

# WHAT'S WRONG WITH BLACK ENGLISH?

Rachel L. Jones

Rachel L. Jones wrote this essay for *Newsweek* magazine in 1982 when she was a student at Southern Illinois University. Ms. Jones has written for *The Chicago Reporter* and is now a feature writer for the *Detroit Free Press*. Her frequently anthologized essay is one of the important documents in the on-going debate over black English.

## ✓ Words to check:

patois (paragraph 1)

doggedly (4)

rabid (5)

- 1 William Labov, a noted linguist, once said about the use of black English, "It is the goal of most black Americans to acquire full control of the standard language without giving up their own culture." He also suggested that there are certain advantages to having two ways to express one's feelings. I wonder if the good doctor might also consider the goals of those black Americans who have full control of standard English but who are every now and then troubled by that colorful, grammar-to-the-winds patois that is black English. Case in point—me.
- 2 I'm a 21-year-old black born to a family that would probably be considered lower-middle class—which in my mind is a polite way of describing a condition only slightly better than poverty. Let's just say we rarely if ever did the winter-vacation thing in the Caribbean. I've often had to defend my humble beginnings to a most unlikely group of people for an even less likely reason. Because of the way I talk, some of my black peers look at me sideways and ask, "Why do you talk like you're white?"
- 3 The first time it happened to me I was nine years old. Cornered in the school bathroom by the class bully and her sidekick, I was offered the opportunity to swallow a few of my teeth unless I satisfactorily explained why I always got good grades, why I talked "proper" or "white." I had no ready answer for her, save the fact that my mother had from the time I was old enough to talk stressed the importance of reading and learning, or that L. Frank Baum and Ray Bradbury were my closest companions. I read all my older brothers' and sisters' literature textbooks more faithfully than they did, and even lightweights like the Bobbsey Twins and Trixie Belden were allowed into my bookish inner circle. I don't remember exactly what I told those girls, but I somehow talked my way out of a beating.
- 4 I was reminded once again of my "white pipes" problem while apartment hunting in Evanston, Illinois, last winter. I doggedly made out lists of available places and called all around. I would immediately be invited over—and immediately turned down. The thinly concealed looks of shock when the front door opened clued me in, along with the flustered instances of "just getting

off the phone with the girl who was ahead of you and she wants the rooms." When I finally found a place to live, my roommate stirred up old memories when she remarked a few months later, "You know, I was surprised when I first saw you. You sounded white over the phone." Tell me another one, sister.

5 I should've asked her a question I've wanted an answer to for years: how does one "talk white"? The silly side of me pictures a rabid white foam spewing forth when I speak. I don't use Valley Girl jargon, so that's not what's meant in my case. Actually, I've pretty much deduced what people mean when they say that to me, and the implications are really frightening.

6 It means that I'm articulate and well-versed. It means that I can talk as freely about John Steinbeck as I can about Rick James. It means that "ain't" and "he be" are not staples of my vocabulary and are only used around family and friends. (It is almost Jekyll and Hyde-ish the way I can slip out of academic abstractions into a long, lean, double-negative-filled dialogue, but I've come to terms with that aspect of my personality.) As a child, I found it hard to believe that's what people meant by "talking proper"; that would've meant that good grades and standard English were equated with white skin, and that went against everything I'd ever been taught. Running into the same type of mentality as an adult has confirmed the depressing reality that for many blacks, standard English is not only unfamiliar, it is socially unacceptable.

7 James Baldwin once defended black English by saying it had added "vitality to the language," and even went so far as to label it a language in its own right, saying, "Language [i.e., black English] is a political instrument" and a "vivid and crucial key to identity." But did Malcolm X urge blacks to take power in this country "any way y'all can"? Did Martin Luther King, Jr., say to blacks, "I has been to the mountaintop, and I done seed the Promised Land"? Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and James Baldwin did not achieve their eloquence, grace and stature by using only black English in their writing. Andrew Young, Tom Bradley and Barbara Jordan did not acquire political power by saying, "Y'all crazy if you ain't gon vote for me." They all have full command of standard English, and I don't think that knowledge takes away from their blackness or commitment to black people.

