

Accents and Ebonics: When the Hood Goes to College

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### Abstract

This paper examines how accents, with a focus on Ebonics, are related to how a person is treated, how literacy and accents are related, and the implications of such on a college campus. This paper discusses a survey of ten questions sent to 32 participants and their responses to being asked about Ebonics. The research in this paper suggests that accents are related to how a person is treated and how their intelligence level is perceived to be; however, it also suggests that colleges are more tolerant than the general population. This paper also explores different ways to overcome language prejudices, especially within children.

*Keywords:* Ebonics

### Accents and Ebonics: When the Hood goes to College

One of the most recognized movie scenes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is in the 1964 film, *My Fair Lady*, when Professor Henry Higgins attempted to teach Eliza Doolittle how to say, “The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain,” in “real English,” without a Cockney accent. While the clip itself may be considered *slightly* outdated, the concept of language prejudice remains the same and just as prevalent in modern American society. For example, in 2010 the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration sparked outrage in the general population when it created a new job for a translator of Ebonics, defined as a nonstandard form of American English characteristically spoken by African Americans in the United States (Ludden & McWhorter, 2010, p. 1; Princeton, n.p.). There were many debates over whether or not the DEA should have hired an Ebonics translator because in doing so, the DEA indirectly recognized Ebonics as an official language and not as the “bad English or broken English” that it was previously considered to be (Ludden & McWhorter, 2010, n.p.). Perry and Delpit (1998) attempted to validate this decision saying that Ebonics is as legitimate a language as French or Spanish. They argued that because teachers view Ebonics as a substandard form of English, and not as another language, the teachers help to form the stigma that children who speak Ebonics are stupid or lazy (n.p.).

The idea of language bias caught my attention in *My Fair Lady* and I began to think about my mother who grew up speaking Ebonics, but then studied at the Coast Guard Academy, University of Michigan and UCLA Berkeley. Each time she visited her home in West Philadelphia, her siblings would say that she talked “white.” This piqued my interest because although my mother is an intelligent person, when she goes back to Philadelphia, she reverts to speaking Ebonics, changing the way she speaks to fit her surroundings. I wondered what her college counterparts thought when she spoke Ebonics rather than “white” at college because students living on a college campus tend to generally speak the same way. Between *My Fair*

*Lady* and my mother, I realized I had two burning questions: are accents related to how a person is treated, and are perceptions of literacy and accents related? I believe that accents *are* related to how a person is treated even though literacy and accents share no correlation; however, in the academic world, thoughts alone are nothing without proof, and I set out to show the world that, even unknowingly, accents do affect the way a person is treated.

Although language prejudice has been studied extensively throughout the years, it has not been studied as thoroughly in a college atmosphere. Little focus has been placed on studying how college students, by nature, are more open-minded and accepting than older generations and uneducated people. I know that there is a language bias in the general population, but I wonder how prevalent it is on college campuses, and more specifically, how Ebonics plays a part in the language bias. Consequently, I placed my focus on college-aged students to get a feel for how they perceive Ebonics, and how Ebonics affects their perceptions of a speaker. In my study, I looked at 26 different college students from different colleges on the East Coast. It should be noted that for the sake of my study, Ebonics would be considered an accent as well as a dialect and not just a nonstandard form of American English characteristically spoken by African Americans in the United States.

### **Research Procedure**

There was previous research available in order to answer the questions stated above to use as the basis for this paper; however, my research is specifically focused on how college students feel about language perception, not just how society feels. The research from this angle is minuscule. Thus this study targets college students ages 17-25 using a SurveyMonkey-created survey. The survey was done in the style of Ahn (2010) who devised a short survey about participants' general knowledge of accent perceptions and how it affected them. Ahn then interviewed subjects and played them tapes of different accents. My methodology is less

personal, as the survey was conducted anonymously to increase participation. Ahn also focused on European and Asian accents, whereas this study focused on Ebonics.

The survey questions were developed (see Appendix A) in an attempt to get the most holistic view of how students feel about people who speak Ebonics. Although these questions may seem broad and unfocused, they were specifically chosen because they are unbiased and open-ended. They are directed at the participants to understand how they perceive Ebonics speakers.

Because the research focused specifically on the college population, the survey was only sent out to, and shared among, college students. After creating the survey, I used Facebook to send out a web link to all my friends currently attending college. I also had my brother at VCU and my sister at Wake Forest do the same. Our friends shared the link with their friends to help decrease the bias of only our friends participating.

