Chapter 6

Language, Culture, and the Assessment of African American Children

Asa G. Hilliard III
Because teaching and learning are rooted in environments that are shaped by politics, says psychologist and historian ASA HILLIARD, educational assessments of African American children cannot be divorced from the historically oppressed status of African Americans in the United States. Hilliard dismantles the notion that African American culture is an insufficient reflection of Western culture, or that Ebonics is an inadequate attempt at Standard English. Instead, he provides a picture of the richness of the culture and language, not only as independent entities, but as major contributors to larger American society. He urges us to produce educators who can examine the big picture behind an education system that assesses not a child's aptitude for learning, but which words she speaks.

Teaching and learning are rooted in and are dependent upon a common language between teacher and student. Language is rooted in and is an aspect of culture. Culture is nothing, more nor less, than the shared ways that groups of people have created to use and define their environment. All people, every group of people on the face of the Earth, have created culture. Therefore, they have also created language, which is included in culture. Children all over the world learn to speak the language of their cultural group at about the age of two. Teaching and learning is a worldwide phenomenon. The teaching function and the learning function have occurred in every culture on Earth. It is natural and not the exclusive property of any group or groups. Teaching and learning—the transmission of cultural heritage—is as old as the human family. All cultures are intellectually complicated and cognitively demanding.

Teaching and learning are also rooted in environments that are shaped by politics. For example, the United States was created as a slave nation, complete with deliberate designs to prevent the education of slaves. The designs included measures that would create certain beliefs to justify that curtailment. For example, the belief in and the ideology of white supremacy have led to the development of an ideology that says that genetically, whites are intellectually superior and people of color inferior. This thinking has resulted in a greater segregation of students in schools and

A review of the documents shows just how pervasive was the influence of such academic disciplines as history, geography, religion, biology, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and linguistics in the creation and teaching of racist beliefs (Carter and Goodwin 1994; Chase 1977; Kamin 1974). The legacy of these beliefs remains with us today, often wearing the cloak of scientific legitimacy. Africans were said by some historians to have had no history, by linguists to have had inferior language, by political scientists to have had poor self-government, by psychologists to have had low intelligence, by biologists to have had inferior genes, and by theologians to have had no soul—among other things (Guthrie 1976; Hegel 1831; Turner 1969). These views were enshrined in scientific literature of recent decades. They were taught in universities and colleges. And so, through no fault of the slaves, unprovoked, systematic, and pervasive oppression was instituted and maintained with the help of those many in education who were most responsible for freedom (Anderson 1988; King 1971; Spivey 1978).

Language, Culture, Oppression, and African Americans

And so, we have before us today culture and pedagogy issues, one of which is the issue of culture and assessment. Valid assessment is thought to be a part of the design of valid pedagogy; yet this is a culturally plural society with political problems based on culture. That issue must be handled in terms of a total context. Language, culture, history, and oppression are inextricably linked together where African American children are concerned. To attempt to analyze assessment practice by reference to language or culture alone will doom such analyses to failure. Indeed, it might well result in data that support beliefs and behaviors which would make matters worse than they already are for African American children.

It is the purpose of this essay to identify certain important language issues and to suggest prerequisites for the constructs of valid assessment.

It cannot be denied that African American children are not achieving at optimal levels in the schools of the nation. Neither can it be denied that there is a need for African American children to learn languages and content other than that which many have already learned up to now. The real problem we are forced to confront is this: Can we be explicit about how professional practice can be made to perform the normal and expected function of facilitating the natural healthy learning processes of children? In particular, how can the assessment process be purified so as to operate in the service of African American children rather than against them?

I speak of African American children and not “minority,” “at risk,” “disadvantaged,” “culturally or otherwise deprived,” or even “Black,” except as it is equivalent in meaning to African American. The reasons for this are scientific rather than either ideological or political. Of the terms above, only “African American” suggests the need to refer to children’s antecedents, ethnicity, and cultural environmental experiences for explanations and interpretations of a group of people. For example, what are the historical antecedents of a “minority”? I intend to show that it is the failure of scholarship to take history and culture into account that distorts scientific study. Failing to deal with the existence of oppression and its impact will result in a further distortion of study.

