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Ebonics: The Political Process through a Glass Darkly

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In the last few weeks ebonics has become a hot political topic in the United States (US). Ebonics denotes a language, also often called "black English." (There are other denotations as well.) It connotes that black language is a separate and legitimate language of equal standing and merit with so-called Standard English--the latter of which IBPP editors attempt to employ correctly in these pages. Ebonics also connotes that black English can be taught in US schools because its contribution to success in life can be or should be as significant as mastery of Standard English. The study of a language a hot topic? Where are we, France? Since when have US government officials, pundits, and other participants in political discourse become so sophisticated? One need not think too hard about this question, because sophistication in the discourse on ebonics is for the most part lacking. However, the usual suspects and motives are everywhere.

The ebonics controversy--as with any political controversy--comprises the beliefs, opinions, attitudes, feelings and motives--conscious, preconscious, and unconscious--of the politically involved. Tragically, the content of these psychological entities which are engendering political behavior relevant to ebonics may themselves have little to do with the topic--either the denotation or connotation. Instead, the ebonics controversy merely gives these beliefs, opinions, attitudes, feelings, and motives another day in the sun, another day to shine, another day to heat things up.

This is par for the course in political discourse and dialogue. So it should come as no surprise that in the larger arena of real and imagined racism in the US--the arena in which the ebonics controversy is being played out--the participants are talking past, around, and through each other.

In fact, one can either support or reject the notion of a legitimate African American language separate from English, its benefits for the education of African Americans--perhaps all Americans--and appropriate psychoeducational implementation in the schools for the most varied of psychological rationales: (1) The belief that many African Americans are so marginalized from the fruits of US society that anything should be tried no matter how unsubstantiated, or that nothing should be tried, because nothing can be effective in confronting the degree of marginalization. (We accept ebonics in the former, reject it in the latter, regardless of its own merits.) (2) The belief that attempts to proselytize for ebonics, research it, and implement educational programs based on it can be used to make or break political, educational, or industrial careers--and even embellish or embarrass people in all sorts of social situations. Group and self-identities can be constructed, deconstructed, infused, or deflated. And this can be done regardless of a sincere belief in ebonics's merits. (3) The belief that formally acknowledged American social and cultural contributions are constrained and circumscribed. This belief may be fueled by racism or related solely to issues of political power or even of evolutionary psychology or sociocultural phenomena. Accepting ebonics opens up the playing field, rejection keeps it restricted. (4) The belief that African Americans are inferior or superior to others and are deserving of the greatest derision or adulation as the case may be. We reject ebonics in the former case, accept it in the latter. (5) Acting out--literally believing or not believing any of the above based significantly on intrapsychic and often unconscious psychological conflict. Included in this are many emotional, irrational, and illogical phenomena. (6) The pleasure of attacking or defending positions, interacting with and affecting people,

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and having an effect on the world regardless of other consequences, regardless of ebonics's merits. (7) The belief in specific definitions of proof, science, and truth which themselves are fatally associated with political power being allocated, seized, or maintained by specific population segments.

As important as the psychological content underlying reactions to ebonics is the resistance which this motivating content has to change. This resistance ensures that the consequences of ebonics for the welfare of African American children may well have little effect on a publicly stated or privately held position. For example, if one supports the teaching of ebonics in a public school, data showing that such teaching is correlated with decreases in overall academic performance, standardized tests, social functioning outside the school, and various indices of success in life may be easily dismissed. This dismissal may occur with the external wave of a hand through allegations of biased measures, or a concurrent increase in racism, or with an internal wave of the hand through noting the irrelevancy of the findings. The crucial issue is what the political position does for its advocate not for the child.

The ebonics controversy exemplifies politics in the US where an approximation to a representative democracy is seriously compromised by significant population segments having little sense of or care for the general good. One sure bet concerning the ebonics controversy? The consequences for those who most need help in becoming full members of the American republic will be--for good or for evil--extraneous to the motives of participants in ebonics's political discourse and dialogue. (See Asante, M. K. (1995.) *In their faces: Situating alternatives to Afrocentrism*. Philadelphia, PA: Institute for Advanced Afrocentric Theory; Blackshire-Belay, C. A. (1996.) The location of ebonics within the framework of the Africological paradigm. *Journal of Black Studies*, 27, 5-23; Heilbrun, J. (January 20, 1997.) Speech therapy. *The New Republic*. pp. 17-19. Jones, C. (January 11, 1997.) Staunch ebonics supporters urge training of NYC teachers. *The New York Times*. (<http://www.nytimes.com>); Rich, F. (January 8, 1997.) The ebonic plague. *The New York Times*. p. A15; Wofford, J. (1979.) Ebonics: A legitimate system of oral communication. *Journal of Black Studies*, 9, 367-382.) (Keyword: Ebonics.)