

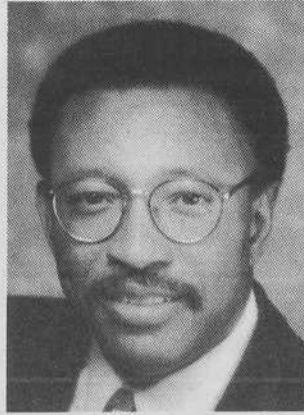
# POINT OF VIEW

THE RAY WILLIS REPORT

## Switch coding

By Ray Willis

What's really behind the ebonics debate? Is it a valid concern that many blacks, especially young people living in the inner cities, speak a less accepted variation of standard English? Or does evil lurk in the minds of men who put ebonics down?



RAY WILLIS

Actually ebonics does not differ very much from standard English. Slang and vernacular expressions in conjunction with the use of improper verb tenses is what complicates the understanding of ebonics. A more accurate view of ebonics, scholars say, is that it is the linguistic consequence of slavery.

So let's get to the bottom line. Why has ebonics ignited a national firestorm of controversy? Could race rather than the substance of the language debate be at the heart of it all? Is America's preoccupation with race — especially as it pertains to African-Americans, fueling the ebonics question beyond reason?

What if instead of ebonics we were to focus on Hispanics or Asians who don't speak the King's English? Would the controversy over their misuse of the language be as intense?

If we were addressing the language issue relative to any other minority, I don't believe there would be half as much concern. How else can you explain why foreign-born minority and majority group students frequently make straight A's through high school and college and can't speak the King's English? It's absolutely appalling that someone can make an A in English and Speech in high school without being able to enunciate words coherently.

I personally shudder at the lack of English-speaking facility of individuals from various non-black minority groups. For some unexplained reason, their language problem does not seem to impede them from becoming successful in our society. But the only ones subject to being punished for not

**POINTS TO PONDER**  
BY PROFESSOR #HARRIS#

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WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU SAW A MAJOR DRUG BUST IN AN ALL WHITE COMMUNITY ON THE EVENING NEWS?

\* NEARLY 80% OF THE DRUG USE IN AMERICA IS IN THE WHITE COMMUNITY!! #HARRIS# ©1994

THE MAYOR, A JUDGE AND THE POLICE CHIEF WERE ALL CAUGHT IN THE DRUG SWEEPS TODAY

BABY... IF YOU WERE NOT SO DARK, AND YOUR LIPS SO BIG, AND YOUR HAIR SO NAPPY, YOU WOULD BE ONE PRETTY WOMAN.

... AND AFTER I LEAVE THE TANNING SALON, I'M GOING TO GET MY HAIR DONE IN DREADLOCKS AND MY LIPS FILLED WITH COLLAGEN!!!

YOU'LL LOOK GREAT!

ON OUR SIDE OF TOWN

ON THEIRS

AGREE OR DISAGREE? #HARRIS# P.O. BOX 4770 CHICAGO IL 60680!

speaking English well are blacks. Actually, it stands to reason. When you look how blacks are treated by American society in general, we are always held to a higher standards than any other group. It's simply a part of the social and political baggage that goes along with being black.

The real question we should be asking ourselves is, "if all black people spoke impeccable standard English, would it place us on par with whites or endear us with white America?" The answer to that one is a "no-brainer." Of course not!

This country places an extremely high value on oral communications skills. Greater

opportunities seem to magically accompany a person who communicates well verbally. On that basis alone we should all desire to be conversant in speaking and writing the language the way it ought to be. That doesn't necessarily mean

### TO BE EQUAL

## The militant of the century

By Hugh B. Price  
President, National Urban League

When President Clinton spoke to religious leaders last week at the annual White House ecumenical breakfast and urged them to help create "a sense of reconciliation, the right sort of spirit" for the nation to tackle its social problems, I thought of Martin Luther King, Jr.

I thought of the Martin Luther King who during the early 1960s was described by countless segregationists as a dangerous "racial agitator."

The one who was jailed countless times for leading demonstrations which disturbed the unjust peace segregation and discrimination had imposed upon America.