Perhaps it is the limited cultural experience of so many U.S. scholars that renders cultural data “invisible.” Perhaps at a deeper level there is some white guilt about racial oppression, including oppression through the invalid use of tests, and a sense of impotence to change the systems that serve those ends at the base of the problem of how to make the healthy and normal experiences of African Americans visible to investigators, without the typical retreat to assumptions of pathology among the children. For many years now, there are those of us who have charged that mass-produced standardized professional tests and materials are ill suited
to the needs of most African American children, in part because certain false assumptions are made about the children and their culture. Basically, the erroneous core assumption is that African American children are nothing more than incomplete copies of Western European white children. When it is recognized that African American children have a unique culture, that culture is usually seen as inferior to the Western European culture. It is these general ideas that cause gross errors to be made in testing and assessment in four areas in particular:

1. in testing the “mental ability” of African American children
2. in testing the speech of African American children
3. in testing the language of African American children
4. in testing the reading ability of African American children.

These errors are made because most professionals are ignorant of certain basic linguistic principles and of the history of American English and African American speech (Cohen 1969; D'Andrade 1995; Hilliard 1985; Hoover, Politzer and Taylor 1995; Shuy 1977). Therefore, professionals make mistakes when dealing both with English and with African English. Let’s look at this more closely.

**Misconceptions About Common American English**

1. English is immaculately conceived and is a pure language.
2. English is superior to other languages.
3. English is a fixed or permanent language.
4. English is essentially the same in all English-speaking countries and in the United States.
5. English in America is uninfluenced by African language.
6. English is language, not simply a language.

The President’s Commission on Foreign Language Study has already sounded the alarm about the poor language preparation of Americans and about the poor attitudes Americans display toward other languages. Few Americans have been taught such simple things as how English really came to be. Were its true evolution widely known, chauvinistic attitudes toward language might be dismantled.

According to Fromkin and Rodman (1995), Romans invaded Britain in the first century A.D. and dominated Germanic Celts, the previous conquerors of Britain. Britain’s northern tribes, the Scots and Picts, were attacking the Celtic invaders at the time that Romans arrived, but Rome prevailed. And as the power of Rome declined during the fifth century, the Romans left Britain. The Celts then sent for Germanic Jutes (Teuton mercenaries) to repel their old enemies, the Scots and the Picts. In 449 A.D., the Jutes helped to defeat the Scots and the Picts and having won, decided to dominate their cousins the Celts with the help of other Germanic tribes, and the Angles and Saxons. It is from the Angles and Saxons and the linguistic soup already present in the British Isles that English was born.

Meanwhile, the Celts left for Wales, Cornwall, and France, and themselves began to speak Welsh, Scottish, Gaelic, and Breton. For the next six hundred years or so, English, as spoken by the Germanic conquerors of Britain at varying times, evolves, even as the German spoken in Germany continues to evolve to the point where emerging English and German, one of its parent languages, are no longer mutually intelligible. (Franklin and Rodman 1995)

In 1066, William the Conqueror invaded and conquered Britain and established French as the national language. English was still the language of the masses, but it was influenced by French. By 1500, British English began to be quite similar to the English that is spoken in England today. And so, what is now English emerged as a polyglot language from the remnants of the language of Celts, Latins, Germanic Jutes, Angles, Saxons, and finally the French.

The result is a language that is largely Germanic in grammar and largely Romance in vocabulary. In fact, we could with some merit argue that English is “nonstandard German.” This is hardly a pure or immaculately conceived language, nor is it permanent or fixed. It would be difficult to demonstrate its superiority to any
other language. Indeed, it was the linguist and scientist Benjamin Whorf who observed after learning the Hopi Indian language that it was more suitable for sophisticated scientific thought than was his native English. We will deal with the African influence later.

What we are left with, then, is that English, common American English, is simply a language of convenience. As a common language, it is efficient for the nation. Yet, the approach to teaching English in our schools seeks to establish standards for aesthetics and to establish a national cultural heritage based on it. Instead of thinking of “standard” as common or ordinary, “standard English” is thought of as a standard of quality. The effect of this thinking is to subordinate any alternative and to label that alternative as inferior.

