My grammar be's *Ebonics*,

Gin, tonic and chronic.

- Nelly, *Country Grammar (Hot Shit)*

I speak *Ebonics.*

- Juicy J, *We Still n this Bitch*

"You're the old dude that be staring at me every morning."

- Donald, *Black Boogiemen*

Ebonics: It's Not All Black, Some Be British

Articulateness is best defined as the quality of being endowed with the power of clear and distinctive speech: to speak with expressive clarity. The ability to express one's inmost thoughts and feelings in a coherent verbal form is an important criterion of middle-class patriarchal masculinity as practiced in America, whether in the written or verbal form. There is great power in the ability to use language in a clear and distinctive manner and our most gifted orators have understood this. From George Washington to Paul Revere to Abraham Lincoln to Nat Turner to Frederick Douglass to Martin Luther King to Malcolm X to Barack Obama, American men recognized as being of some stature of importance have possessed the ability to articulate their respective messages with purpose and clarity. Some demographic groups within the American social fabric have been represented, historically, as being incapable of possessing the qualities associated with articulateness and such representations have often times blurred the lens through which we view our American neighbors. Consider the stereotypical understanding of Asian-Americans' inarticulate use of the English language as underscored by the blockbuster hit movie *The Pursuit of Happyness* starring Will Smith. Or, consider the motivation of the producers' of a show like The History Channel's *Swamp People* who believe that the speech of the people representing the backwoods of Louisiana and Florida is in need of subtitles. Or, consider a motion picture like *The Last Boy Scout*, where the young, black professional quarterback portrayed by Damon Wayans spells the word bomb as follows: bom! As Americans, inured in a social system which uses middle-class patriarchal masculinity as the criteria by which we make critical assessments of Others, we are quite aware of the stereotypical understandings of inarticulate Asians and rednecks and black men; it is our understanding of such stereotypical representations which allow the representations to serve as sources of humor in the popular cultural materials in which they can be found. Without the understanding that some Asians do not speak or spell English well, the misspelling of "Happyness" loses its impact; without an understanding of the backwoods people of Louisiana and Florida as uneducated rednecks, the subtitles used by The History Channel are worthless; and, without the lame japery, engendered

by America's fascination with the minstrelsy show, associated with the attempt by black men to articulate using the English language, Wayans's artful spelling of bomb would serve no comedic purpose.

At least with reference to men who look like Damon Wayans, there are definite historical and social and cultural reasons why black men may have a tenuous hold on the masculinist criterion of articulateness. Pre-Emancipation, we are all aware of the dangers inherent regarding the education of African slaves and the difficulty in attaining education for free blacks; and, while the rate at which black males were educated in the post-Emancipation era increased dramatically in the South as compared to during the ante-bellum era, the quality and frequency of such an education would not be considered of high measure by anyone's standards. As time has progressed, I think that we can agree that the quality of one's education has become inextricably tied to one's bank account. So while there are middle-class and upper-class African American men who have been educated reflective of their economic class and status, the vast number of black men in American populate the lower-classes of American society…and the education that they receive is reflective of their relationship to such classes.

I was living in California when the Oakland school board decided that the black children who predominantly populate their schools must be incapable of receiving the Standard English curriculum that had been installed and therefore sought to design a curriculum with focus on what has come to be known as Ebonics. According to Marcyliena Morgan, in "US Language Planning and Policies for Social Dialect Speakers,"

> On December 18, 1996, the Oakland, California school board passed a controversial resolution recognizing the legitimacy of "Ebonics"—what mainstream linguists more often term African-American Vernacular English—as a language. The resolution set off a maelstrom of media criticism and ignited a hotly discussed national debate.

> For students whose primary dialect was "Ebonics," the Oakland resolution mandated some instruction in that dialect, both for "maintaining the legitimacy and richness of such language... and to facilitate their acquisition and mastery of English language skills." This also included the proposed increase of salaries of those proficient in both "Ebonics" and Standard English to the level of those teaching LEP (limited English proficiency) [or ESL] students and the use of public funding to help teachers learn AAVE themselves. (Morgan 173)

I understand the pros and cons of both sides of the "Oakland Ebonics controversy," as it came to be known. On the one hand, I can comprehend the desire to equate AAVE with the other regional and global dialects of English; if compensation can be afforded speakers of other regional and sectional dialects of English, then so should such compensation be made for AAVE. On the other hand, I also understand the arguments of those who suggest that black Americans are Americans and speak the same English as other Americans and should be taught the English language according to the standardized system. At the heart of the issue is difference. Proponents

of Ebonics suggest that there is a difference between how African Americans speak and how Standard English is spoken in America; opponents suggest that the establishment of Ebonics as a component of school boards' curricula reeks of a "separate but equal" mentality, based on assumed differences between blacks and whites, which was hoped dismissed some score ago.

