

LOOKING FOR ROOTS IN THE SUBSTRATE: THE CASES OF EBONICS AND ANGLO-IRISH

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Abstract

Despite many differences in the sociolinguistic setting of Hiberno-English in Ireland and African-American Vernacular English in the USA, arguments about substrate influence have been invoked in both cases to promote the notion of separate linguistic identities. In the case of Ireland, Henry (1958, 1977) has insisted that the proper term to describe the vernacular now used by many in rural Ireland is “Anglo-Irish”, as opposed to “Hiberno-English” or “Irish English”, and he argues that “a new language” was created as a result of the substrate influence that became especially prominent in the nineteenth century. There have likewise been strong claims about the significance of substrate influence in African American Vernacular English, or to use the term advocated by the Oakland School Board, “Ebonics”. In 1996 the Board declared this variety to be “not a dialect of English” but instead an instance of “African Language Systems”. The arguments of Henry and of the Oakland School Board may not convince linguists that Anglo-Irish and Ebonics are indeed distinct languages, but these claims do warrant reconsidering the question of where English begins and ends.

1 Introduction

Substrate influence can be defined as the role that one's native language (most typically) can play in the acquisition of (most typically) a second language. The hedges just used, "most typically", acknowledge the fact that substrates are sometimes involved in the acquisition of a third language, but the second language situation is likely the most common and is the focus in this paper (cf. Odlin 1989, Ceñoz & Jessner 2000). Ever since the nineteenth century the study of substrate influence has received increasing attention. Much of the early interest focused on historical questions, and the burgeoning research literature on language contact shows the ongoing scrutiny of the diachronic dimensions of substrate influence (e.g., Thomason & Kaufman 1988). Yet another research community has also focused on such influence—namely, those linguists who investigate second language acquisition—and that field rapidly grew in the second half of the twentieth century (e.g., Ringbom 1987). Although acquisition studies and historical research do not overlap a great deal, work on cross-linguistic influence in one can benefit work in the other, as Salikoko Mufwene (1990) and others have pointed out.

In both historical linguistics and second language acquisition, there have been skeptics questioning the empirical reality of cross-linguistic influence, as in the arguments of Roger Lass (1990) questioning the influence of Irish on Hiberno-English. However, the increasing detail in the evidence for such influence not only in Ireland but also in many other language contact situations has made the skeptics a small band—and not an especially well-informed one. In contrast to the skeptics, there are others who accept as a matter of course the reality of cross-linguistic influence, and they invoke it to affirm the value of both the speakers of the substrate languages and of the speakers of the varieties showing cross-linguistic influence. In this paper I compare the stances toward substrate influence in two cases, the first in Ireland, as seen in some of the writing of P. L. Henry, and the second in the United States, as seen in a 1996 resolution of the school board in Oakland, California regarding what the board termed Ebonics. My comparison will, I hope, cast light on the question of where dialects end and languages begin.

2 Anglo-Irish

P. L. Henry is probably best known for his detailed description of the vernacular titled *An Anglo-Irish Dialect of North Roscommon*, which was published in 1957. Most of the monograph addresses specific points where the vernacular diverges from the dialects of Britain and America and especially where there are parallels with the indigenous Celtic language of Ireland known both as Gaelic and Irish. In the introduction Henry distinguishes "common AI" and "rural AI", with the former capable of serving as "a link between the rural dialect and StE [Standard English]". In a lexical survey published in 1958, he discusses the ambiguities of the term *Anglo-Irish* (AI), which can have three senses: emphasis on the original settlers, emphasis on the native Irish, and also a neutral sense. The first sense is probably that which is used most by scholars and includes some treatments of language as found in a book by Loreto Todd (1989). With regard to the second sense, Henry notes that the stress falls on the second element of the compound. Commenting on the rich Anglo-Irish literary tradition that developed in the nineteenth

century, Henry implies the importance of Irish substrate influence, as seen in the following passage:

The reality underlying later literary developments was that Ireland was forging a new language on the pattern of the old. English, transformed in the mouths of an Irish-speaking people, was fraught with potentiality. (1958:56)