**Misconceptions About African American Language**

To refer to the language of most African Americans as “nonstandard English” is to mislead people, since the implication is that all that is involved is a variant of English. And yet, like English, the language spoken by African Americans is a fusion of languages that cannot be understood apart from an appeal to historical origins and to the oppression of slavery. Winifred Vass (1974) has shown that about 49.1 percent of the Africans who were enslaved were sent to South America, and 42.2 percent were sent to the Caribbean and to the Greater and Lesser Antilles. About 1.8 percent were sent to Europe and its island environs. The remainder, about 6.8 percent, went to the United States, Mexico, Canada, and Central America. It is important to know that the 4.5 percent of the total trade that came to the United States came mostly during the last fifty years of the slave trade, when by the end of the slave trade, West Africa had been heavily depopulated. Therefore, Africans were brought to the United States from Angola, with many Africans coming through Angola from as far away as Mozambique and South East Africa on the coast. Thus, during the heaviest years of African enslavement in the U.S., the primary source of people was from the core band of Bantu language culture, and the Africans who were brought to the United States were speakers of one or more of the Bantu languages. Further, one of the principal features of the Bantu family of languages is that they covered the largest part of the African continent. In addition, a well-known characteristic of Bantu languages is something that those who know them have called the “Bantu dynamic.” That is to say, these languages exert a powerful influence on other languages. They tend to have tenacity and staying power. It is the retention of the “Bantu dynamic” that is picked up by Lorenzo Turner (1969), who showed how features of African languages, far from being lost during enslavement, were retained in the speech of the Sea Islanders in South Carolina.

Winifred K., a resident of Zaire for over forty years and fluent in Tshiluba, a Bantu language, has described the Bantu dynamic:

The cultural picture of the Bantu emphasizes a strong oral tradition which places supreme ethnographic value on an individual’s ability to communicate impressively. The conquering process begun by metal spears was continued by a gift of speech so forceful that it was adopted by successive ethnic groups, which continued to exist as separate cultural and physical entities within the total Bantu pattern. The Bantu speech dynamic has asserted itself in a new setting, transported to this continent by Bantu-speaking slaves. The Afro-American has retained the deft canny power of communications which has enabled him to “use language in the contexts of the situations,” to “manipulate and control situations to give himself the winning edge” (Vass 1974: 102).

As Vass has shown, this Bantu dynamic is not limited in its impact to the African continent. In fact, the most highly visible oral culture in America today is the speech of lower-class African Americans.

Today, Africans and African Americans are a race of gifted speakers, though the motives for unexcelled speech performance have changed from the motive of sheer physical survival to motives
expressing the deep psychological needs of the human personality. Completely uninhibited in his efforts to imitate a strange speech, the Bantu-speaking slave brought from Africa had the inner will to expression and the sensitivity to the human situation which furnish the basis for the greatest potential that every African American has today, his own personal share of the Bantu past. Conscious of it or not, black and white Americans are the inheritors today of a rich cultural contribution: the tough, lusty, good-natured, and uncannily perceptive part of our speech which is our Bantu heritage (Vass 1974: 105).

Vass documents the Bantu retention in the speech of both black and white Southerners. She identifies the names of many southern cities today that are Bantu in origin and also locates many Bantu words in the vocabulary of Southerners. She decodes such familiar songs as “Polly Wolly Doodle” and “Here We Go Loop de Loop,” which are shown to be freedom songs that are from the Bantu (see also Alleyne 1971; Turner 1969).

Having lived in West Africa for six years, I can attest to a similar dynamic among people there. Liberia is a West African nation of 26 languages, virtually all a part of the Bantu family of languages. It is a common saying in Liberia, “Never let a Liberian man talk for himself in court. If you do, you will lose.” I am witness to the fact that it is common for young children to recognize and speak two or more African languages and some English as well. I saw no evidence that “large lips and tongues,” as early linguists had said, “were physical impediments to speech” (Turner 1969:6). I saw no evidence of genetic or linguistic inferiority over the time spent in Liberia. I did find a strong oral culture where even young children are frequently excellent public speakers. These examples in Liberia of a powerful oral language, like that described by Vass, show the Bantu dynamic in action, the power of speech exhibited. It is clear that early linguists spoke out of their own ignorance of African language and culture, much the same as many did and still do about the language of African Americans.

The historical, political, and cultural information is important when we learn that many of the things which cause African American children to be labeled as “poor readers,” “dumb” (low intelligence), or as “speech impaired” are the retained features of Bantu speech or speech from other African language families mixed with or fused into a form of common English (Alleyne 1971; Turner 1969; Vass 1974). Ironically, some varieties of common English—i.e., white Southern speech—also are influenced by the Bantu dynamic. It is important to note that the African retention in the language of African Americans covers all the features that go to make up language—i.e., vocabulary, phonology, grammar, etc. (Smith 1978).

