Making Languages

Ralph W. Fasold
Georgetown University

1. Introduction: language and dialect

It is common for textbooks in general linguistics and sociolinguistics—if they address the issue at all—to maintain that the concepts "a language" and "a dialect" are not exclusively linguistic notions, but also involve social and political factors. That is, the distinction between what should be called a language or a dialect cannot be made on linguistic criteria alone, particularly on the basis of the common-sense criterion "mutual intelligibility". For example, a textbook in general linguistics widely-used in the United States (Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams 2003:446) admits: "Because neither mutual intelligibility nor the existence of political boundaries is decisive, it is not surprising that a clear-cut distinction between language and dialects has evaded linguistic scholars." Similarly, Peter Trudgill's excellent and popular *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society* (Trudgill 1995:4) has this to say on the subject: "The criterion of 'mutual intelligibility', and other purely linguistic criteria, are, therefore, of less importance in the use of the terms *language* and *dialect* than are political and social and cultural factors …" Nevertheless, regardless of how evasive or of lesser importance linguistic criteria are, most of the linguistics literature leaves the distinct impression, either implicitly or explicitly, that linguistic criteria are crucial. In other words, ultimately the decision about what is a language and what is a dialect cannot be made without the expertise of linguists. The crucial issue is whether or not you think it is possible that languages can be natural objects that can be discovered by the methods of the natural sciences. If you think there is no such possibility because *everything* is ultimately a social construct, then you will think my point is too self-evident to be argued about. My contention is, yes, it is conceivable that languages might be scientifically-discoverable natural objects, but in fact they are not. Ulrich Ammon (1989:31ff.) explicitly rejects this conclusion. Ammon points out that a political scientist would not accept a political system as a democracy just because its population calls it that, nor would a biologist consider an eel a snake because people consider it one. The difference is that political scientists and biologists can give criteria by which democracies can be distinguished from other kinds of political systems and biologists can tell you how to define snakes so as to exclude eels. Linguists have failed to determine criteria by which languages can be distinguished from dialects or other kinds of linguistic systems.

2. *Ausbau* and *Abstand* languages

The problem of social-political versus linguistic influences on assigning language or dialect status was taken up by Heinz Kloss (1967). Kloss distinguished between what he called *Ausbau* and *Abstand* languages. An abstand language, a "language by distance", is a language that is so different from other related grammars that "a linguist would have to call a language even if not a single word had ever been written in it." (Kloss 1967:29) He was convinced that abstand language is "predominantly" a linguistic concept and "assume[s] that linguists are in a position to apply final, reliable and uniform criteria" on establishing status as languages for abstand languages (Kloss 1967:30). I will try to argue that no such criteria exist or are likely to be discovered. In practice, then, Kloss's view is taken to mean that an abstand language is so distant in linguistic properties from any language with it might be associated that it would be obvious to any linguist that we have a language and not a dialect.

Kloss's concept 'ausbau language'—"a language by expansion"—on the other hand, is primarily sociopolitical. That is, ausbau languages have been deliberately reshaped so as to allow a wide range of literary expression. My own view is that elaboration for purposes of literary expression and the like

is too strong a criterion. A language is a language if it has been so SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED. If there is a social group that believes and acts as if a linguistic system is a language then it is one. This is no doubt farther that Kloss would have been willing to go.

3. Ausbau languages

The number of 'ausbau languages', languages that are related closely enough to be dialects if they were not expanded, are numerous and some are well-known: Norwegian, Swedish and maybe Danish; Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian; Moldovan and Romanian; the Mayan languages of Mexico and Guatemala and the Nguni languages of South Africa. These cases show that languages can be made out of what would otherwise be dialects. But are there 'abstand dialects'—distant varieties of which a single language is made?

4. 'Abstand dialects' of Ebonics

This second part of the argument is more difficult. The most often-cited case like this is Chinese, where language systems that are so different from each other as to make them virtually mutually unintelligible are constructed as dialects of the Chinese language. In this case, though, the "dialects" are clearly related to each other, historically and in general structure. Presumably, the Chinese dialects fall short of what Kloss would regard as pure abstand languages, such that they could never be considered co-dialects, no matter what ideology might be served by doing so. A crucial problem with a notion pure abstand, of course, is the criteria by which we recognize it—criteria which, so far as I know, have never been proposed.

