter may speak WAPE, they do not necessarily want their children to speak it because even though it is widely spoken in West Africa, it is neither a language of power nor of opportunities in the formal sector.

The threatening and intimidating wall-signs found all over the school campus warning the students not to speak WAPE are appalling. In addition to the previously mentioned wall-signs, some others carried messages such as, “Drop your Pidgin here,” “Pidgin destroys, make it your enemy,” and “Pidgin is a canker it may eat you up.” Paradoxically, that is the language I overheard students on that campus using to interact with their peers during lunch break. WAPE has attained a creolistic status in most of these West African countries. This explains why a nomenclatural shift from Pidgin to Kamtok, to affirm that creolistic status in Cameroon, was timely and necessary. Unfortunately, the word Kamtok remains popular only within the linguistic community of scholars because of the rift between academia and the legislation.

Here is a typical sample of a WAPE from Chinua Achebe (1966) in *A Man of the People*:
“Me? Put poison for master? Nevertheless!” said the cook, side-stepping to avoid a heavy blow from the Minister . . . Why I go kill [will kill] my master? . . . Abi [I be] my head no correct? And even if to say I de craze why I no go [will go] jump for inside lagoon instead to kill my master? (p. 34)

In a nutshell, the cook’s master developed stomachache after drinking a different brand of home-made coffee and accused him for poisoning his coffee. In the foregoing, he is denying the allegations. He says, even if he is crazy, he would rather jump into the river and drown himself than to kill his boss. Note that the verb to be is not conjugated as it is most often the case in Ebonics. Also note that the future tense is marked by go and not will. Unlike Mandarin (Chinese), which does not have present, future, and past tense markers, WAPE does have present continuous and past tense markers. These markers may sometimes be linked to the stem of the verb (e.g., doam for doing). In Gullah, a language spoken by the descendants of slaves in South Carolina and Georgia, the am suffix and be are used in the same context as in WAPE. For example, they would say I be don do-am. This is chiefly WAPE, and it means I had done it.

However, it cannot be claimed that WAPE is standardized throughout West Africa. As stated earlier, there are several varieties of the language as it is often the case with any language that cuts across cultural, religious, geographic, socioeconomic, and ethnic boundaries. A sentence such as, They are going to eat beans will be translated slightly differently in WAPE and Gullah varieties with minimal problem of intelligibility:

**Nigerian Pidgin English:**
Dem dey go cook beans

**Cameroonian Pidgin English:**
Dey di go for go cook beans

**Sierra Leone Krio:**
Dem dey go for cook beans

**Gullah:**
Dem duh gwine fuh cook beans

**Ebonics Has Transgressed, Metamorphosed, Yet Survived**

Human beings are not pre-wired to speak only some specific languages and not others or enunciate some sounds and not others. It is a matter of speech community to which they are born and the extent to which they have been
exposed to the varying syntactic structures, lexicon, and phonology of a given language. This explains why not all African Americans can fluently express themselves in Ebonics even though it is a heritage language to most of them. Some geographic, socioeconomic, and ecologic factors are responsible for their limited exposure to Ebonics and thus for their inability to speak it. The neighborhood, the school, parents’ income, the racial identity of parents, and children are some of the factors that affect people’s interests and attitudes toward a language.

However, it can also be posited that compulsory “ignorance laws,” passed in several southern states to exert control over African Americans contributed to heritage language maintenance among enslaved Africans. Ebonics would not be in the same shape and form had its earlier speakers been given the opportunity to read and write Standard English. Indeed, it was not only a punishable offense for slaves who sought literacy skills, but it was also against the law for anyone to teach the slaves how to read and write. South Carolina was the first state to pass this law in 1740. It stated,

Whereas, the having of slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, may be attended with great inconveniences; Be it enacted, that all and every person and persons whatsoever, who shall hereafter teach or cause any slave or slaves to be taught to write, or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe, in any manner of writing whatsoever, hereafter taught to write, every such person or persons shall, for every such offense, forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds, current money. (Bremmer, 1970, p. 338)