As seen in the quotation, Henry goes so far as to term Anglo-Irish a new language. Although these observations from the 1950s give a sense of Henry's thinking, it is in an address published in 1977 that we get an elaborated discussion of the overall significance of substrate influence. As in his earlier observations, he views Anglo-Irish as a "new language" (1977:24), but here he amplifies on the reasons. For Henry, substrate influence endowed Anglo-Irish with a wellspring of creativity. The speakers of earlier times were not engaged in mere "learning", which for Henry is no more than imitation:

Whereas in nineteenth century Ireland the colonist stock held the reins, the tie with England was close and there was no scope for the rise of Anglo-Irish as a national speech norm fashioned by the people and therefore adapted for their own needs, educational, social and political. The situation is symbolised by an Education Machine which could not understand the *creation* but only the *imitation* and learning of language. (1977:25, emphases in the original)

Also evident in the quote is Henry's conviction that Irish schools in the days before independence had little understanding or sympathy for what made the speech of bilingual children distinctive.

Although Henry stresses the uniqueness of Anglo-Irish and its creative potential, he does concede that in structural terms it owes much to English, as seen in the following: "Generally speaking, the material basis of the language, that is, words and grammatical forms, were very largely from English" (1977:34). On the other hand, he adopts a quasi-generative stance, as seen in the next quotation, to argue for a distinctive linguistic identity: the English-derived material parts are "set in motion by a deeper structure, namely, that of meaning" (1977:35). (On the final page of the article, moreover, he actually uses the term *generative*.) In the same paper, he gives numerous examples of idioms that have an Irish parallel; it appears that his examples come from a manuscript in the archives of the Department of Irish Folklore at University College Dublin. Although some of the examples he gives may not necessarily reflect Irish substrate influence, I have checked several of the UCD idioms to see if they also appear in British English, and they do not (Odlin 1991).

Meaning, then, plays a key role in Henry's arguments for the distinctiveness of Anglo-Irish. Not surprisingly, he invokes assumptions common in linguistic relativism:

You will be obliged to concede on reflection that languages are distinctive in the first instance because they embody contrasting views of life, and secondly because they employ their own favoured linguistic modes to mediate their particular world view. (1977:27)

Such thinking brings to mind not only modern work on relativism but also the Romanticism of thinkers such as Wilhelm von Humboldt (1836/1988). For Henry, the vernacular of modern Ireland embodies not only a distinctive history but also a distinctive world view.

3 Ebonics

Turning now to Ebonics, we see similarities and differences regarding the significance of substrate influence. Some background on the Oakland resolution may be useful. In December of 1996, the school board issued a document that the media considered highly newsworthy, and the controversy generated by the original resolution lasted well into the following year, even after the board revised the resolution in January of 1997. I have written a detailed analysis of the two resolutions and will not attempt to summarize all the points made in that article (cf. Odlin 1999). However, the most striking feature of the December resolution was the board's declaration that Ebonics is a separate language, not a variety of English:

...numerous validated scholarly studies demonstrate that African American students as part of their culture and history as African people possess and utilize a language described in various scholarly approaches as "Ebonics" (literally Black sounds) or Pan African Communication or African Language Systems; ... these studies have also demonstrated that African Language Systems are genetically-based and not a dialect of English.

While terms such as "African Language Systems" are not widely used by most linguists to describe either the languages of Africa or anything in the Americas, the wording of the Oakland resolution indicates the school board's interest in substrate influence. In fact the board invokes an African language family in relation to Ebonics: "these studies demonstrate that such West and Niger-Congo African languages have been officially recognized and addressed in the mainstream public educational community as worthy of study". In the revised resolution, moreover, the board makes its historical argument somewhat clearer: "these studies have also demonstrated that African Language Systems have origins in West and Niger-Congo languages". As with Henry's analysis of Anglo-Irish, then, the Ebonics resolution invokes substrate influence to posit the existence of a separate language—although the board retreated from this position somewhat in the revised resolution (Odlin 1999).