5. Social constructions of Ebonics as a kind of English

Before we take up a case of a language constructed of abstand dialects—one construction of Ebonics as a language of abstand dialects—it will be useful to examine the various ways in which Ebonics has otherwise been constructed. The linguistic system used by a segment of the African-American population in the United States is generally called African American Vernacular English, or AAVE, by linguists who work on it. Like typical vernaculars, it is spoken most widely by people with worker status in both urban and rural settings. It is almost universally considered as some kind of English.

Ebonics in the United States is most commonly constructed as a simplified, corrupted and broken approximation of standard American English. This construction is virtually undisputed by most Americans, even by perhaps a majority of African Americans. The United States has struggled with racism for more than two centuries, while at the same time adhering to an assimilationist ideology. The idea of assimilation applies to immigrants, who are expected to enter the "melting pot" by which they become thoroughly American by, among other things, learning fluent American English and ceasing to use their heritage languages. It also applies to the Native Americans who are indigenous to the North American continent, and to the descendants of enslaved Africans.

Similarly, the early days of the civil rights movement by and for African Americans emphasized "integration"; the breaking down of laws that kept African Americans and European Americans from being educated in the same schools, eating in the same restaurants or even using the same toilet facilities. The later emphasis on a distinct African American identity muted the integration ideal. The assimilationist viewpoint played a role in an early construction of U. S. Ebonics as simply Southern American English as spoken by the uneducated and disadvantaged. On this view, there was no substantial difference between the English of black and white disadvantaged southerners. Give black speakers the same opportunities as most white speakers, and they would speak the standard dialect of their region. And, by the way, poor southern whites also spoke "Black English". It was all purely an matter of the combination of region and social inequity, nothing that couldn't be changed by integration.

In late 1996 and 1997, an action by the Board controlling the Oakland, California public school system, focused the nation's attention on what was called EBONICS. The attacks on Ebonic were often quite appalling. In opinion pieces around the country, as reported in Rickford and Rickford (2000:195), Ebonic was commonly assailed as "a linguistic nightmare that refuses to die a natural death", "mumbo jumbo", "mutant English", "broken English", "fractured English", "ghettoese" and "the Ebonic Plague". These descriptions were often combined with the opinion that Ebonics was bad English that could be spoken by anyone.

Since the middle of the last century, most mainstream American linguists, among others, have adopted the mosaic, rather than the integrationist, ideology of the desirable ethnic social organization for the United States. Each ethnic group could retain distinctions, including linguistic ones, and each of these groups contributed a tile to the total mosaic of American social life. But it is all ultimately a single pattern. Therefore, the motivation was there to construct Ebonics as a distinct, and beautiful dialect of *English*. Just like the social mosaic, there was a linguistic mosaic, with each ethnic dialect contributing its part to the whole American English mosaic. This ideology favors the construction of African American (Vernacular) English.

6. Ebonics as a language of abstand dialects

A striking case in which language systems with substantial abstand may have been constructed as a single language involves another construction of Ebonics. This social construction of Ebonics is very much different from the construction of AAVE which I gave earlier. Ebonics is a language, or perhaps a family of languages, that unifies the people in the African Diaspora, and is separate from the European languages with which it (or they) share most of the vocabulary and with which they may be mutually intelligible. This concept of Ebonics has been developed by scholars in the Afrocentric tradition. It is motivated by what they see as an attempt by European thinking to attribute most aspects of the history and culture of people of African descent outside of Africa to Western sources, denying the agency of African people in these matters, and obscuring the unity of the people of the African Diaspora over against the people of European origin among whom they live. The response is to propose that the language system spoken by people of African descent in the Diaspora comprise a common language of African origin that is not to be mistaken for a variety of some European language such as English or French.