The one who plowed ahead with his decision in 1965 to "take the movement northward" despite heavy criticism from erstwhile northern white supporters.

The one who in 1967 persisted in his public criticism of American involvement in the War in Vietnam despite criticism from mainstream liberals and some other civil rights leaders.

And the one who, against the advice of many, spent the last year of his life planning a multi-racial Poor People's March on Washington for economic justice, and the last months of his life supporting black sanitation workers in Memphis, Tenn., who were striking for better pay and working conditions.

abandoning ebonics or other vernacular expressions associated with talking black. It does mean having the discipline to learn to speak standard English. And, if you choose to do so, to be able to "switch code" into fluent ebonics when in the

presence of others who speak that way. Language is indeed the most powerful tool at our immediate disposal, when used properly, to communicate with others.

To know is to grow. Until next month.



HUGH B. PRICE

That's the Martin Luther King, Jr. I remember — the one the Rev. Hosea Williams, one of his close aides through the years of struggle, called "the militant of the century."

From the moment in 1955 he was chosen by the civil rights community in Montgomery, Ala. to lead the now-famous boycott against that city's segregated bus system, King understood that his mission was to be a rabble rouser — to rouse America to confront its continual racial crisis and close the gap between its rhetoric about freedom and its reality of widespread *un-freedom*.

King's passion and pitch for rabble-raising was never more evident than in the "I Have A Dream" speech he gave at the 1963 March on Washington.

King declared to the world that he and the 250,000 gathered at the Lincoln Monument had come to dramatize the "shameful

condition" of the racial bigotry which had made a mockery of white America's "sacred obligation" to insure that all Americans enjoyed the rights set forth in the Constitution. The March had been called, he said, to "remind America of the fierce urgency ... (that) Now is the time to make real the promises of America."

It's precisely because the "Dream" speech presents an evocative yet blunt discussion of racial rights and responsibilities (See *Militant*, Page 16)

### THIS WAY FOR BLACK EMPOWERMENT

## Ebonics. What's the difference?

By Dr. Lenora Fulani

"Ebonics" — the term adopted by the school board in Oakland, California to refer to what some people call "Black English" — is the dialect or language or slang or code or "broken English" (take your pick) spoken on the street by young African-Americans and more, or less, understood/misunderstood by everyone else. In December the board passed a resolution identifying Ebonics as a second language and announced that school policy on curriculum and teaching methods would reflect this social, cultural and genetic "fact."



DR. LENORA FULANI

Immediately, a torrent of controversy gushed forth; for weeks virtually every newspaper and radio station in the country has been awash in the opinions of multi-culturalists, cultural nationalists, defenders of the "Western canon," Afro-centrists, and — of course — politicians. The Oakland board responded to the commotion with a new and much less controversial resolution which simply calls for the recognition of language differences among black students in order to improve their proficiency in English. But did all the public dialogue create anything of value for black youth?

Many who supported the Oakland school board decision recognize that just about everything young black people do is routinely disparaged, inside and outside the black community. Their intelligence, their values, their very human-ness, are called into question. Many in the pro-Ebonics camp are looking for ways to validate these young people, and

create an educational environment which is more inviting to them.

The anti-Ebonics faction maintains that for better or worse we all live in a world where there is a "correct" and acceptable way to speak, act, and dress, particularly as young people grow up and try to enter college and/or the job market. They say that teaching inner city youngsters to speak, read and write anything but standard English is irresponsible and dooms them to failure.

Still, the debate seems to be taking place some distance from the reality of what actually goes on in the schools, not to mention life. Many black kids do speak black English, or what is now called Ebonics. Does the Oakland initiative mean that white teachers trained in Ebonics will now be correcting black students if they speak it improperly? That's hard to picture. What about the "either/or" character of the debate? Isn't it the case that when young people apply to college or enter the job market, they do have to learn the language of the marketplace, which everyone agrees is standard English. If young people want to take that step, they have to learn to speak in ways that allows them to do that. Presumably, our school systems should utilize approaches that provide both for the cultural characteristics of different populations and for preparing those diverse populations for entry into the more culturally standardized mainstream.

(See *Ebonics*, Page 16)

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