Their law was worded as though it was designed to protect slaves from the “torture” of learning to read and write. Meanwhile, it was designed to circumscribe them into second class citizenship and deny them equal opportunities in the society. At the end of the Civil War, vocational schools such as the Hampton Institute for the Negroes and Tuskegee Institutes were founded for freed slaves. These vocational schools that offered home economics, agriculture, and carpentry only prepared African Americans for menial jobs and subservient positions in the society. These kinds of schools failed to provide them critical literacy skills; on the contrary, they offered them just basic numeracy and literacy skills (Anyon, 1980). Here is an excerpt from Virginia Revised Code of 1819 on compulsory ignorance laws:

That all meetings or assemblages of slaves, or free negroes or mulattoes mixing and associating with such slaves at any meeting-house or houses, &c., in the night; or at any SCHOOL OR SCHOOLS for teaching them
READING OR WRITING, either in the day or night, under whatsoever pretext, shall be deemed and considered an UNLAWFUL ASSEMBLY; and any justice of a county, &c., wherein such assemblage shall be, either from his own knowledge or the information of others, of such unlawful assemblage, &c., may issue his warrant, directed to any sworn officer or officers, authorizing him or them to enter the house or houses where such unlawful assemblages, &c., may be, for the purpose of apprehending or dispersing such slaves, and to inflict corporal punishment on the offender or offenders, at the discretion of any justice of the peace, not exceeding twenty lashes. (Webster, 1992, p. 187)

As an instrument of control and subversion, slave owners strove to curtail slaves’ hopes for formal education and any form of literacy instruction since they understood the empowering and emancipatory values of literacy to the oppressed. The fear of emancipation of the oppressed is a universal characteristic of oppressors. Whether it is in a more patriarchal society where women remain subservient to men or in a country with a totalitarian leadership, the oppressors employ all sorts of uncouth and unorthodox means to control the oppressed and to justify the oppression by limiting access to quality education. Government officials of any political system are generally conversant about the liberating potentials of literacy acquisition. Southern states governments were not different. They saw literacy as a threat to their bottom lines. As Valencia (2010) posits, literacy can raise consciousness, politicize the minds of the oppressed, and trigger a revolt against the oppressors.

Other Southern states that also followed South Carolina to pass the abhorrent law were Missouri (1817), Virginia (1819), Georgia (1831), and Mississippi (1832), (Johnson, 2000). Prior to arriving in the Americas, a good number of the slaves spoke an Africanized version of English that had been and is still an influential lingua franca in West Africa since the 16th century (Ndemanu, 2011). Denying these slaves a formal education in America was tantamount to denying them “Standard English” proficiency. Based on my own multilingual experiences, there is no gainsaying that the higher the educational attainment of a given speaker, the better his or her communicative competency. The prohibition of African Americans from learning to read and write contributed to the survival of WAPE, which evolved to Ebonics today. In a nutshell, Compulsory ignorance laws in the South contributed to the survival of Ebonics whose mother language is still a lingua franca today in at least six West African countries: Cameroon, Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone, The Gambia, and part of Equatorial Guinea (see Figure 3).
Analysis of the Grammatical and Phonological Influences of West African Languages on Ebonics

The influence of African languages on Ebonics is prevalent at the levels of phonology and grammar. Like many other world languages, notably Mandarin and Thai, most Niger-Congo languages are tonal. They may distinguish from three to five levels of pitch. The Kru languages spoken in the southeast of Liberia and east of Ivory Coast are emblematic of sophistication in tonal languages with more than three pitch levels, which can sometimes be equated only to the Omotic languages, an Afroasiatic language family spoken in southwestern Ethiopia (Bender, 2000). A shift in the pitch level signifies a shift in the meaning of the word (see Table 1).
For example, in my native language, Ngwe, the following three words have three distinct meanings as a result of the variations in the tone markers: mbáh (to hate), mbāh (home), and mbàh (bush).

In spite of the grammatical and phonological sophistication of the Niger-Congo languages, there are some aspects of English grammar and sounds that are not found in any of their variations. Whenever there are commonalities in the speech patterns of two languages, it becomes easier for the speaker of L1 (native language) to learn L2 (second language) and emerge with native-like fluency. When there is a multitude of phonological and grammatical disparities in both languages, the language learner intuitively resorts to approximation of the L1 sounds and L2 grammar. Varying intonations, accents, and dialects are the results of intuitive approximation and pidginization. In the subsequent paragraphs, some of the phonological and grammatical structures that set African languages, and consequently Ebonics, apart from European languages will be examined.