It is on the basis of the assumption that languages relationships are determined on the basis of syntactic structure and not at all on the basis of lexicon that Afrocentric scholars have argued for the unity of Ebonics and its distinction from English or any other European language. This position is taken clearly and explicitly by Smith (1998:52):

> The fact is, when one analyzes the grammars of the so-called "Black English" dialect and the English spoken by the Europeans and Euro-Americans, the grammars are not the same. While there has been extensive borrowing or adoption of English and other European words, the grammar of the descendants of Niger-Congo African slaves follows the grammar rules of the Niger-Congo African languages … In other words, based on a criterion of continuity in the rules of grammar, there is no empirical evidence that "Black English" ever existed.

Smith is making the argument that Ebonics is a separate language from English, despite the frequency of words from the lexicon of English and other European languages—because the underlying grammatical structure, not vocabulary, is what counts for computing abstand.

Not only do Afrocentric linguists construct Ebonics as distinct from English, but it sometimes appears that they intend Ebonics to include other linguistic systems spoken by descendants of Africans. Blackshire-Belay (1996) is rather explicit on this point. She explicitly lists the following language systems as part of the "Ebonics Continuum":

> **In North America**
> Termed *Louisiana French Creole*. Used in parts of eastern Louisiana, but diminishing in numbers of speakers.

Termed *Black English* or *African American English*. English-based varieties spoken throughout the United States in African American communities, both rural and urban, south and north, male and female, and spoken among all socioeconomic groups.

In South America

Termed *Brazilian Creole Portuguese*. Used by Brazilians of African ancestry in rural areas. This variety is spoken *in* São Paulo.

Termed *Lingua Gêral*. A Tupí-Guararní-based variety used in Brazil. Now losing ground to Portuguese.

In the Caribbean

Termed *Caribbean Creole English*. About 30 English-based varieties are found throughout the islands of the Caribbean, some represented by several varieties. The largest is the Ebonics spoken in Jamaica, with more than 2 million speakers.

Termed *Haitian French Creole*. Used in three main varieties in Haiti by more than 4 million speakers.

Termed *Virgin Islands Dutch Creole.* Widely used in the 19th century, but now nearly extinct.

Blackshire-Belay has included English-, Dutch-, Portuguese-, French- and even Tupí-Guaraní-lexified creoles along with Ebonics as spoken in the United States within the Ebonics continuum. She goes on to say:

> The most fascinating characteristic about these so-called pidgins and Creoles is that despite the fact that they display many obvious differences in sounds, grammar, and vocabulary, they have a remarkable amount in common. Ebonics contains structural remnants of certain African languages, although the vocabulary is overwhelmingly English, French, or Spanish. My position is that Ebonics is rooted in the African experience, on the basis of the linguistic evidence reflected in the system and comparable to the system within many of the African languages of the Niger-Congo family, that is, Twi, Igbo, Ewe, Efik.

To be sure, it is far from clear that Blackshire-Belay intends all these varieties of Ebonics to be considered the same language. In fact, she speaks not of the Ebonic language but of a family tree of Ebonic *languages*. Similarly, another Africologist, Robert Twiggs (1973) in some places speaks of what he calls Pan-African Language in the Western Hemisphere as a language, in other places he speaks of it as a language *system*. However, to follow through on the position taken by Smith and apparently endorsed, at least in part, by Blackshire-Belay, there would be no reason not to take all the points on Blackshire-Belay's continuum as dialects of the same language. That is, if what counts is syntactic structure and not vocabulary, then a language lexified by French is the same language as a language lexified by English, as long as both are based on the same grammar.

