

Discuss the following boxed statement in a short essay (about 2–4 typed pages). If you agree or disagree with anything in the statement, explain why. Be sure to respond to everything having to do with linguistics that is mentioned or implied. Clarify any assumptions or definitions you need to make to respond adequately. Defend your response with logic, reason, and linguistic insight. Make use of appropriate linguistic terminology, especially presupposition, entailment, and implicature. Please focus on objective linguistic issues, and avoid getting bogged down in subjective socio-political issues.

It is incorrect to classify English dialects like African-American Vernacular English (AAVE, more popularly known as “ebonics”) as *languages*, since they are just standard variants based on slang and poor grammar. Treating these dialects as languages is detrimental to African-Americans’ fight for social equality. As noted by African-American poet laureate, Maya Angelou: “The very idea that African-American language is a language separate and apart is very threatening, because it can encourage young men and women not to learn standard English.”

English is so socially, politically, and economically valuable to individual Americans that it is irresponsible and counter-productive to enact plans like the Oakland school board’s 1997 proposal to teach AAVE in school. These proposals leave African-American students without the appropriate language skills they need to succeed in today’s society.

Indeed, this argument applies to any citizen of the United States who does not speak standard English, whether they speak a non-standard dialect (like many African-Americans, Native Americans, and Southerners) or they speak a foreign language (like many immigrants). Every American needs to be able to speak standard English properly, and government bodies at every level, from city to federal, should prevent non-standard English dialects and immigrant languages from usurping English by legally recognizing and enforcing English as the one and only official language to be used in schools, government, ballots, ATMs, etc.

You may freely draw on any material you can find in the library or online. You may even consult native speakers of AAVE, if you find it appropriate to do so. If you make use of sources other than your own thoughts, such as the textbook (O’Grady et al. 2005), the articles we’ve read (Nunberg 1997 and Pullum 1997), or any other books, articles, webpages, etc., be sure to cite them appropriately in the body of your essay. List all cited references at the end of your essay, in any reasonable, consistent bibliographical format (such as the one used for the examples at the bottom of this page).

Your essay will be graded primarily on content, but also on form, so write logically, clearly, concisely, and professionally. If you have messy handwriting, please type your essay. If you have any questions about the intended meaning for any part of the boxed statement, email or IM me for clarification. While this is not meant to be a tricky assignment, there are many subtle issues contained within the boxed statement, and a perfect essay would respond to all of them.

References

- Nunberg, Geoffrey. 1997. Double standards. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 15:667–675.
- O’Grady, William, John Archibald, Mark Aronoff, and Janie Rees-Miller. 2005. *Contemporary linguistics: An introduction*. 5th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s Press.
- Pullum, Geoffrey K. 1997. Language that dare not speak its name: Proposals by a school board in California to recognize the dialect used by most of its pupils unleashed a ferocious media attack. Why did the press get things so wrong, and why were the proposals so virulently ridiculed? *Nature* 386:321–322.