**Post-Vocalic –r**

Most Niger-Congo languages do not have the post-vocalic –r in their languages. So, pronouncing –r at the end of words that follow a vowel is unchartered waters for the speakers of these languages just like many English speakers have difficulties in pronouncing u[ə̃] in French words such as tu, lui, and utilizer. Thus, for the following English words, the –r will be elliptical in Congo-Niger languages (see Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words</th>
<th>Standard English pronunciation</th>
<th>Ngwe pronunciation</th>
<th>WAPE pronunciation</th>
<th>Ebonics pronunciation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Or</td>
<td>[awr]</td>
<td>[aw]</td>
<td>[aw:]</td>
<td>[awr]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>course</td>
<td>[kawr]</td>
<td>[kaws]</td>
<td>[kaws]</td>
<td>[kaws]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four</td>
<td>[faw]</td>
<td>[faw]</td>
<td>[faw]</td>
<td>[faw]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>[chahrlz]</td>
<td>[chahz]</td>
<td>[chahz]</td>
<td>[chahz]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More</td>
<td>[mawr]</td>
<td>[maw]</td>
<td>[maw]</td>
<td>[maw]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sir</td>
<td>[sur]</td>
<td>[sa]</td>
<td>[sa]</td>
<td>[su]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. WAPE = West African Pidgin English.*
Both WAPE and Ebonics are not taught in schools. Other than the Bible and other holy text that have WAPE versions, there is rarely any newspaper or leisure book in either of the two languages. Nonetheless, WAPE in West Africa, like Ebonics in the United States, continue to thrive. They have not experienced any attrition rate despite the vilification from the elite class. People who denigrate these languages still enjoy good music sung in them.

**The Use of Copula Verb to Be or Lack Thereof**

Unlike in Latin-based languages, copula verbs have less significance in Niger-Congo language family. Like in WAPE, the copula verb *to be* is not often conjugated.

For example,

- **Standard English (SE):** He will be there in 10 minutes
- **WAPE:** I go *be* for dey small time
- **Ebonics:** He *be* there in 10 minutes

Most Niger-Congo languages do not use the copula verb, *to be*, before a qualifying adjective.

Examples:

- **SE:** She is sick
- **Ngwe:** A gow [translated as: she or he sick or he or she is a patient]
- **WAPE:** He sick
- **Ebonics:** She sick

The prelude to Michael Jackson’s song, *You rock my world*, is a typical example of copular ellipsis in Ebonics, which mirrors Niger-Congo languages. Before the song begins, Michael Jackson and Chris, co-singer, discuss the beauty of a girl whom they have just spotted:

- Chris: . . . That giiiiirl! Oh man! Look at that girl right there! Goodness gracious! Uuh! **That girl fine**, man! . . . She’s just too fine she know[s] **she fine too**!
- Michael: She is bangin’ . . .
- Chris: Ooh, she’s off the hook!
- Michael: She looks good, you’re right.
- Chris: Uhh, uhh, uh, uh, uh. I **betchoo cain’t nobody** can get that girl!
- Michael: Chris, I can get her . . .
- Chris: You can’t get that girl, Mike, I guarantee you can’t get that girl!
Michael: Watch me get that girl!
Chris: I bet you never neverland you can’t!
Michael: I can get her!

First of all, fine is a neutral qualifying adjective often used by WAPE speakers in place of beautiful, pretty, and handsome. In Standard English, fine will not be used in this context. It is used to qualify animate and inanimate objects just as in Ngwe the same adjective, bong, employed to qualify human beauty is used to qualify animals and objects. So, WAPE follows a similar rule, fine man, fine woman, fine car, and fine dog. Second, the non-use of a copula verb is also typical of Niger-Congo languages. The use of double negatives in Ebonics is basically for emphatic reasons as it would be elucidated in a separate segment.

**Double Negatives**

In Niger-Congo languages like Ngwe, Yemba, and Ngemba, double negatives are grammatically correct. They are used to underscore the negation in a sentence. For example,

- SE: I am good at math/I am not good at math
- Ngwe: Meng bong na mat/Meng te bong na mat bo
- Ebonics: I good at mat/I ain’t good at no mat
- WAPE: I good for mat/I no good for mat
- SE: I am not good at anything in math
- WAPE: I no know no nothing for mat

Note the double negatives in Ngwe; te alone denotes negation. So, bo comes in just for emphatic reason. The use of the preposition at in Ebonics is the product of American English (AE) influence. In WAPE, prepositions of places like at, to, and in are substituted with for.