The difficulty with the Africological position, to the extent that it is based on the argument that Ebonics is unified by its underlying Africa-based grammar, is that the evidence that the grammars of African languages have survived in the Ebonics linguistic systems is flimsy at best. In fact, most advocates of the Afrocentric construction of Ebonics are not trained linguists, although Blackshire-Belay is an exception. But it is my contention that linguistic science, since there are no principled criteria by which such a notion as "language" can be defined, cannot claim authority in constructing what is or is not a language. It does seem that any argument derived from linguistic science that Ebonics is a language because of grammatical similarity despite lexical differences must fail. On the other hand, there is no reason why the construction of a language should be based on linguistic science at all. In fact, Africologists do not rest their case only on the supposed structural substrate from African languages, but also on thought patterns, gestures and other criteria beyond nuts-and-bolts linguistics. According to Smith (1998:54):

> In the sense that Ebonics includes both the verbal and paralinguistic communications of African-American people, this means that Ebonics represents an underlying psychological thought process. Hence, the non-verbal sounds, cues, gestures, and so on that are systematically used in the process of communication by African American people are encompassed by the term as well.

Blackshire-Belay (1996:20, fn. 2) adds:

> Nonverbal communication patterns in African culture, for example, rhetorical style, body movement, expressions, gestures, are included in the process.

Ebonics, then, is only partially constructed by means of the traditional standard practices of linguistics. And since linguistics has no privileged position in this regard, there is no reason why the construction of a language from such apparently absolute abstand varieties as U.S. Ebonics and French Haitian Creole should not succeed.

In any case, the ideology that is being promoted by the construction of Ebonics as a language, or at least a continuum of related languages, is not hard to discern. Focusing on the undeniable and continuing effects of slavery and present-day racism perpetrated by peoples of European origin, Afrocentric scholars seek grounds on which all those of African origin who have had and are having this experience can be unified and at the same time separated from European-origin society. They are dismayed that so much of the lives and culture of people who trace their origins to Africa is explained by mainstream scholarship as having ultimately European origins, even if perhaps shaped by their unique experience as Africans. It then seems reasonable to look for origins for present-day cultural institutions in the African Diaspora in Africa, at a time when African people had the luxury of agency to develop their traditions without the interference of European oppressors. Ebonics the language, then, becomes iconic to all that unifies people of African origin as against the Europe-based societies in which they live. In fact, the considerations I have described are not so different from many of the cases of the construction of ausbau languages described in Kloss (1967) and Trudgill (1992), among others.

Before going further, I am going to summarize the line of argument I have been presenting.

- Reasonably closely-related language systems can be constructed as either dialects or languages.
- There is no generally agreed-on procedure for measuring language distance (abstand). Even in cases of substantial abstand, linguistics provides no explicit criteria that a language system must meet in order to qualify as "a language" rather than as "a dialect".
- Ausbau languages are regularly constructed and dismantled to bring the results into conformity with a desired ideology.
- There is no reason why the same processes could not work in cases of languages constructed of "abstand dialects".
- The case of the Afrocentric construction of Ebonics as a language consisting of dialects of the degree of abstand of Haitian Creole and the U.S. English-lexified dialect called African-American Vernacular English is possibly a (near-)example of one of the rare instances in which this has actually happened.
- This line of argument leads me to a conclusion that is as unsatisfactory as it is inevitable. "Languages" are *socially* constructed. That means that any social group can construct a language out of any linguistic material available, and it will be a language to that extent. It is to be expected that there will be viable competing social constructions in many cases.

In the case of Ebonics, it may be that Afrocentric scholars, to their own satisfaction, have constructed Ebonics as a language of abstand dialects. In fact, this construction of Ebonics briefly became part of official policy in one school district in one city in the United States, during the Oakland, California Ebonics controversy of 1996 and 1997. Similarly, whether Serbian and Croat are one language or two depends on who has control over such matters at a particular point in time. Is Afrikaans an African language? If Afrikaners are free to construct it, the answer may be yes, but not if black South Africans have a say in the matter. Is Arvanitika a part of Albanian or a separate language of Greece? It depends on whether you ask an Albanian or a Greek official (Trudgill 1992:177). What of Francisco Franco's attempts to construct Catalan as a dialect? According to Kloss (1967:36):

> … the speakers of Catalan never accepted this status and they still consider their mother tongue a full-fledged language, and a classification of languages which ignores the desires of the linguistic community, basing its conclusions exclusively on external phenomena forcibly brought about by a semitotalitariam government would be both immoral and unscientific. Catalan is not a dialectized language.

