

# Guilty 'Till Proved Innocent: a review of *Mock Ebonics: Linguistic racism in parodies of Ebonics on the Internet*

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## 1 The Article

This paper presents a summary, review, and update of the article *Mock Ebonics: Linguistic racism in parodies of Ebonics on the Internet*<sup>1</sup> written originally by M. Ronkin, who then revised the article with the help of H. Karn. Ronkin and Karn identify a set of a four strategies used by online parodists. The bulk of the article is spent in a series of analyses of these strategies, with each analysis followed by a short analysis of the racism inherent in the methodology employed. While the linguistic analysis of each strategy is sound, the argumentation for the racist intent of the parodist(s) is sometimes weak and in at least one case completely unconvincing. In the United States of America, the general principle is that persons accused are innocent until proven guilty. Ronkin and Karn's article, however, takes the stance that these parodists are racists with an agenda, ignoring all other possibilities (such as ignorance or entertainment). In all fairness, the authors do provide a very clear operating definition of racism (specifically outgroup racism) against which their judgments can be critiqued:

Our definition of racism is 'the structural societal framework that enables and reproduces dominant group power.' Outgroup racism is the 'socially organized set of attitudes, ideas, and practices that deny [a racialized group] the

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<sup>1</sup>Ronkin/Karn.

dignity, opportunities, freedoms, and rewards that [the United States] offers white Americans.’ Extending this notion, outgroup linguistic racism is any linguistic attitude, idea, or practice that has these effects.<sup>2</sup>

The article by Ronkin and Karn is extremely valuable as a historical resource, independent of its value as a commentary on the racial status quo in America. The data presented in their article was collected in March, 1997, four years ago. In terms of the Internet, this is ancient history, from the “Pre-Dot-Com” era. Many of the resources cited by Ronkin and Karn are no longer available (e.g. *The Ebology of Blato: Sockradees Defense*), and the layout and character of the Internet has changed immensely in the meantime. For example, Yahoo has recategorized wordplay from “Entertainment—Humor, Jokes and Fun” to “Social Science—Linguistics and Human Languages.” In a sense, this represents a worsening of the situation, as now “Ebonics translators” (which Ronkin and Karn<sup>3</sup> demonstrate to be lacking in value as translation devices) are classified as “Science” and “Linguistics,” but at least the web community is coming to recognize the fields which linguistics encompasses.

## 2 Graphemic Manipulations Sound Fishy

The first strategy that Ronkin and Karn investigate is simple substitution (probably through algorithmic and automated means) of graphemes to represent the “reduction, deletion, substitution, and metathesis of hyper-salient phonetic segments.”<sup>4</sup> The authors demonstrate that the results of such substitutions are a far cry from what a linguist would expect from a speaker of AAVE. One problem they found in these “translations” of English into Ebonics was the random (rather than systematic) application of substitution rules. A reexamination of one of the web sites mentioned in the paper, <http://www.joel.net/EBONICS/translator.asp>, reveals that (at least on November 4th, 2001) the translating engine “systematically” applies an [st] simplification rule to every other occurrence of an appro-

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<sup>2</sup>Ronkin/Karn p. 361.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. pp. 364–6.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid. p. 364.

priate context.<sup>5</sup> Additionally [d] was used as a substitute for both [ð] and [θ] (generating highly improbably forms such as *strengd* ‘strength’) and the application of rules was confounded by opaque graphemic environments (e.g., ‘ngs’ was not recognized as a velar nasal which should be replaced by the alveolar). From this, the authors draw the conclusion that the parodists believe Ebonics is unsystematic, and therefore not a legitimate language.

### **3 Parodists be Hyper!**

The second strategy analyzed by Ronkin and Karn is hyper-use of invariant ‘be.’ They are able to find numerous instances (many of them on [joel.net](http://joel.net)) where be is inserted into sentences seemingly at random. Linguists, however, know that the use of invariant ‘be’ is easily predictable in Ebonics, and often serves to indicate habitual aspect. Again, this is used as “proof” of racism because “if Ebonics is not a legitimate language, it follows that anyone can display mastery of its grammatical nuances by randomly inserting be.”<sup>6</sup> In that same paragraph, they state that “the hyper-use of be in the [corpus of nursery rhymes translated into Mock Ebonics] illustrates the misappropriation of a grammatical construction [in order] to pejorate a language system that differs from the dominant one by failing to follow its prescriptive rules.” It seems reasonable that this is true, but the authors do not give any explicit evidence that the intent of the writers was to worsen the linguistic situation of black Americans.