I find myself less concerned with the back and forth taking place between the proponents and opponents of Ebonics than I am with the manner by which language and language systems become designated as belonging to Ebonics. It seems that if black Americans say it, then it is Ebonics. I am not sure about that perspective. Take for example the most popular use of language used to explain and explicate Ebonics: the auxillary helping verb "to be."

The most readily identified phrasing in Ebonics is: I "be" doing something, he "be" doing something, etc. Most linguists, like Stanford's John Rickford suggest that this manner of speaking evidences an occurrence of deletion in black speech, where words, phrases or the annunciation of certain Standard English phrases are *systematically* dropped or deleted. Consider Rickford's take:

> teachers should "distinguish between mistakes in reading and differences in pronunciation"; so the kid who reads "I missed him" as "I miss him" should not automatically be assumed to have misread, in the sense of not being able to decode the letters. On the contrary, he may have decoded the meaning of this Standard English sentence correctly, but he may then have reproduced its meaning according to the pronunciation patterns of his dialect, in which a consonant cluster like [st]--the final sounds in "missed"--is often simplified to [s]. [Many] also suggest giving more attention to the ends of words, where Ebonics pronunciation patterns have a greater modifying effect on Standard English words than they do at the beginnings of words. He also suggests that words be presented in contexts that preserve underlying forms, for instance, words that are followed by a vowel which favors retention of final consonants--*testing* or *test of*--rather than *test* in isolation. He also suggests using the full forms of auxiliary verbs (e.g. "He will be here," "He is tall") and avoiding contractions (e.g. "He'll be here," "He's tall"), because of evidence that once you go through a contraction stage, Ebonics is much more likely to proceed to deletion ("He Ø be here," "He Ø tall"). (Rickford)

While I am in no position to question the veracity and fidelity of Rickford's statement, I would like to suggest an alternative manner of looking at Ebonics, or at least its most readily identifiable use of the verb "to be." I want to suggest that the use of the verb "to be," especially in phrases like "he be wildin'," "he be trippin'," reflects a gnomic use of the verb "to be" which is the result of morphosyntactic change that took place during the *adventus saxonum*, when Saxon speakers of Old English came into contact with Britons who spoke Welsh. The gnomic use of "to be" is not a black American – an African American – invention. The fact that the gnomic use of "to be" is still, in 2013, to be found in the speech patterns of some black Americans reflects some black Americans' function as a living artifact, preserving archeological fragments of a time long passed. I would suggest that at some point in time during America's past, white American speakers who used the gnomic tense of "to be" passed such speech patterns on to their slaves and subordinates. Perhaps, some of the descendants of such slaves, being deprived of access to educational systems which outlawed the gnomic use of "to be," were not afforded access to an English language system which did not include the gnomic use of "to be."

Like black Americans, the British were once believed to speak Old English improperly due to their improper learning (which surprisingly was thought to reflect the inferiority of the British when compared with Anglo-Saxons). Supposedly,

> due to their 'imperfect learning' of the Anglo-Saxon language the [British] are assumed to have carried over a number of morphosyntactic features from [British] that found their way into the general spoken language of the people due to the large number of British-influenced speakers of Anglo-Saxon. (Coates qtd. in *Celtic Voices* 7)

This linguistic influence is then assumed to have "influenced a number of changes in the English language" (Niehueus 30). In 2002, Markku Filppula summarizes these developments:

> It seems safe to conclude that the last decade or so has seen us enter a new phase in the history of research on the early Celtic–English contacts: a substantial amount of new research has been undertaken, or is under way, on a wide range of problems covering the general historical and archaeological background to these contacts and the linguistic outcomes in all domains of language. (*The Celtic Roots of English* 22)

Morphosyntax can occur when a word or phrase is borrowed from another culture and the word or phrase is not used, with regards to syntax, in the manner for which the word or phrase is originally created. Scholars from Tolkien to Filppula endorse the idea of Welsh morphosyntax influence of Old English (*English and Celtic in Contact* 27; Tolkien 32).

