

If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?

JAMES BALDWIN

American novelist, essayist, playwright, poet, and social critic, James Baldwin (1924–1987) grew up in Harlem, New York. He attended the DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx where he worked as literary editor on the school magazine alongside student Richard Avedon, an aspiring young photographer. After high school Baldwin pursued his studies at The New School. It was during these years that Baldwin recognized his own homosexuality, and in 1948, disillusioned by Americans' prejudice against blacks and homosexuals, he immigrated to Paris, France, where he lived as an expatriate for most of his adult life. Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, a semi-autobiographical coming-of-age story appeared in 1953. It was followed quickly by *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), a collection of essays; *The Amen Corner* (1954), a play; and *Giovanni's Room* (1956), a controversial homoerotic novel. Baldwin's other books include the books of essays *The Fire Next Time* (1963), *No Name in the Street* (1972), *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985), and *The Price of the Ticket* (1985); *Going to Meet the Man* (1965), a volume of short stories; the novels *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), and *Just Above My Head* (1979); and a book of poems, *Jimmy's Blues* (1983). A prominent member of the African American community, Baldwin returned to the United States during the 1960s, working for civil rights as a member of the Congress of Racial Equality. He appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1963. Later Baldwin was disheartened by the untimely loss of his personal friends Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr.

In the following essay, which first appeared on July 29, 1979, in the *New York Times*, Baldwin joined the debate about black English that was raging in America at the time and takes white America to task for not acknowledging the reality and validity of black English as a language and its importance to the black community.

WRITING TO DISCOVER: What are your thoughts when you hear the phrase "black English"? What does black English sound like? Who have you heard use black English? For you, how does black English differ from standard English?

St. Paul de Vence, France—The argument concerning the use, or the status, or the reality, of black English is rooted in American history and has absolutely nothing to do with the question the argument supposes itself to be posing. The argument has nothing to do with language itself but with the *role* of language. Language, incontestably, reveals the speaker.

Language, also, far more dubiously, is meant to define the other—and, in this case, the other is refusing to be defined by a language that has never been able to recognize him.

People evolve a language in order to describe and thus control their circumstances, or in order not to be submerged by a reality that they cannot articulate. (And, if they cannot articulate it, they *are* submerged.) A Frenchman living in Paris speaks a subtly and crucially different language from that of the man living in Marseilles; neither sounds very much like a man living in Quebec; and they would all have great difficulty in apprehending what the man from Guadeloupe, or Martinique, is saying, to say nothing of the man from Senegal—although the “common” language of all these areas is French. But each has paid, and is paying, a different price for this “common” language, in which, as it turns out, they are not saying, and cannot be saying, the same things: They each have very different realities to articulate, or control.

What joins all languages, and all men, is the necessity to confront life, in order, not inconceivably, to outwit death: The price for this is the acceptance, and achievement, of one's temporal identity. So that, for example, though it is not taught in the schools (and this has the potential of becoming a political issue) the south of France still clings to its ancient and musical Provençal, which resists being described as a “dialect.” And much of the tension in the Basque countries, and in Wales, is due to the Basque and Welsh determination not to allow their languages to be destroyed. This determination also feeds the flames in Ireland for many indignities the Irish have been forced to undergo at English hands is the English contempt for their language.

It goes without saying, then, that language is also a political instrument, means, and proof of power. It is the most vivid and crucial key to identity: It reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity. There have been, and are, times, and places, when to speak a certain language could be dangerous, even fatal. Or, one may speak the same language, but in such a way that one's antecedents are revealed, or (one hopes) hidden. This is true in France, and is absolutely true in England: The range (and reign) of accents on that damp little island make England coherent for the English and totally incomprehensible for everyone else. To open your mouth in England is (if I may use black English) to “put your business in the street”: You have confessed your parents, your youth, your school, your salary, your self-esteem, and, alas, your future.