Also similar to Henry's position is the desire of the Oakland board for the local schools to affirm the unique identity of pupils who speak a distinct linguistic variety. The board states that the aims of "the Oakland Unified School District in providing equal

opportunities for all of its students dictate limited English proficient educational programs [*sic*]. Although the sentiments expressed are similar to Henry's, the wording of the resolution indicates a special agenda. The phrase "limited English proficiency" is customary in American bilingual education programs, and other wording in the Oakland resolution makes it clear that the school board was pursuing a novel strategy to obtain Federal funds available through bilingual education. The board could not expect to obtain such funding unless Ebonics was deemed to be a distinct language, and the first part of the December resolution lays the ground for obtaining such support. The furor in the national media led the board to claim that it never had any interest in obtaining bilingual education funds, but the language of the December resolution makes their denials hard to believe (Odlin 1999).

Although the interest in obtaining Federal funding was probably the main reason for declaring Ebonics to be a separate language, the school board continued to emphasize the role of substrate influence even after the bilingual education argument was dropped. In the revised resolution, the board expresses its intent to

implement the best possible academic program for the combined purposes of facilitating the acquisition and mastery of English language skills, while respecting and embracing the legitimacy and richness of the language patterns whether they are known as "Ebonics," "African Language Systems," or "Pan African Communication Behaviors" ...

Although the wording is not quite as explicit as Henry's, the resolution suggests that the "legitimacy and richness" of Ebonics can be traced at least partly to the African substrate. Whether or not funding opportunities could improve from a new name, the nomenclature might persuade some members of the public that the speech ways of African American children have as much history as any other and deserve as much respect.

4 Substrate influence

What the arguments of P. L. Henry and the Oakland school board have in common, then, is primarily the foregrounding of substrate influence. In both cases, such influence is seen not only as a rich source for innovation but also as the basis of a new language. Yet in both cases the substratist positions leave important questions unanswered. Henry seems to believe that Anglo-Irish is "a kind of Irish" (1977:36) but it remains unclear whether or not he would consider Anglo-Irish to be a Celtic instead of a Germanic language. Likewise the Ebonics resolution invokes the taxonomic term *Niger-Congo*, but the authors do not make clear whether or not they would maintain that Ebonics belongs to the Niger-Congo family. Classifying the one as Celtic and the other as Niger-Congo would at least provide some clarity as to just how strongly the authors believe Anglo-Irish and Ebonics to be separate languages. On the other hand, those classifications would be extremely dubious in view of the structural evidence. Anglo-Irish resembles dialects of English far more than it does any Celtic language, and the same goes for Ebonics as compared with any Niger-Congo language. The Appendix includes versions of the Lord's Prayer in Irish and in Yoruba so that readers can get a sense of

how different Celtic and Niger-Congo languages are from an English-related creole, Gullah, which is spoken in South Carolina and Georgia.

The Gullah text clearly resembles English and what the school board terms Ebonics, and the resemblance in both cases is obviously far greater than any resemblance to Yoruba. Even so, the fact that most linguists do consider Gullah to be a separate language might seem to provide a promising argument in the case of Anglo-Irish and Ebonics: one might claim that both are also creoles. However, there are compelling counter-arguments in both cases (Odlin 1997, Winford 1997, 1998).

5 Languages vs. dialects

The cases of Anglo-Irish and Ebonics raise the old question of where a dialect ends and a language begins. Cross-linguistic distances are obviously relevant to that question, and if language distance were the only factor, neither Henry's argument nor that of the Oakland board would deserve much attention at all. On the other hand, both cases involve the use of historical arguments to pursue another aim: namely, that of raising the estimation of Anglo-Irish and Ebonics. A classic article by William Stewart (1968) discusses four factors relevant to the language/dialect distinction: standardization, autonomy, historicity, and vitality. The stance taken by Henry and also by the Oakland board addresses two of those factors: historicity and vitality. That is, both Anglo-Irish and Ebonics have distinctive histories (even if substrate influence could not be invoked), and both varieties have no shortage of speakers who confer vitality on them. Even so, neither variety has really been standardized. Moreover, speakers and writers of these varieties have not established a high degree of autonomy. The Oakland board declared Ebonics to be a separate language in December of 1996, but a month later it no longer saw fit to follow through on the logic of such claim, that is, to seek funding for a bilingual education program. Furthermore, neither Henry nor the Oakland board chose to write their polemics in actual Anglo-Irish or Ebonics.

