

They point out that although language can be used to conquer, repress, and for other purposes, it can also be used to survive, adapt, and create. The ideas and experiences discussed in the chapter illustrate that the expansive capacity of language helps people adjust to new lands, new realities, and new challenges regardless of their national, racial, or ethnic identity.

James Baldwin, a preeminent American novelist, essayist, and playwright, and author of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, places Black English in its historical context and makes a case for its legitimacy in his provocatively titled essay “If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?” In “Speaking Swahili for Kwanzaa?” John McWhorter, an American linguist, wonders whether there is one “ancestral” African language that has the power to unite Americans of diverse African backgrounds. Nigerian-born poet and writer Bassey Ikpi writes defiantly about how the proliferation of myths and misconceptions about Africa has tarnished the continent’s image in “Why the Whole ‘Poor Africa’ Thing Isn’t Cool.” Tracing the rise of Spanglish as an authentic language in “Spanglish Moves Into Mainstream,” Daniel Hernandez, a news assistant for the *Los Angeles Times* in its Mexico City bureau, gives us a glimpse into how the language is actually created. On the other hand, in her essay “Saying ‘Adios’ to Spanglish” *Newsweek* contributor Leticia Salais takes great pride in transitioning from Spanglish into “proper” Spanish and becoming, from her perspective, truly bilingual. In “Regarding Spanglish,” Felipe de Ortego y Gasca, a scholar in residence at Western New Mexico University, critiques Salais’s rejection of Spanglish and develops a compelling argument in favor of linguistic diversity. Finally, in “Writing Like a White Guy,” Chicago-born poet Jaswinder Bolina ponders a uniquely American problem as his racial and writerly identities collide.

James Baldwin If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?

Born and raised in Harlem, New York City, James Baldwin (1924–1987) spent most of his adult life abroad, which afforded him the distance he

needed to write about his experience in America. In his many celebrated books, including *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), he examined issues of deeply social relevance: interracial marriages, homosexuality, Black identity, and racial struggles in America. The following article originally appeared in the *The New York Times* in 1979. In it Baldwin asserts that Black English is as legitimate a language as any other because it was formed out of necessity and articulates the experiences of those who speak it.

Are Baldwin’s observations about Black English, and language in general, still relevant today? What changes in contemporary American culture support his argument?

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 identify: 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.

"Language is . . . a political instrument, means, and proof of power."

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.

- 5 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 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, 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.¹ 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 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.

Analyze

1. What tone of voice does Baldwin adopt in the first paragraph of his essay? Is it effective?
2. According to Baldwin, how did Black English develop in the United States? Analyze the historical references in the essay as you respond.
3. What point is Baldwin trying to make when he draws a connection between language and education?

Explore

1. According to Baldwin, languages arise out of need to survive, to “confront life.” Write about a time when you had to be creative about the words you used to adjust to or deal with a particular life situation. How did you go about creating these words? What effect did the words have on the situation?
2. Linguists have debated over whether Black English is a dialect or a language. In a researched essay, examine some of the claims made about Black English and develop your own position as you analyze these claims. Be sure that you understand the difference between a dialect and a language, according to linguistic scholarship.
3. How closely is language tied to racial identity? Interview a friend or acquaintance who speaks a language in addition to English to find out how his or her identity is shaped by that language. How do the words themselves influence your interview subject’s sense of self?

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John McWhorter Speaking Swahili for Kwanzaa?

John McWhorter, an American linguist who specializes in language and language context, is the William T. Simon Fellow at Columbia University. He writes and comments on ethnicity and cultural issues for the Institute, a conservative public policy think tank, and is a contributor to the Institute’s urban policy magazine, *City Journal*. He is also a contributor to *The Root*, a leading online source of news and commentary from an African American perspective, founded by Henry Louis Gates Jr. (a professor of African American studies at Harvard University). “Speaking Swahili for Kwanzaa?” was posted on *The Root* in December 2009.

How far back in your lineage do you have to go to find a language you consider your “ancestral” language? If you speak or understand a language now, how does it connect you to your heritage? If you don’t speak or understand it, do you feel a sense of loss?

“Jambo” may mean hello in Swahili, but a slave brought to the United States would not have recognized that greeting. There have not been a single Swahili-speaking African brought to these shores since the slave trade. If there were any, it was very few.

I get to thinking about this during the holidays as we start Kwanzaa, which starts the day after Christmas and runs through January 7th, Kwanzaa Day. Kwanzaa is fine, but it was rooted in a ’60s fashion for black America’s “ancestral” language. The choice of Swahili among thousands of languages spoken in Africa was innocent, and it makes sense in that it is a lingua franca across several African nations. Hundreds of other languages are spoken.

But the nations where it’s spoken are in East Africa. Most of our ancestors came mostly from West Africa. And as we all know, that’s enormous.

The thing is this: To treat Swahili as meaningfully African for Americans because it’s “African” is to lump diverse peoples together that might seem less appropriate if done by whites. Or, if