**Regular and Irregular Verb Conjugation**

To support the theory that the lexification of WAPE is predominantly English-based while its grammatical structure is Niger-Congo, this section of the article uses some concrete examples to illustrate the structural similarities between languages spoken in West Africa and Ebonics/Gullah. Most Niger-Congo languages do not use post-inflectional morphemes on verbs to mark a shift in time and person as it is the case in most Latin-based languages. So, in Ngwe, ké, ke, se, ndo are, respectively, past tense, present perfect, present
continuous, and future tense markers that modify the verbs that they precede. WAPE which preceded Gullah/Ebonics but was preceded by Niger-Congo grammar and English Lexis, follows a similar pattern in verb conjugation with the use of *be, do, done, go* (for WAPE) and *been, da, done, will* (for Ebonics) to mark their past tense, present continuous, present perfect, and future tenses, respectively as shown in Table 3.

### Table 3. Tenses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tenses</th>
<th>Ngwe</th>
<th>WAPE</th>
<th>Gullah</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Past tense</td>
<td>Meng ké law</td>
<td>I be cook</td>
<td>I been cook</td>
<td>I cooked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present continuous tense</td>
<td>Meng se ndaw</td>
<td>I de cook</td>
<td>I da cook</td>
<td>I am cooking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present perfect tense</td>
<td>Meng ke law</td>
<td>I done cook</td>
<td>I done cook</td>
<td>I have cooked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future tense</td>
<td>Meng ndo law</td>
<td>I go cook</td>
<td>I will cook</td>
<td>I will cook</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. WAPE = West African Pidgin English.*

Note that in spite of a shift in the tense usage, the stem of the verb, *cook*, is not inflected in neither Ngwe nor WAPE except the prefix in the present continuous tense for the former, which has to do with pronunciation of combined sounds of */se/ and */l/ than with inflectional morphemes. Just like we pronounce “the” differently when it comes before a vowel sound. The lack of inflectional suffix on the stem of verbs may explain why many speakers of Niger-Congo languages, like Ebonics speakers, tend not to pronounce the *ed* at the end of sibilant sounds, vowels, as well as voiced and voiceless consonants. If someone still believes that it is because of physiological deficiency that people do not pronounce these sounds exactly as native English speakers, let him or her start learning another language and make sure they do not forget to ask for honest feedback from native speakers of that language. It would be a good experiment to carry out in order to understand how one’s native language influences how one learns and speaks a new language.

### Possessive Noun Forms

Niger-Congo languages do not generally carry any apostrophes or words like possessive noun forms to denote possession. For example,

SE: Mary’s farm
Ngwe: A noo Mary (Mary farm or the farm of Mary)
WAPE: Mary (yee) farm
Ebonics: Mary farm

Moreso, Niger-Congo languages rarely have words that end with sibilant sounds let alone plural markers that come at the end of a noun. Plural markers usually come before the nouns they are modifying. This explains why WAPE and Ebonics speakers may use the plural form of a word *boy* without pronouncing the *s* at the end of the word (e.g., *2 boy* instead of *2 boys*).

This statement made by an enslaved person in 1776 shows how the sentence structure is void of a possessive noun form and is similar to WAPE:

Ebonics: Me massa name Cunney Tomsee (Smitherman, 2000, p. 31).
SE: My master’s name is Colonel Thompson.
WAPE: Ma massa yee name na cunney Tomsen.

**Gender-Neutral Personal Pronouns and Possessive Adjectives**

Like in many African languages, personal pronouns and possessive adjectives in WAPE are gender-neutral. There is no distinction between *he* or *she*. Although it is written as “I” or “he,” it is pronounced as [i]. His or her is translated as *yee*. In WAPE, the personal pronouns are I [a], you, he [i], we, una, and dem (see Table 4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard English</th>
<th>WAPE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>I [a]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You</td>
<td>you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He/she/it</td>
<td>He[i]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You</td>
<td>una</td>
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<tr>
<td>We</td>
<td>we</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They</td>
<td>dem</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. WAPE = West African Pidgin English.*

For example,

WAPE: *I* di go for see Mary; *he* di sick and *yee* [her] massa no dey for house [I am going to visit Mary; she is sick and her husband is not home].
WAPE: *Dem* don chop rice [They have eaten rice].
Note that he is a genderless pronoun in WAPE because most Niger-Congo languages are also genderless. The he is pronounced as the e letter and not as he in SE. Given the influence of Standard English, Ebonics speakers do use the he and she personal pronouns.

