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Testimony submitted by William Labov, Professor of Linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania, Past President of the Linguistic Society of America, member of the National Academy of Science.

I am testifying today as a representative of an approach to the study of language that is called "sociolinguistics," a scientific study based on the recording and measurement of language as it is used in America today. I am now completing research supported by NSF and NEH that is mapping changes in the English language through all of North America, for both mainstream and minority communities. Since 1966, I have done a number of studies of language in the African American community, beginning with work in South Harlem for the Office of Education that was aimed at the question, "Are the language differences between black and white children responsible for reading failure in the inner city schools?"

The term "Ebonics," our main focus here, has been used to suggest that there is a language, or features of language, common to all people of African ancestry, whether they live in Africa, Brazil or the United States. Linguists who have published studies of the African American community do not use this term, but refer instead to *African American Vernacular English*, a dialect spoken by most residents of the inner cities. This African American Vernacular English shares most of its grammar and vocabulary with other dialects of English. But it is distinct in many ways, and it is more different from standard English than any other dialect spoken in continental North America. It is not simply slang, or grammatical mistakes, but a well-formed set of rules of pronunciation and grammar that is capable of conveying complex logic and reasoning.

Research in New York, Philadelphia, Washington, Florida, Chicago, Texas, Los Angeles, and San Francisco shows a remarkably uniform grammar spoken by African Americans who live and work primarily with other African Americans. Repeated studies by teams of black and white researchers show that about 60% of the African American residents of the inner city speak this dialect in its purist form at home and with intimate friends. Passive exposure to standard English -- through the mass media or in school -- has little effect upon the home language of children from highly segregated inner city areas. However, those African Americans who have had extensive face-to-face dealings with speakers of other dialects show a marked modification of their grammar..

In the first two decades of research, linguists were divided in their views of the origin of African American English: whether it was a Southern regional dialect descended from nonstandard English and Irish dialects, or the descendant of a Creole grammar similar to that spoken in the Caribbean. By 1980, a consensus seemed to have been reached, as expressed in the verdict of Judge Charles Joyner in the *King* trial in Ann Arbor: this variety of language showed the influence of the entire history of the African American people from slavery to modern times, and was gradually converging with other dialects.

However, research in the years that followed found that in many of its important features, African American Vernacular English was becoming not less, but more different from other dialects. Research on the language of ex-slaves showed that some of the most prominent features of the modern dialect were not present in the 19th century. It appears that the present-day form of African American English is not the inheritance of the period of slavery, but the creation of the second half of the 20th century.

An important aspect of the current situation is the strong social reaction against suggestions that the home language of African American children be used in the first steps of learning to read and write. The Oakland controversy is the fourth major

reaction that I know of to proposals of this kind. Plans for programs to make the transition to standard English have misunderstood as plans to teach the children to speak African American English, or Ebonics, and to prevent them from learning standard English. As a result, only one such program has been thoroughly tested in the schools, and even that program, though very successful in improving reading, was terminated because of objections to the use of any African American English in the classroom.

At the heart of the controversy, there are two major points of view taken by educators. One is that any recognition of a nonstandard language as a legitimate means of expression will only confuse children, and reinforce their tendency to use it instead of standard English. The other is that children learn most rapidly in their home language, and that they can benefit in both motivation and achievement by getting a head start in learning to read and write in this way. Both of these views are honestly held and deserve a fair hearing. But until now, only the first has been tried in the American public school system. The essence of the Oakland school board resolution is that the first method has not succeeded and that the second deserves a trial.

Research on reading shows that an essential step in learning to read is the mastery of the relation of sound to spelling. As linguists, we know that for most inner city African American children, this relation is different, and more complicated, than for speakers of other dialects. We have not yet been able to apply this knowledge to large-scale programs for the teaching of reading, but we hope that with the interest aroused by the Oakland School Board resolution, this will become possible in the near future.