### **4 Derogation in Semantics and Pragmatics and Vulgarization**

In the most convincing sections of this article, the authors deal with the association between Ebonics and slang. These strategies involve the tactics of “replacing semantically neutral

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<sup>5</sup>For example, “must must must must must must” was translated as “must mus’ must mus’ must mus’”

<sup>6</sup>Ibid. p. 367.

words with ones with derogatory connotations” and “inserting interjections that are inappropriate to the registers of the original texts.”<sup>7</sup> More than anything else, they argue effectively, these reduce African Americans to stereotyped “images of minstrelsy” and “[males with] abnormal sexual appetites.” They go on to point out that this vulgarization forces Ebonics into the same register as obscene language, and “elevate[s] Whiteness by reducing all male Ebonics speakers – and, by extension, all African Americans – to participants in a monolithic ‘Snoop Doggy Dogg’ underworld culture.”<sup>8</sup>

## 5 Conclusions Drawn

Ronkin and Karn set out with the desire to find a racist language ideology, and they found it wherever they looked. In the aftermath of the Oakland school board’s resolution regarding Ebonics, there was a lot of material to confront. Although several racist groups were active at the time, racism cannot explain the whole story.

Implicit in the conclusions drawn in the first two sections (graphemic and grammatical variations) is the assumption that non-linguists share the linguistic view that “legitimate languages” are in general rule-governed. Because of the prevalence of irregular and suppleted forms, it is possible that many non-linguists see language in general as more exceptions than rules. Moreover—judging by the article’s own operational definition of linguistic racism—the status of such translators is very questionable. The claim that must be justified is this: “The publishing of algorithmic Ebonics translations and short texts with falsely reconstructed AAVE grammar is a linguistic attitude, idea, or practice that denies black Americans the dignity, opportunities, freedoms and rewards that the United States offers white Americans.” It is certainly difficult to see that these translations deny black Americans any opportunities, freedoms, or rewards offered to white Americans. The question of dignity is more interesting, but it seems reasonable to say that the existence of algorithmic

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<sup>7</sup>Ronkin/Karn p. 368.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid. pp.371–372.

translations from English into “Redneck” and “Hacker”,<sup>9</sup> “Valley Girl”,<sup>10</sup> and Pico Iyer’s translation of *King Lear* into California surfer-speak<sup>11</sup> cast doubt on the idea that somehow these translations strip dignity away from black Americans that is not also being stripped away from most white American speakers. Finally, the `joel.net` Ebonics site (which has archived much of the data used by the authors) carries the following disclaimer: “This Web-site is an Ebonics related entertainment site. This is not real Ebonics. It is mostly slang and what people perceive as Ebonics. View this site in jest. If you think this is actually real Ebonics or believe me to be either racist or promoting Ebonics... then you’re an idiot.” It is likely that this disclaimer was not present in March 1997, but the web site itself does not reflect someone whose attitudes towards Ebonics have shifted much. In all probability, this was the site maintainer’s intention from the start.

In short, while I do not doubt that many people with racist agendas and ideologies are out there on the Internet, I also do not believe that they represent a large part of the Ebonics related material on the web. It seems to me that most of what is out there comes from a much more light-hearted attitude that is merely trying to get a giggle, laugh, chuckle, or smile from its readers.

## References

- Iyer, Pico:** Chap. The Lears: An American Tragedy In Tropical Classical: Essays From Several Directions. Vintage Books, 1998
- Ronkin, Maggie/Karn, Helen E.:** Mock Ebonics: Linguistic racism in parodies of Ebonics on the Internet. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 3 1999, Nr. 3, 360–380

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<sup>9</sup><http://rinkworks.com/dialect/>

<sup>10</sup><http://www.80s.com/Entertainment/ValleyURL/>

<sup>11</sup>Iyer.