O CRUZAMENTO DE SABERES NA AULA DE INGLÊS

CONTRIBUTOS PARA UMA PRÁTICA MULTIDISCIPLINAR

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1. Introduction

African American English (AAE) – also called Black English – is a nonstandard variety spoken by the majority of black people in the United States. In 2006 they numbered 38.5 million and made up nearly 13% of the country’s population (Wright 2007:698). Many AAE speakers are bidialectal, using standard American English in formal situations to convey the fact that they are educated and using AAE in informal circumstances to convey solidarity with other black people. Many middle-class blacks who use standard English grammar may use AAE phonological features (e.g. word-final nasalized vowels) to convey a positive attitude towards their racial identity. However, President Barack Obama does not usually use these AAE phonological features in speaking standard English, and since his election many prominent AAE speakers have begun following his example.

African American English is seldom written except in dialogue in fiction, but since the middle of the 20th century the concern about disadvantages that children speaking AAE may have in the American educational system has led to a great deal of attention being devoted to the variety by sociolinguists like William Labov, making it one of the world’s best documented non-standard language varieties. The fact that AAE involves massive variation between standard and non-standard features led to Labov’s development of quantitative methods of measuring the presence of linguistic features. Later research into the origins of AAE features from historical contact with creole and African languages makes the study of AAE a useful bridge to the study of contact linguistics itself.
Until the 1950s the overwhelming majority of white Americans saw their country and its culture as the product of their European roots flourishing in a new land. This ideology allowed very little room for the contribution of other cultures, so that even the distinctiveness of the folk ways and speech of African Americans was attributed to their frequent lack of access to education and general ignorance – if not to their very intelligence. Thus well into the 1950s, Negro Non-Standard English (as AAE was then called) was usually considered bad English in need of eradication rather than study. Insofar as its origins were considered at all, it was assumed to have descended solely from British dialects that had been left untended in America.

In the 1960s, the civil rights movement sharply changed this ideology: equal citizens could not logically be unequal human beings, and there was a new willingness to reconsider African Americans, as well as the development of their language and culture in the United States. By the 1970s, there was widespread agreement – at least among linguists – that the distinctive features of AAE identified it as a post-creole: the descendant of a variety of English that had first been creolized or restructured when it was learned by adult African slaves on plantations (as English had been creolized in Jamaica, for example). Subsequently this speech underwent decreolization, or the loss of many of its distinctive creole features through contact with standard English. Dillard’s influential book, Black English (1972) popularized this view, convincing many that AAE, like its speakers, was much more African than anyone had realized. This was part of another growing ideology, supported by many blacks, that affirmed a very separate cultural identity for African Americans.

By the end of the 1970s, there was a general assumption that decreolization explained the varying structural distance between different creoles and their lexical source language: Caribbean creoles based on English, for example, were actually post-creoles at different stages of decreolization away from a very early fully creolized variety that may have resembled the modern Surinamese creoles, which were cut off from contact with English in the 17th century. The decreolization theory for the origin of Black English – the “creolist” theory that finally received the imprimatur