Now, I do not know what white Americans would sound like if there had never been any black people in the United States, but they would not sound the way they sound. *Jazz*, for example, is a very specific sexual term, as in *jazz me, baby*, but white people purified it into the Jazz Age. *Sock it to me*, which means, roughly, the same thing, has been adopted by Nathaniel Hawthorne's descendants with no qualms or hesitations at all, along with

let it all hang out and right on! Beat to his socks which was once the black's most total and despairing image of poverty, was transformed into a thing called the Beat Generation, which phenomenon was, largely, composed of *uptight*, middle-class white people, imitating poverty, trying to *get down*, to get *with it*, doing their *thing*, doing their despairing best to be *funky*, which we, the blacks, never dreamed of doing—we *were* funky, baby, like *funk* was going out of style.

Now, no one can eat his cake, and have it, too, and it is late in the day to attempt to penalize black people for having created a language that permits the nation its only glimpse of reality, a language without which the nation would be even more *whipped* than it is.

I say that the present skirmish is rooted in American history, and it is. Black English is the creation of the black diaspora. Blacks came to the United States chained to each other, but from different tribes: Neither could speak the other's language. If two black people, at that bitter hour

If this absolutely unprecedented journey does not indicate that black English is a language, I am curious to know what definition of language is to be trusted.

of the world's history, had been able to speak to each other, the institution of chattel slavery could never have lasted as long as it did. Subsequently, the slave was given, under the eye, and the gun, of his master, Congo Square,¹ and the Bible—or in other words, and under these conditions, the slave began the formation of the black church, and it is within this unprecedented tabernacle that black English began to be formed. This was not, merely, as in the European example, the adoption of a foreign tongue, but an alchemy that transformed ancient elements into a new language: *A language comes into existence by means of brutal necessity, and the rules of the language are dictated by what the language must convey.*

There was a moment, in time, and in this place, when my brother, or my mother, or my father, or my sister, had to convey to me, for example, the danger in which I was standing from the white man standing just behind me, and to convey this with a speed, and in a language, that the white man could not possibly understand, and that, indeed, he cannot understand, until today. He cannot afford to understand it. This understanding would reveal to him too much about himself, and smash that mirror before which he has been frozen for so long.

Now, if this passion, this skill, this (to quote Toni Morrison) "sheer intelligence," this incredible music, the mighty achievement of having brought a people utterly unknown to, or despised by "history"—to have brought this people to their present, troubled, troubling, and unassailable

1. Congo Square: A gathering place in New Orleans where slaves, starting in the eighteenth century, would set up a market, sing, dance, and play music on Sundays.

and unanswerable place—if this absolutely unprecedented journey does not indicate that black English is a language, I am curious to know what definition of language is to be trusted.

A people at the center of the Western world, and in the midst of so hostile a population, has not endured and transcended by means of what is patronizingly called a “dialect.” We, the blacks, are in trouble, certainly, but we are not doomed, and we are not inarticulate because we are not compelled to defend a morality that we know to be a lie.

The brutal truth is that the bulk of white people in America never had any interest in educating black people, except as this could serve white purposes. It is not the black child's language that is in question, it is not his language that is despised: It is his experience. A child cannot be taught by anyone who despises him, and a child cannot afford to be fooled. A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiate his experience, and all that gives him sustenance, and enter a limbo in which he will no longer be black, and in which he knows that he can never become white. Black people have lost too many black children that way.

And, after all, finally, in a country with standards so untrustworthy, a country that makes heroes of so many criminal mediocrities, a country unable to face why so many of the nonwhite are in prison, or on the needle, or standing, futureless, in the streets—it may very well be that both the child, and his elder, have concluded that they have nothing whatever to learn from the people of a country that has managed to learn so little.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT THE READING

1. How does Baldwin define *language*? In what ways is his definition central to his argument? Explain.
2. What does Baldwin mean when he says, “The argument [about black English] has nothing do with language itself but with the *role* of language” (1)?
3. In paragraph 2, Baldwin introduces the example of French and how that language is used in different parts of the world. What light, if any, does this discussion shed on Baldwin's point about black English?
4. According to Baldwin, what is the origin of black English? In what ways is black English “a language that permits the nation its only glimpse of reality, a language without which the nation would be even more *whipped* than it is” (6)?
5. What do you think Baldwin fears has happened and will continue to happen if black children are required to learn standard English? Do you see any problems with using black English for the instruction of black children? Explain.