So, it should be clear that we are really talking about two amalgams when we speak of English and African American speech. To realize this is to reduce the professional problem considerably. The language spoken by many African Americans should simply be regarded as a “foreign” or “semi-foreign” language and not as “pathological” or “deficient.” The prime test of the “normalcy” of the language of a child is to compare the child’s language to the environment within which it was learned. This simple test seems to have been overlooked by many test makers and linguists alike.

From the minimal information presented above, it should be clear that any linguists or other students of the language of African Americans will have serious deficiencies in their professional preparation if they are ignorant of the African cultural linguistic antecedents.

The Practical Consequences of a Reorientation

Much of the language and many constructs in testing and assessment must be redefined or eliminated! These assessment practices are inconsistent and incompatible with and contradictory to valid cultural-linguistic principles (Rowe 1991; Salomon 1995). Yet testing and assessment, as we now see them in education, are rooted in and dependent upon language.
Let's take a look at some constructs that will prove to be absurd under the light of cultural-linguistics analysis:

- "basic word" list
- word "difficulty"
- "vocabulary"
- "general information"
- standardized "beginning and ending sounds"
- standardized "comprehension"

Standardized test makers assume that there is, in general, a unique correct answer to a given question or problem. If there is not a unique answer, if there can be multiple answers, then the scoring and analysis system disintegrates. This matter is fundamental. What I am asserting is a basic threat not only to biased testing and assessment of African American children, but to the very foundation of testing and assessment for any child. The results of standardized testing favor children who speak common American English simply because these children are able to respond to questions that are couched in a familiar language based upon familiar experiences. Since the "right children"—upper class, wealthy—tend to get the top scores, it is assumed that the I.Q., reading, speech, language acquisition, and other tests are valid. Test makers have no way of taking the achievement results of a privileged child and separating that part of the scores which is due to the student's special skill and that part which is due simply to growing up in the common white American culture. Because the results come out "right" or appear to have "face validity," the basic assumptions about what the testing and assessment process is supposed to be doing are left unexamined. Let's look at this more closely:

What are the criteria for the establishment of a "basic word list"? Is a basic word list something that all Americans can be expected to have had an equally likely chance to encounter? Is a basic word list a random sample of vocabulary from the total possible vocabulary pool? Does a basic word list represent necessary vocabulary for communication in English? Can there be more than one basic word list? Is the basic word list simply a matter of identification of words that have a high frequency of use? What does it mean not to be in possession of a knowledge of vocabulary in the basic word list?

In a study by Kersey (1970), the Dolch Common Noun List and the Dolch 220 Word List were compared to a word list from a population of Seminole Indian children. The children's words came from stories used by third and fourth graders. The Seminole word list contained 67.7 percent of the words on the Dolch 220 Word List. But it also contained 149 service words that were not on the list. The Seminole word list contained 63.2 percent of the words on the Dolch Common Noun List plus 189 nouns that were not on the Dolch list. How is the educator to explain this? Is one list better than another? Is a child smarter if he or she knows one or the other list? In short, the meaning of "basic word list" is ambiguous, with fatal results for standardized testing. To treat a single basic word list as universally valid is absurd.

Let's examine the concept of "word difficulty." Is a word difficult because only a few people know it? Is a word easy because many people know it? On many standardized test items, difficulty is determined by statistical methods. Yet it is not clear just what the nature of the difficulty is. The assumptions about difficulty are not explicited. Therefore, what is being tested, difficulty or familiarity?

What about "vocabulary"? Notice the word "vocabulary" is unqualified. Is it a Chicago vocabulary, a Bronx vocabulary, a Boston vocabulary, a Tennessee vocabulary? Is there a universal American vocabulary? If not, do we measure a person's vocabulary, or do we simply try to determine if a person has learned a particular vocabulary? Are we measuring vocabulary ability—the ability to learn words? What is the linguistic rationale for expecting all Americans to have identical vocabularies? What are the criteria for item selection for a vocabulary test? What is a vocabulary test?