8 I know from experience that it's important for black people, stripped of culture and heritage, to have something they can point to and say, "This is ours, we can comprehend it, *we* alone can speak it with a soulful flourish." I'd be lying if I said that the rhythms of my people caught up in "some serious rap" don't sound natural and right to me sometimes. But how heartwarming is it for those same brothers when they hit the pavement searching for employment? Studies have proven that the use of ethnic dialects decreases power in the marketplace. "I be" is acceptable on the corner, but not with the boss.

9 Am I letting capitalistic, European-oriented thinking fog the issue? Am I

possible? I have not formed a personal political ideology, but I do know this: It hurts me to hear black children use black English, knowing that they will be at yet another disadvantage in an educational system already full of stumbling blocks. It hurts me to sit in lecture halls and hear fellow black students complain that the professor "be tripping dem out using big words dey can't understand." And what hurts most is to be stripped of my own blackness simply because I know my way around the English language.

- 10 I would have to disagree with Labov in one respect. My goal is not so much to acquire full control of both standard and black English, but to one day see more black people less dependent on a dialect that excludes them from full participation in the world we live in. I don't think I talk white, I think I talk right.

### WHAT DID THE WRITER SAY AND WHAT DID YOU THINK?

1. What is the thesis?
2. What specific problems has the author experienced because of her "white pipes"?
3. What problems does the author see black English causing for other blacks?
4. Does the author see any value to black English?

### HOW DID THE WRITER SAY IT?

1. What is the significance of the story about searching for an apartment?
2. Why does the author quote James Baldwin directly instead of merely summarizing his statements?
3. Explain the rhyming last sentence.

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### WHAT ABOUT YOUR WRITING?

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Aware that her support of standard English is likely to arouse hostility, Rachel L. Jones tries to turn the tables on her opponents by showing that they support standard English, too. If James Baldwin thinks black English is so fine, how come he is such a master of standard English and shows that mastery in everything he writes? Different readers will assess the validity of Jones's argument differently. As writing strategy, though, her approach can lead to interesting and effective papers.

Anticipate the strongest argument of your opponents, and try to turn it against them. If they contend that your stand against a new highway is holding back progress, show how they are holding back progress in mass transit systems, ecology, and so forth. If they maintain that grades in school are

artificial and should be abolished, try to show that nothing is more artificial than an environment in which good work is not rewarded and bad work is not penalized. These approaches won't prove in themselves that your own position is correct, but they put your opponents on the defensive, and that's where you want them to be.

## DEAR MOM, CLEAR MY CALENDAR

*Cathy Rindner Tempelsman*

Best known for her book *Child-Wise* (1994), Cathy Rindner Tempelsman writes on child psychology and parenting. Her essay on children's schedules is one important voice in a very heated current debate on this subject.

### ✓ Words to check:

bemoaning (paragraph 1)  
implication (2)  
insidious (2)  
dismayed (3)  
enrichment (3)  
exasperated (3)

assuage (4)  
beneficial (4)  
underprivileged (5)  
competent (5)  
exposure (5)  
irony (6)

self-esteem (6)  
accredited (9)  
corporate (9)  
lush (10)  
instilling (10)  
constrain (12)

- 1 Labor Day is around the corner, and some of us are already bemoaning summer's end. But parents have a special reason to do so. The end of summer means the start of school. And these days, planning a young child's schedule takes about as much time and skill as filling out a tax return. The challenge is no longer finding activities to fill a child's day; it is saying no to the hundreds of options available.
- 2 Our mailbox brims with brochures urging me to enroll our children (ages three, five, and eight) in everything from cooking to martial arts. (I keep waiting for some clever soul to combine the two into a single offering called "Karate in the Kitchen.") As an exercise in fun, a Gymboree class is fine. But the implication is that our children won't be just as well served by time spent tossing a ball, reading together, or running breathless in the park. One computer company aims at anxious parents in the same insidious way, with magazine ads that read: "Give your kids an edge."
- 3 Educators are themselves dismayed by the number of special classes that many children attend. In the name of "enrichment," three-year-olds not only go to preschool in the morning but study French, ballet, or gymnastics after lunch. One exasperated teacher tells of a four-year-old asking for help in the toilet before trotting off to tennis. Another teacher says that children sometimes cling to her at pickup time. They dread going to the same costly classes