

Wrenched Black Tongues: Democratizing
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**WRENCHED BLACK TONGUES: DEMOCRATIZING
ENGLISH***

by LOUIE CREW

In "The English Language Is My Enemy," playwright Ossie Davis reported that fifty percent of the synonyms for Blackness listed in Roget's *Thesaurus of the English Language* are "distinctly unfavorable." One-

* *College Composition and Communication* 25 (February 1974): 42-45.

third of the remaining words are "related directly to race." As Mr. Davis observes:

If you consider the fact that thinking itself is subvocal speech (in other words, one must use words in order to think at all), you will appreciate the enormous trap of racial prejudice that works on any child who is born into the English language.*

Let one think that Mr. Davis's own responses to Roget are biased, I found that forty Black students at Claflin College in South Carolina similarly rated a significant number of Roget's terms for Blackness (40% instead of Davis's 50%) as "distinctly unfavorable." Perhaps the slight (10%) decrease in negative weight is an index to the effectiveness over the last six years of the slogan "Black is Beautiful." In any event, the language itself, at least as Roget selects it, has not accommodated the identity needs of Black people; it remains an enemy.

A biased language is a curious anomaly from a strictly linguistic point of view. A biased language would clearly be an inferior language: yet linguistics does not recognize superiority or inferiority as properties of a language or of a dialect. Linguist R. H. Robins observes that the linguist "has no concern with preferring one dialect over another, nor with prescribing how people should use their language. Description, not prescription, is his work, and it is work enough."† According to linguistics, each living language is adequate to the cultural needs and experiences of its speakers: when the language threatens to become inadequate, the speakers change it. One can no more say that Eskimo is inferior to English because Eskimo does not, as English, have specialized words for atomic particles than one can say that English is inferior to Eskimo because English does not, as Eskimo, have specialized terms for the many grades of snow. English and Eskimo are both adequate to the needs of their speakers; both are able to accommodate new terms for atomic or niveous reality as the people's experience requires them. According to linguistics, the moment that English (or any other living language) threatens to become an enemy of its speakers, those speakers change it.

My studies of the language of Black students demonstrate support of the linguists' view of English. What Mr. Davis and my students are reacting to in Roget's list is not English per se, but *English as white folks use it*. Meanwhile, no language is the exclusive province of any one group of its speakers. All speakers of a language do indeed mold it to their needs; and the language habits of Black users of English demonstrate this molding in most creative ways. Language change is one of the most personal ways of measuring the cultural revolution taking place in America today.

* "The English Language Is My Enemy" in *Language, Communication, and Rhetoric in Black America*, ed. Arthur L. Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 51. A reprint from *American Teacher* (April 1967).

† *General Linguistics* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1964), p. 58.

The battle for a just response to Black language is one of the most significant skirmishes against white cultural imperialism. Miss Fidditch, the legendary white English teacher, must learn to talk and to understand Black English if she is not to continue tongue-tying her millions of Black charges.

To demonstrate that Roget's list does not reflect the biases and aspirations realized in the English of Black users of the language, I asked my forty Claflin students to participate in a two-part exercise. In the first part, each student anonymously composed ten sentences saying "White is ugly" without using the words *white* or *ugly*. In the second part, the same students composed ten more sentences saying "Black is beautiful" without using the words *black* or *beautiful*. This assignment provoked no consternation at all: the class was spirited, electric; sharing of responses with neighbors was frequently spontaneous. While clichés abounded, more interesting were the ways the students discovered to state the familiar ideas in fresh, original ways. Clearly the students were engaging in a language art well known to them, and their responses are, for the most part, vividly articulate. They speak as ones having authority. Here follows an important Black addendum to Roget's lists, including terms for Blackness and Whiteness employed by the students. Like Roget's lists (which included *nigger*, *darky*, et al.) this list does not purge all terms carrying social usage restrictions. Following Roget's lists, it does not try to include all of the most scabrous terms used. Again, like Roget's list, this list does not specify the fine shades of meaning and is a list of "synonyms" only in a most liberal sense of the term.

A Black Addendum to Roget

BLACKNESS

Soul Brothers
Africans
Africanism
Brother/Sister
Dude
Night
Cat
Eagle
Ram
Midnight (even "a midnight")
Brow: sugar
Mystery

WHITENESS

NOUNS

Whitey	Crackers
Bleachy	Southern pale trash
Pinky	Buchra
Ghost	Honky
Superghost	Mister Charlie
Pig	Peckerwood
Maggot	Hunk of funk
Cancer	Redneck
Butcher	Rabbit-ass
Cream-of-dung	Abominable snowman
Buzzard	Pale face
Hookworm	Snowy-faced monkeys
Dried Butt Meat	Chucks
Pimpleface	Rice-patties
(Skinned) Rabbit	

Semantics: Words as World Shadows

Together
Natural
"Bad"
Tanned
Radiant
Blended
Shaded
Chocolate
Naturally camouflaged
Tar
Dark brown
Brown
Smooth
Kinky
Mystical
Mysterious
Delving

ADJECTIVES

Puke-faced	Red
Bald-faced	Colorless
Frosted-faced	Pale-faced
Pink	Raw
Intestinal	Dead
Transparent	Salmon-faced
Non-Black	Vanilla
Bland	Yellow
Flour-faced	

Not surprisingly, English as these Black students use it has more negative terms for Whiteness even than it has positive terms for Blackness. Generally, all speakers of any language are more resourceful with hostility than with affirmation. So too, white Roget proved to be in his lists reflecting the anti-Black biases of English as spoken by whites.