This response from Laura Smalley, an enslaved African, as to the question whether she has ever seen any “wild Indians,” underscores the grammatical and phonological influences of Niger-Congo languages on African American speech:

I nuse hear mama about um [I used to hear mama talk about them] when say she-when she was a chil’ . . . he[he] say dat uh, one mornin’ she went out an Ol’ Mistress-she’d big “nough you know for to handle water-an; said when she got to de door, open de door, that the stars was fallin” . . . (Lanehart, 2001, p. 36)

The foregoing quote illustrates a heavy linguistic interference. WAPE and Standard English have had tremendous influence on the speaker’s speech. Giving the high level of intelligibility of Ebonics among Americans, its speakers are not likely to give up their heritage language any time soon; not especially at the time when the entertainment industries in this country are dominated by African Americans.

Pronunciation

A lot of linguistic interferences occur when speakers of Niger-Congo languages speak Standard English. Their pronunciation of English words is often influenced by their first language speech patterns. Speakers of West African languages today still pronounce differently some consonant clusters, diphthongs, triphthongs, s and z at the end of certain vowels, voiced and voiceless consonants. Ebonics speakers, omit some consonants and some vowels in their pronunciation of words partly because of prolonged residential and institutional segregation from native English speakers. Fortunately, they had a language to hold onto.

Examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consonant clusters</th>
<th>th-sounds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ask—pronounced as ax</td>
<td>the—de</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test—tes</td>
<td>with—wif or wit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hand—han</td>
<td>them—dem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help—helep or hep</td>
<td>Past tense marker and present tense 3rd person singular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hold—hol Old—ol</td>
<td>Asked—axt asks—axs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falling—fallin</td>
<td>Picked—pikt</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Associative Plural Markers**

Like in French, Niger-Congo languages have a different way of marking the regular plural on nouns. Their plural marker is not adding and pronouncing an *s* or *es* at the end of the word as it is the case in English. Thus, during a speech production, only the plural form of determiners such as definite and indefinite articles help determine whether the word is singular or plural as it is in French.

In the languages like Ngwe, Yemba, and Ngemba which are all part of the Niger Congo language family, it is rare to find words that end with /s/, /z/, or /iz/ sounds, be there plurals of nouns or third person singular marker for the present tense. The plural or singular markers in a speech production are easily discernible by the determiners *mé* or *ba* modifying the nouns especially in Ngwe and Yemba (see Table 5).

**Table 5.** Plural Markers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English words and their corresponding singular and plural in Ngwe for objects and animals</th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a book</td>
<td>a caté</td>
<td>mé caté</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a farm</td>
<td>a no’o</td>
<td>mé no’o</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a house</td>
<td>nga</td>
<td>mé nga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a bed</td>
<td>éku</td>
<td>m’éku</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English words and their corresponding singular and plural in Ngwe for human beings</th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a child</td>
<td>Ma nkeu</td>
<td>ba nkeu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a woman</td>
<td>Me ngwi</td>
<td>Ba ngwi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a man</td>
<td>Ngho bangha</td>
<td>Ba bangha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a parent</td>
<td>Mbe or ma’a</td>
<td>Ba mbe or ba ma’a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Mé* is the plural marker for animals and inanimate objects that usually precedes the nouns it modifies. For the purpose of distinction of the singular from the plural in a written form, an *s* can be added to the plural noun as it is the case in French. *Ba/ba/ is the plural marker for human beings. Ba also serves as a third person plural of a personal pronoun. In WAPE, *Ba* is translated as *dem* (them). Therefore, *Peter and others* can be translated into Ngwe as *Ba Peter* and then into WAPE as *Peter dem* or *dem Peter*. This explains why there is little respect for English plural markers in Ebonics and English Creoles in Latin America. Here are two examples of associated plurals in WAPE and Gulllah:
WAPE: Ma mami *dem* and papa *dem*, una come for inside [Parents, please, come in]
Gullah: *Dem* boy come inside! [Boys, come inside!]
Sierra Leone Krio: “Your Peekin dem dae feel betteh, right?” (Beah, 2007, p. 61) [Your children are feeling better, right?]