Kloss objects to language-status construction by a type of government of which he does not approve and over the desires of its speakers as invalid on moral and scientific grounds. But the "scientific" grounds, as I have been emphasizing, are not at all reliable, and moral grounding is regularly claimed by people on opposite sides of almost any social issue. Perhaps construction as a language or dialect by members of the community served by a language variety might be a reasonable criterion. However, in the case of Ebonics, we would have to ask which community members? The majority who find U.S. Ebonics to be broken English, African-American mainstream linguists who say that AAVE is a well-ordered dialect of English, or the Africologists who say that Ebonics is a language totally separate from English based on African linguistic structure, paralinguistics and thought patterns? It seems that the problem is not solved if we insist that community constructions be privileged.

I have just listed three different constructions for Ebonics (broken English, an English dialect belonging to African Americans, or a separate language). To this could be added the now-defunct construction as a biracial dialect of poor southerners. So what *is* Ebonics, really? I think the answer has to be "all of the above", to differing levels of success.

Interestingly enough, it seems to me that one can quite readily read the associated ideology associated with each social construction of Ebonics, even if the constructors would be inclined to deny it. Table 1 illustrates this.

Table 1. Ideology and social constructions of "Ebonics".

Social group	Ideology	Construction of "Ebonics"
Non-linguist European Americans and African Americans	African American inferiority or lack of opportunity, due either to poverty or to race	Broken English
Present-day mainstream American linguists	U. S. society as a mosaic of more-or-less distinct ethnicities	AA(V)E as an orderly, grammatical dialect of English
Mid 20th-century American dialectologists	Integrationist, assimilationist, egalitarian	So-called "Black English" as a dialect of disadvantaged southern Americans of both races
Afrocentric scholars	Unity of the African Diaspora, opposition to Europeans (in the broad sense)	Ebonics as a separate language (or perhaps language family) of abstand dialects (or languages)

The most successful language constructs will be those created by social groups with the greatest hegemony. Linguists, I regret to say, have no special standing in the matter except to bring whatever persuasive force they can in favor of the social constructions that lead to the least injustice.

References

Ammon, Ulrich. 1989. Towards a descriptive framework for the status/function (social position) of a language within a country. In: Ammon, Ulrich (ed.). *Status and Function of Languages and Language Varieties,* 21-106. Berlin: de Gruyter.

Blackshire-Belay, Carol Aisha. 1996. The location of Ebonics within the framework of the Africological Paradigm. *Journal of Black Studies* 27:1.5-23.

Fromkin, Victoria, Rodman, Robert and Hyams, Nina. 2003. *An Introduction to Language, Seventh Edition.* Boston: Thomson-Heinle.

Kloss, Heinz. 1967. Abstand languages and Ausbau languages. *Anthropological Linguistics* 9:29-41.

Rickford, John Russell and Rickford, Russell John. 2000. *Spoken Soul.* New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

Smith, Ernie. 1998. What is Black English? What is Ebonics?, in Perry, Theresa and Delpit, Lisa (eds.). *The Real Ebonics Debate*, 49-58. Boston: Beacon Press.

Trudgill, Peter. 1992. Ausbau sociolinguistics and the perception of language status in contemporary Europe. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 2:2.167-177.

_____. 2000. *Sociolinguistics: an introduction to language and society.* Fourth Edition. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books.

Twiggs, Robert D. 1973. *Pan-African Language in the Western Hemisphere PALWH [pælwh]: A Re-Definition of Black Dialect as a Language and the Culture of Black Dialect.* North Quincy, MA: The Christopher Publishing House.

ISB4: Proceedings of the 4th International Symposium on Bilingualism

edited by James Cohen, Kara T. McAlister, Kellie Rolstad, and Jeff MacSwan

Cascadilla Press   Somerville, MA   2005

Web access and citation information

This paper is available from www.cascadilla.com/isb4.html and is identical
to the version published by Cascadilla Press on CD-ROM and in library binding.