All Indo-European languages have the linking verb "to be." Old English has a use of the verb "to be" as a linking verb and a gnomic use as a verb in the present tense. In the present tense, the verb "to be" exists as: am, are, and is. The verb "to be" is also used gnomically indicating a universal nature. A gnomic tense, sometimes called the neutral or universal tense, is one used to express general truths or aphorisms (de Haan 4). For example, "Women are good cooks" (or, "Women be good cooks") indicates that universally, women cook well. This is an example of a sentence construction that is common to a number of English speakers. Scholars such as Filppula and Tolkien suggest that this characteristic is a result of morphosyntax influence of Welsh onto Old English.

The Welsh of the time period contemporary with Old English has a third person singular form of the verb "to be" in the present tense and the future tense. The present tense form of the third person singular of the Welsh verb "to be" is *yw*; the future tense form of the third person singular of the Welsh verb "to be" is *byd*. This future tense also indicates a gnomic, universal nature. Old English has two functions of the present tense verb "to be" (two "to be's" if you will): function *a*, which indicates the actual present and function *b*, which indicates the customary or habitual or gnomic nature (Tolkien 32-33). The *b* function is "expressed by forms [of the Old English verb "to be"] beginning with *b*-, which do not appear in the true present: *bīo*, *bist*, *bið*. The meaning of bið is "is" (naturally, habitually, or in a gnomic sense) or "will be" (Tolkien 31-32). Filppula and Tolkien indicate that the function *b* of the Old English verb "to be"

is a result of speakers of Old English preserving the distinctions between the two "to be's" due to language contact with the Welsh and the understood preservation of function *b* in the Welsh (*English and Celtic in Contact* 43; Tolkien 31-32). However, the Welsh use *byd* as a third person singular verb of the *future* tense which could also indicate the gnomic characteristics of universally, naturally or habitually. The speakers of Old English use the *b* function of their *present* tense verb "to be" to suggest "will be" and functions that are gnomic. Nevertheless, whether the gnomic use of "to be" is to be credited to the Welsh or speakers of Old English, one thing is certain: descendants of African slaves in American did not invent the gnomic use of "to be" so readily evident in Ebonics. Some of the structures of Ebonics are British. Black men would serve themselves well in understanding that some of the very lack that they experience, such as lacking articulateness, is the result of others projecting traits of themselves that they do not like onto black men. Such circular logic and reasoning we employ in America. In the effort to fit in and feel accepted, many of us adhere to the criteria of middle-class patriarchal masculinity. Much of the criticism that black men receive regarding the articulate nature of their speech is the result of ideals related to articulateness developed by Western Europeans. To be criticized according to criteria modeled on European standards for speech patterns that were themselves developed in western Europe and forced upon black men seems illogically circular. If you want to criticize me for something, criticize me for employing aspects of British morphosyntax. While I be black, all the time, I be speaking according to Welsh-onics, not Ebonics.

Works Cited

Coates, Richard. "Introduction" found in *Celtic Voices – English Places: Studies of the Celtic impact on the place-names in England* by Richard Coates and Andrew Breeze with David Horovitz. Stamford: Shaun Tyas, 2000, pp. 1-14.

Filppula, Markku. *English and Celtic in Contact.* New York: Routledge, 2008.

Filppula, Markku, Juhani Klemola, Heli Pitkänen "Early contacts between English and the Celtic Languages" found in *The Celtic Roots of English. Studies in Language, Volume 37*. Markku Filppula, Juhani Klemola, Heli Pitkänen (eds.).Joensuu: University of Joensuu, Faculty of the Humanities, 2002 pp. 1-26.

- "What's Celtic and What's English in the 'British IslesEnglishes'?" found in *The Celtic Englishes IV*,Hildegard L.C. Tristram (ed.).Heidelberg: Winter, 2006, pp. 1-39.

Morgan, Marcyliena. "US Language Planning and Policies for Social Dialect Speakers." In *Sociopolitical perspectives on language policy and planning in the USA*. Eds. Kathryn Anne Davis and Thom Huebner. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1999.

Rickford, John. "Using the Vernacular to Teach the Standard." Stanford University, 1998.