The debate over ebonics:
Black English in cross-cultural perspective

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BY RICHARD FEINBERG

Mi hanu numa fo kosim tugala.
No, this isn't Pig Latin. Or ebonics.
Nor is it muddled English. It is Solomon
Islands Pidgin English (also known as
"Pijin"), and it means "I'm glad to meet
you all."

Pijin, which com-

bines a predominant-
ly English vocabulary
with an Oceanic
grammar and pho-
nology or sound sys-

tem, is the only com-

mon language in a
culturally diverse Pa-
cific nation half the

size of the continen-
tal United States.

For a long time,
Europeans perceived Pijin as an un-
grammatical or debased slang, spoken by
people who lacked the intellect to learn
"proper" English. School children were
taught exclusively in standard (British)
English, whether or not they could un-
derstand their teachers.

As is true of African-Americans, there
are good reasons for Solomon Islanders
to learn standard English. Most govern-
ment documents are written in English. It is
difficult to conduct international

business in Pijin, and few books are writ-
ten in that language.

Pijin, on the other hand, is either the
first or second language of people
throughout the country. (English is, at
best, the third.) Many islanders speak it
in their homes and with their friends.
Most local business is conducted in Pijin.
And it is sometimes used in schools.

Solomon Islands schools do not "teach
Pijin." Classes, for the most part, are in
English.

Pijin, nonetheless, is useful in explain-
ing difficult concepts, and it can even
help in teaching English syntax.

Similarly, Oakland's schools do not plan
to "teach Ebonics" in the class-

room.

However, the Oakland school board's

policy attempts to acknowledge what has
been clear to linguists now for decades -
that black English is a distinct language,
with its own grammar, phonology, and
lexicon.

Many students in the Oakland public
schools are inner-city African-Americans.
Making sure that teachers have some
training in those students' native lan-
guage can facilitate communication,
thereby improving education in all sub-
jects.

The Oakland school board is also cor-
rect to note that speakers of black Eng-
lish are not using "bad" or "ungrammati-
cal English."

They are not speaking standard Eng-
lish poorly. As is true of Solomon Island-
ers, they are speaking their own lan-
guage well.

But black English is like any lan-
guage: There are times when it is useful,
at other times it is a liability. Effective
communication requires what sociolin-
guists call "code switching." To be suc-
sessful, one must know which code to
use in what context.

To grasp this point, consider that peo-
ple speak differently to parents than they
do to friends, and they speak differently
in class than at the local bar. The object
is to gain enough facility with a variety of
codes so one can automatically employ
that which is best suited to the situation.

Schools exist in large part to help stu-
dents gain the skills that they will need
in formal contexts. The problem is how
to accomplish this, and it often helps if
teachers can switch codes themselves.

Oakland has proposed no more than this.
Other school systems where children
have to master multiple languages have
taken much more radical approaches.

For example, at the Rough Rock
Demonstration School in Arizona, chil-
dren are routinely taught in Navajo.

Hawaiian Language Immersion Pro-
gram has, for years, been helping to pre-
serve the island's native tongue while
promoting a well-rounded education.

And in Papua, New Guinea, Village
Tok Fles Schools are doing much the
same. In these instances and many oth-
ers, the results have been encouraging.

Oakland's proposal is comparatively
modest. It is simply to help teachers un-
derstand black English better, thereby
improving communication between them
and their students and increasing the ef-
feciveness of their instruction.

A linguist colleague of mine recently
observed, "The Oakland School Board is
merely doing what sociolinguists and lin-
guists have said for 20 years should be
done - code-switching so the kids know
what the heck the teacher is talking
about."

Oakland's move will not resolve all of
the problems facing our beleaguered
schools.

However, it is one step in the right
direction. As such, it deserves to be sup-
ported and encouraged.