If one were to measure an immigrant’s loyalty to his or her host country by how fast they lose their heritage language, 99.99% of adult immigrants who spoke fluently their mother tongue prior to immigrating into a new country would flunk the test. So, one’s fluency in a host’s language ought not be the yardstick to measure an immigrant’s loyalty to the host country in any part of the world, and not especially when those immigrants happened to have been brought to their present location involuntarily (Ogbu & Simons, 1998).

**Conclusion**

Language is the most unifying and, at the same time, disuniting weapon worldwide. It has been used to build, mend, and dismantle relationships and create cultural divides among human beings. The United States, like many other countries, has a way of thinking that can be termed *Republicanism*. It requires that in order for citizens to live together in harmony, there needs to be some basic cultural and moral values that everyone has to abide by. English, though not an official language, happens to be one of those core values whose mastery often directly defines one’s citizenship’ and indirectly defines one’s loyalty. The mastery of Standard English is a requirement to become a naturalized U.S. citizen. However, Standard English happens to be one of the varieties of English spoken nationwide. In every speech community, there are subtle to major linguistic differences. To standardize one variety of a language means elevating its status and ipso facto its speakers. It also means the *otherization* of speakers of the nonstandard varieties of the language. It is puzzling that language majority and minority immerse themselves in the linguistic divide without asking questions as to why one dialect has to be derided while the other is extolled and cherished by its privileged speakers as well as the underprivileged “other.”. The linguistic diversity of English—Southern English, Boston English, Midwestern English, Tex-Mex, and Ebonics—itself explains the pluralistic and heterogeneous nature of the U.S. population. Yet, speakers of some of the English varieties are still automatically stigmatized and vilified for subtle to major dialectic differences.

Those who advocate for language extinction have to understand that language loss represents a loss of ideas, history, knowledge, creativity, identity,
aspirations, cultural values, and humor. For example, what might be humorous in the source language might not be necessarily humorous in the target language because the translation might not always be perfect. As a speaker of a couple of Niger-Congo languages and two European languages, the humor that comes with narrating a funny story that is set in my hometown is often untranslatable in the other languages that I also speak. The honor and respect that come with addressing somebody in French as *vous* and not *tu* is lost in English because both words are translated simply as *you*. Therefore, there is no gainsaying that there is unconscious personality and identity shift when one alternates between two or more languages during multilingual interactions with people from different speech communities. As Toni Morrison so eloquently stated about Ebonics,

> It’s the thing Black people love so much—the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them. It’s a love, a passion. Its function is like a preacher’s: to make you stand up out of your seat, make you lose yourself and hear yourself. The worst of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language. There are certain things I cannot say without recourse to my language. (Christensen, 2009, p.136)

As Christensen (2008) intimates, the perpetuation of the myth of the supremacy of European languages and inferiority of non-European languages has been the hallmark of cultural and linguistic disenfranchisement of language minority students. It is important to understand that it may be easier to de-name and rename someone in the colonization process, but once someone grows up with a language, it cannot be completely erased from a grown-up’s brain by a mere policy, law, or prejudice. Ebonics is not going anywhere any time soon. One of the most cherished human freedom is the ability to use the language of one’s ancestors freely without any fear of reprisal in school or in any public space. , Children whose home language is not Standard English should be able to acquire it in school or anywhere else without losing their ability to communicate in their home languages/dialects with their family members (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002). Although slave owners succeeded in de-naming and renaming enslaved Africans after them for the purpose of sole proprietorship and ethnic identity obliteration, they failed to erase the influences of Niger-Congo languages on Ebonics partly thanks to compulsory ignorance laws alluded to earlier and partly because they could not have afforded to lose every bit of their cultural heritage. For better or for worse, Ebonics is one of the major legacies of slavery that is here to stay. It is a respectable variety of English with its own sophisticated grammar, phonology, and syntax.
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