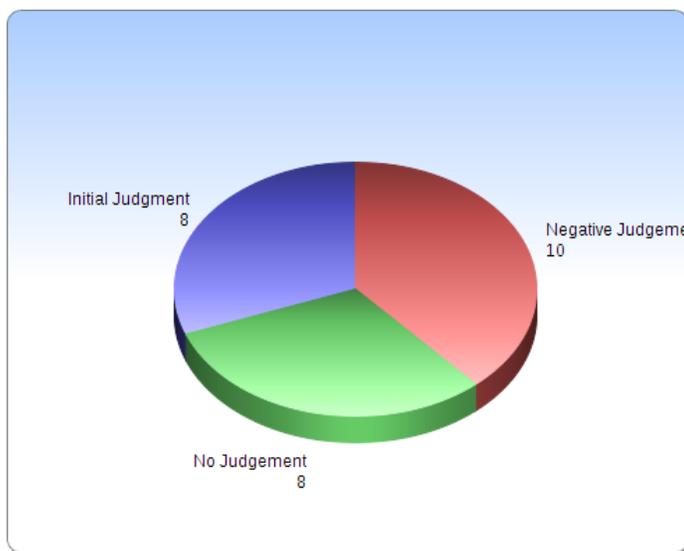
There were some inherent limitations to this particular research method. The most glaring was that the survey was anonymous. Although this was done to encourage participation and honest answers, it was hard to guarantee the sanctity of the research because there was no way of keeping older, non-college students, from answering the survey. Since the survey was sent out over Facebook, I am assuming that I do not have to worry about a younger generation bias because I highly doubt that they would take the time to answer a survey like this. The second problem was the inability to force participation. Without enough responses, it would be almost impossible to collect and analyze enough data to make a legitimate argument. The last limitation was that the sample population was college students. College students are not the most patient people, nor do they have inordinate amounts of time to answer surveys. Because of this, the survey was limited to only ten short questions that would not take long to answer. This meant that all the detailed questions about Ebonics had to be curtailed and edited to

broader, easier-to-answer questions so that the participants would feel more inclined to respond my survey. Despite the limitations, the survey was successful in answering the original questions about the relationship between Ebonics and how someone is treated.

By the time the survey closed, there were 32 participants. However, there were 6 surveys that were unusable due to inappropriate language or responses which called into question the credibility of the respondent.

### Summary of the Findings

Out of the 26 usable surveys, ten participants (38%) said that they would negatively judge an Ebonics speaker, and would have no reservations about it. Eight (31%) said that they would not judge an Ebonics speaker at all because they realize that accent is not an accurate reflection of character. Eight (31%) said that while they would initially judge an Ebonics speaker, they would not let that cloud their judgments because they recognize that first impressions can be wrong.



However, 20 participants (77%) said that if they heard someone speaking Ebonics, their initial impression would be that the speaker is less intelligent. Of these 20 participants, 12 (60%) made sure to clarify that this initial judgment was based **solely** on a first impression and

noted they know that Ebonics does not necessarily reflect intelligence. One participant commented, "A final judgment of a person shouldn't be based on the way they speak." Other participants echoed this response. Many of the other responses stated that people speak Ebonics because they have "pride in their culture." Regardless, these participants still made a distinction between "proper English" and Ebonics. They seem to think that there is a time and a place for Ebonics.

Seven other participants (35%) were adamant that Ebonics and intelligence are positively correlated. Many were under the stereotypical opinion that Ebonics speakers are "lower socioeconomic African Americans" who either "lack the ability to speak more properly, or they have no reason to" or "have a depleted vocabulary and lack education." As one participant stated "[Ebonics speakers] show a lackadaisical attitude toward the learning of the English language...I tend to believe the person is uneducated and has little, if any, desire to learn the language properly." Another participant reluctantly admitted that "Sadly, it's the basic truth that when I hear someone who speaks Ebonics I think they are unintelligent." One participant had never spoken to someone who speaks Ebonics but candidly said that she would probably "resort to the stereotypical view that they are uneducated" if she were to ever hear Ebonics. There was another participant who did not care about the speech by itself; the clothes were the deciding factor of his final judgment. When speaking to someone using Ebonics he said that if they use Ebonics, but dress well, it is a sign of confidence in one's self and accordingly, intelligence.

This prejudice is a curiosity given that many respondents change the way that they speak to fit in their surroundings. Eighteen (69%) of the participants admitted to doing so for various reasons, the most prevalent being that some speech is inappropriate to use around professors and figures of authority the way one does with friends. Unsurprisingly, the majority

of the respondents who said that they change their speech to match their surroundings were more accepting of people who speak Ebonics, recognizing that it doesn't necessarily reflect on the speaker themselves, or their intelligence. Oddly, race and gender were insignificant factors in this survey though this may be due to the relatively low, workable turnout.