Elsewhere I have argued that the process of a dialect becoming a language is similar to the way a new country may obtain diplomatic recognition (Odlin 1999). P. L. Henry and the Oakland board have consciously adopted terminology to affirm the linguistic independence of Anglo-Irish and Ebonics, largely from a concern that both the speech ways and the speakers have not gotten the respect they deserve. All the same, it is possible to agree with the sentiments underlying such declarations of independence but at the same time to predict that neither variety will ever be considered anything other than English by most people. Here it will help to think of some of the competing terms: *Hiberno-English* and *Irish English*, on the one hand, and *Black English* and *African American Vernacular English* on the other. The fact that no term is universally used in either case suggests that the status of these varieties remains contested, and this terminological limbo seems likely to continue for many years to come.

6 Conclusion

The cases of Anglo-Irish and Ebonics are, I think, interesting in their own right, but they also point to a larger concern: namely, the notion of the unity of the English-speaking world. As noted above, the declaration of the Oakland school board in 1996 got considerable attention in the media, yet there has been much less publicity of a recent decision of the British government that may have very serious ramifications for language policy. In 1998 negotiators concluded the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, the official framework for a peace settlement in Northern Ireland, and some of the terms in the agreement involved language. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed discussion of all the linguistic issues that complicated the peace negotiations, but one outcome should be noted: the various negotiating parties, including the British government, agreed to recognize Ulster Scots as a language of Northern Ireland and, by implication, as an official language of part of the United Kingdom. Ulster Scots resembles the vernacular English of southern Scotland (which is often called Scots). The Ulster variety certainly has distinctive characteristics, and now language activists in Belfast and elsewhere are trying to put the variety to novel uses including, for example, official job notices written in the newly declared language (cf. Görlach 2000). The distinctive identity of Ulster Scots does not depend mainly on substrate influence, but it does show one more example of how declarations such as those of P. L. Henry and the Oakland school board could, for better or worse, call into question the unity of the English language.

Appendix. The Lord's Prayer in Gullah, Irish, and Yoruba.

Gullah, a creole considered by some linguists to be the most archaic form of African American Vernacular English, has a great deal of vocabulary identical with English, even though it diverges in some areas of grammar (especially verb phrase construction). Irish, a Celtic language, shares several Indo-European affinities with English, but most are quite opaque without some background in Indo-European linguistics (e.g., *ríocht* 'kingdom'). As a Niger-Congo language Yoruba is, not surprisingly, a language quite different from the other two in the appendix.

The Lord's Prayer in Gullah

(Source: <http://www.gullahtours.com/prayers.html>)

Our Fadduh awt'n Hebb'n, all-duh-weh be dy holy 'n uh rightschus name. Dy kingdom com.' Oh lawd leh yo' holy 'n rightschus woud be done, on dis ert' as-'e tis dun een yo' grayt Hebb'n. 'N ghee we oh Lawd dis day our day-ly bread. 'N f'gib we oh Lawd our trus-passes, as we also f'gib doohs who com' sin 'n trusspass uhghens us. 'N need-us-snot oh konkuhrin' King een tuh no moh ting like uh sin 'n eeb'l. Fuh dyne oh dyne is duh kingdom, 'n duh kingdom prommus fuh be we ebbuh las'n glory. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer in Irish

(Source: <http://www.stmarysdrogheda.ie/Patrick%27s%20day/MassPrint.htm>)

Ár n-athair, atá ar neamh: go naofar d'ainm. Go dtaga do riocht. Go ndéantar do thoil ar an talamh, mar dhéantar ar neamh. Ár n-arán laethiúl tabhair dúinn inniu, agus maith dúinn ár bhfiacha, mar mhaithimid dár bhféichiúnaithe féin. Agus ná lig sinn i gcathú, ach saor sinn ó olc. Óir is leatsa an Ríocht agus an Chumhacht agus an Ghlóir, tré shaol na saol.

The Lord's Prayer in Yoruba

(Source: <http://www.christusrex.org/www1/pater/JPN-yoruba.html>)

Baba wa ti mbe li orun.Ki a bowo fun oruko re ki ijoba re de.Ife tire ni ki ase li aiye
Bi won ti nse li orun Fun wa ni onje ojo wa loni Dari ese wa ji wa Bi ati ndari ese ji awon
ti ose wa.Mafa wa sinu idanwo.Sugbon gba wa lowo bilísi. Amin.

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