I could go on with a similar treatment of "general information," "beginning and ending sounds," and "comprehension." However, the point should be clear: the constructs are ambiguous and the
specifications of items are arbitrary! Therefore, the mass production of standardized tests and assessment procedures to measure the behaviors implied by the constructs is in reality the production of mass confusion.

In general, we are faced with a rampant, unbridled ethnocentricism among the designers of standardized tests and assessment procedures for use with populations of diverse cultural groups (Hilliard 1995). If tests are designed only as achievement measures, are content valid, and if the content is agreed to by clients, then there is little to concern us. It is only when the detection of pathology is implied that we must call for superior accountability in testing. The cure for this ethnocentric malady must address the ethnocentrism more than the study and analysis of African American children. William Labov’s classic article, “The Logic of Non-Standard English” (1970), is an excellent piece of work in which he proves that “nonstandard English,” meaning “African American language,” has a logic. He didn’t need to prove it to those who speak it. They have not changed. His work teaches the scholars who apparently have had a difficult time understanding African American speech.

**Urgent Needs**

It should be clear by now that Band-Aids will not do. It will take more than lay knowledge to respond to the fundamental issues. That means that cultural linguists who are familiar with linguistics and with the language of African Americans must be a part of an in-depth evaluation of how language is used in assessment and in the instructional process to see if it is scientifically appropriate. This principle applies to professional practices with any ethnic group. We have major changes to make in the whole system of education. Some of them are as follows.

There is an urgent need for systematic cultural-linguistic review of all testing and assessment devices that are used with African Americans. No existing instruments have been subjected to such a review by professionals who are competent in African American cultural linguistics. There is an urgent need to provide full and competent descriptions of the language that is spoken by African Americans. This language must be described in its historical and cultural context, and not as a simple contrast to common American English.

There is little need to teach teachers specific techniques for teaching the African American child. Teachers must be taught so that their total orientation toward language and cultural linguistic principles represents the best that we now know about the subject. It is not the bag of tricks but the general attitude of a teacher that is important. If an African American child is seen as language deficient, we can show that the behavior of the teacher actually changes toward that child as compared to “normal” children. He or she will engage the child in communication less and pay less attention to the child (e.g., see Aaron and Powell 1982; Irvine 1991; Simpson and Erickson 1983). It is this teaching behavior and not the language of the child, no matter how different, that creates the problem for learners (Johnson and Clement 1973; Nimnick and Johnson 1973).

It is one thing to say that the language context of African Americans must be taken into account in the teaching/learning process. It is quite another to know what to do about it. Both linguists and successful teachers and school leaders—those who are successful with African American children—must be provided with the time to develop and articulate their theories of positive and empowering pedagogy. (One example is the work of Ladson-Billings 1994.) We need no “Black language kits.” The child’s language presents no pedagogical problems. Cultural-linguistics review can show that this is true.

If chimpanzees (Warshoe at the Yerkes Primate Laboratory) can be taught to do American Sign Language, and if a chimpanzee can teach another chimpanzee to sign, and if a gorilla (Koko at Stanford) can earn a 90 on a human I.Q. test, then one would think that any human being could be taught the simple task of reading. All humans are capable of so much more.
Septima Clark is the creator of “freedom schools” in eleven Southern states. These schools were responsible for teaching reading to 12 million potential voters who were illiterate. In a short period of time (Clark seems to suggest about two or three years), the number of illiterates was reduced from 12 million to about 12,000, radically altering voting patterns in the South. I asked Septima Clark how she was able to accomplish such a feat. She responded, “I generally avoided using regular trained teachers.” As a teacher educator, I was stunned. “Why would you do that?” I asked. She answered that often people who saw themselves as highly educated projected the idea to her students that they regarded themselves as better than the students. “Their education got in the way.” Surely, there is a lesson in this for us, as we ponder the nature of our interventions to come.

Conclusion

Who teaches error in linguistic understanding? How do they do it? It is done in many subtle ways in everything from linguistic departments, to English classes, to teacher behavior, and to the mass media. We are faced with nothing less than the need to re-educate our nation to the truth about language. The public in general is not equipped to understand the language issues. We have a major communication problem, especially since so few professionals understand language issues either. There is no quick fix. It is important to conceptualize the problem in its broadest scope. We need no more analyses of the African American child. We need to renovate the system that teaches error. We have the tools to do the job. Do we have the will?

REFERENCES