Many of the students' best skills are not reflected clearly by merely isolating terms in the thesaurus fashion. Of particular interest are the imaginative ways in which the students frequently reversed the connotative fields of established words in Roget's white lexicon. For example, *ivory* in Roget's list would seem safely enough positive, suggestive of expensive artifacts stolen from aboriginal cultures and esteemed on the coffee tables and in the jewelry boxes of Europe and North America; yet observe its metamorphosis in one student's collocation "ivory-faced honky." Similarly "blue-eyed" is at worst innocuous if not positive until a Black metaphorically collocates "blue-eyed hookworms." Even traditional white standards of *snow* as "pure" and *soot* as "ugly, dirty" are wrenched in the Black language of another student: "The snow that fell into the soot surely made it murky as hell." Similarly witness the vicious diminutive wielded by another student: "that snowflake bastard." Very truly what you see is what you get: pollutants come in many colors, the white mentality to the contrary notwithstanding. One student almost phrenetically reveals the ambivalence-potential of biased words in his revision of the positive field for the white word *milk*: "As I came in my pants one day it reminded me of the milky people." The very color of the people who are white comes into a much closer scrutiny than whites themselves customarily employ, as is evidenced by the frequent emphasis upon

the conspicuous blood colors in white complexion, in the terms *pink, red, raw, salmon-faced, pinky, pig, butcher, dried butt meat, redneck, etc.* (Frequently paintings by Black artists of white people demonstrate this greater sensitivity to the red pigments in white skin.)

The students were equally resourceful in wrenching Roget's words for Blackness out of the negative connotations they convey in the white lexicon. For example, one said, "I'm the sort of person that thinks of the charcoals as a pretty cool people." Another "redeemed" *nigger* with familiar vaunting: "The nigger is known for anything goes when it comes to sex." Another emphasized: "The raven is a very dignified-looking bird." In an almost Jungian or Gestalt fashion the students welcomed the opportunity to probe the positive side of what white society has tried to identify as negative, black, and threatening.

While some mindless approval and name-calling was encouraged by the brief exercise, often students accomplished both the affirmation and the negation with verbal inventiveness, as in the following samples, all of which were particularly popular with the students themselves:

BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL: SAMPLE SENTENCES

1. The darker the berry, the sweeter the juice.
2. He's an oil well.
3. Night is one-half of God's world too.
4. There is nothing like a cup of hot chocolate to keep a soul sister warm in the winter time.
5. She's deep, dark, delicious.
6. Joe Frazier's bony shoulders are stronger than Hercules'.
7. All those little kinky curls swirl on her head like those of a genuine goddess.
8. How blended are the pigments of the dark.

WHITE IS UGLY: SAMPLE SENTENCES

1. I thought I saw a walking ghost, but I cracked a joke and it turned pink.
2. Her legs were so pale I could count her veins.
3. I'll boil that rice honky till he puffs up.
4. Put the overcovering of your skin back on.
5. Her head looks like a pile of shit with curls of silk running from it.
6. You can let the hem out of those pants now because the flood has ceased.
7. I slapped his dirty face and he turned red.
8. Who the fuck is a snow fairy?

Here and also in the less inventive sentences are the positive values of allowing students to use their own language to affirm life from their own

vantage, their own experience, to purge the alien that threatens to enslave their minds. The last group may be viewed as a way of exorcising the devil White Linguistic Tyranny. Not surprising are the numerous references to Black prowess. Over fifty percent of the students, unprompted, presented at least one sentence specifically affirming Black masculinity and femininity, and a similar majority wrote sentences denigrating white sexual identifications. Heavy emphasis in both lists was given to affirming exclusively Black biological experience (especially praises of hair and complexion) and to negating equivalents in the white experience as viewed from the outside. At times the students' fascination with the alien biology of whiteness is almost morbid. Frequently the white alien is seen as illusory, unreal, perhaps so perceived because he is not true to the Black personal experience (see nos. 1 and 4).

Blacks are not condemned to speak "a broken tongue," but rather are privileged to wield a tongue that breaks, ripping through the biases of English as whites use it to affirm a Black experience that is very much alive and linguistically resourceful. Meaning does not reside in words themselves; communities of people give meaning to words.

Six years ago Ossie Davis recommended that we democratize English. That process is occurring. It yet remains to be seen whether white America is listening. He that hath an ear to hear, let him hear. Blacks do not speak English as whites do, and they do not need a new language; they need only to get in touch with their natural imaginative linguistic resources.

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