After analyzing the results, the expected difference between the participants who would negatively judge Ebonics speakers, and the ones who were more positive, were much smaller than expected. The results were mostly average, with few anomalies. Most participants would initially judge the speaker, and later change their opinion accordingly. The number of those in the middle were also expected to be significantly smaller because the findings were expected to be more consistent with Rakic (Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena, 2010) who found a significant correlation between accents and stereotypes. In 2010, Rakic conducted a study where participants were shown a photograph of German and Italian looking persons together with written statements about the individuals depicted. The participants were asked to match up the statement with the correct photograph. All the participants correctly matched the statement to the photograph. The participants were next asked to do the same exact thing while listening to a recording of the statements, some spoken with German accents, and others with Italian accents. In this part of the experiment, the participants placed more emphasis on the accent matching up to the picture rather than to the statement, showing that accents significantly shape people's perception more than written words or pictures. Rakic found that the majority of "participants orientated themselves nearly exclusively on the spoken accent while categorizing people" and that language is "a source of information in the ethnic categorization" (n.p.). This study showed that it is human nature to judge based on accent.

Although Rakic's study was done in the general population instead of being limited to college campuses, the results between my study and that of Rakic were still expected to be at

least similar; however, the results did not exactly match up. It seems that accents, Ebonics in particular, are much more widely accepted, tolerated and less judged on college campuses than in the real world. The participants recognized the existence of the bias but chose not to act on them. This could be due to the general open-mindedness of college students and that college students are taught by their respective universities to be accepting of diversity. It could also be the fact that, within college campuses, African Americans who speak Ebonics, are also highly intelligent individuals who are able speak “proper English” when necessary, and other students recognize this.

### **Implications of this Study**

On college campuses, students seem to be extremely open minded and accepting of Ebonics, although this study did not delve into the why. There are many theories about how to encourage the general public’s acceptance of Ebonics, as it is on college campuses today.

In California, there is a school that formally recognizes Ebonics. Prescott Elementary School has implemented a Standard English Proficiency Program, which uses Ebonics to teach African-American and white students Standard English (Miner, 2012). The teachers in this program approach teaching Standard English as if they are teaching their students a second language, and “not fixing the home language you bring to school” (n.p.). The teachers believe that if “you don't respect the children's culture, you negate their very essence” (n.p.). They use these philosophies as the basis for their program, which has proven to be successful because the students in this school grow up learning that accents are not the only part of a person.

However, my survey should not only encourage people to recognize their prejudice towards Ebonics, but also towards accents as a whole. The following are other ways that have been proposed to end accent prejudices. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) (2010) recommends that parents begin the education of their children. They suggest that parents

“teach [their] children respect and an appreciation for differences by providing opportunities for interaction with people of diverse groups,” and “help children recognize instances of stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination”(n.p.). The theory means that if children are educated about language prejudice at a young age when they are less influenced by their peers, they will be more tolerant in the future.

In drama classrooms, where accents and voice inflections are especially important and stressed, Sabo (2012) addresses the teachers. She beseeches teachers to “not only present General American speech as just another accent students need to learn, but also emphasize that it has no intrinsic worth making it better than any other dialect” (p.4). She says that “[teachers] have an obligation to root out prejudice and challenge assumptions.” These three examples are directed at teachers, parents and other figures of authority, who serve as role models and who are most able to make a difference in the future.

Now that we are aware that some people treat Ebonics speakers differently, we are able to act on it. Next time you hear someone speaking Ebonics, or speaking in any accent, before judging them, understand that just because they sound a certain way, does not mean that they *are* a certain way. Language prejudice is prevalent in our society, but it is up to us to overcome our initial judgments to see the person beyond. Perhaps in the future, no one will understand just how relevant that one prejudicial scene in *My Fair Lady* once was in everyone’s daily lives.

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Appendix A  
Ebonics Survey Questions

For the purpose of this survey, Ebonics (African American Vernacular English: a nonstandard form of American English characteristically spoken by African Americans in the United States) will be defined as both an accent and a dialect, or a "ghetto accent."

\*

1. What is your gender? In the comment box below, please specify which race you identify with (i.e. White, Black/African American, Asian, Pacific Islander, etc..)

Male

Female

Other (please specify)

\*

2. What is your age?

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

Other (please specify)

\*

3. Are you a native American- English speaker? If not, please specify.

Yes

No

Other (please specify)

\*

4. What college do you attend?

\*

5. What academic year are you in college?

Freshman

Sophomore

Junior

Senior

Grad Student

\*

6. Do you recognize regional accents/dialects?

Yes

No

Can't Answer

Other (please specify)

\*

7. Do you judge others by the way that they speak, specifically Ebonics. Please explain.

8. Have you ever changed the way you speak depending on your surroundings? If yes, please explain.

Yes

No

Other (please specify)

\*

9. What are your thoughts on Ebonics?

\*

10. What is your first impression of someone who speaks Ebonics?