

BLACK LANGUAGE LIBERATION: A DISCUSSION
PAPER FOR LINGUISTS AND ACTIVISTS
IN BLACK STUDIES

(DRAFT)

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Black people throughout the world have common problems for which must be found common solutions. And one of these problems concerns language. Black Language is a world issue for two basic reasons: (1) the results of European domination have Black people unable to communicate with each other because former colonial empires are still tied to the economy and education of European "mother countries", and (2) the rise of African liberation movements requires the liberation of language so that a new revolutionary consciousness can freely be absorbed through common languages. Most Black people are bound to language in a reactionary way. We are in language prisons.

Some people are still holding on to the 3-R notion (readin', rightin', 'rithmetic) of text book colonial languages (e.g., English, French), while others join with liberal anthropologists by labeling us with either non-standard English or some romantic sounding term meaning pidgin, patois, or creole. There are those of us who misunderstand cultural history and social change to the extent of believing a new language will come from the poets pen. Or, we can count many who would have us either re-create the language barriers of ancestral Africa, or choose one African National language from among the most progressive African countries. For the most part this has resulted in confusion, whether intentionally misleading or not.

The only solution to this dilemma is to probe our language problem, devise a strategy to deal with it and move to implement a solution. The unity of the theory and practice-theoretical analysis and practical application is essential. This paper is presented as a policy position for Black language liberation.

In order to deal with the specific language problems Black people face it is essential to have some degree of conceptual clarity about the types of language functions that exist so that we can focus on these basic necessities rather than secondary issues. There are three basic languages for Black people

- (1) Language of Black peoples communication
- (2) Language of the European (white) ruling class
- (3) Language of revolutionary movement

We must consider the importance of each.

1. It is clear that Black people have always needed to communicate with each other, sometimes with the conscious survival need to exclude white people, and sometimes not. One might compare the language problems of the slave middle passage to the language trauma of being subjugated or captured by any people speaking a different language. The difference is in the degree of language dissimilarity and the number of people involved. Also, whether or not one was allowed to use his native tongue. One simply had to adapt in order to communicate.

Moreover it is possible to trace the historical patterns of adaptation of Black people in the Caribbean Islands, South America and North America. Examples of this adaptation include Yourba (spoken in Oriente, Cuba); distinct types are Gulla in Georgia (a language retaining many traditional African words intact), Creole in Louisiana, or Black English on the South Side of Chicago.

So the language of the people is the language of Black culture. Somehow the sum total of all Black communication represents the diversity of Black

Culture. Culture is the actual experience of the people, not what we want that experience to be. We must understand what the different languages of Black communications are, then find out how they developed and how they function. Only then can we decide what to approve of and support, and what to attack and destroy.

2. It is also clear that Black people all over the world have been colonized and for the most part are left with European languages. The languages of Europe have represented colonial domination for Black people. These languages are the basis for most institutional activities in Black Societies. This includes most radio and T.V. government and educational programs, and most libraries and newspapers. Most of the knowledge concerning our daily lives (from the police, to the school, to the store) is contained in European languages. These are languages of colonized Black society.

3. Last, it is important to understand the third language, the language of revolutionary movement. This is based on one of two related alternatives. One is the language spoken by progressive revolutionary forces, while the other is what is most appropriate for the scientific understanding necessary for the liberation struggle. Languages for scientific analysis are often the same as those revolutionary forces because revolutionary countries organize their research activities for revolutionary use.

LANGUAGE TYPE	COUNTRIES WITH BLACK POPULATIONS		
	GUINEA-BISSAU	MARTINIQUE	UNITED STATES
1. Language of Culture (religion and tribe)	Ballante, Fula Mandjake, Mandingo Arabic	Creole	English
2. Language of Society (colonial and independent)	Portuguese	French	English
3. Language of Revolution (Pan-Africanism, and Science)	French, English	English Spanish	Spanish French

In the above table, three countries are used as examples to illustrate how different languages are used. Each country represents a different combination of the three types of languages. Guinea-Bissau, located between Senegal and Guinea on the West coast of Africa, has a population of almost one million people. Although there are more than 15 different tribes in the country, the major ones are Balantes, Mandjaks, Fulahs, and Mandingos. About 70 percent of the population practices Animist religion, while the other 30 percent is Islamic. Because the Portuguese colonial administration was based on a very limited practice of assimilation, and failed to encourage any economic development, the people of Guinea have been kept in a tribal situation. There are only five major towns, in which all of the Portuguese lived. A handful of Africans speak creole, while the vast majority speak (but do not read) traditional tribal languages.

It is important to note that the beginning of the national liberation struggle was based on a few Black students in Portugal who petitioned the

University of Lisbon in 1948 to set up an African Studies Center so they could study their history and learn the language of their people. This was carried out while they used Portuguese in taking instruction in Marxism-Leninism from Communists in Portugal. Among them was Amilear Cabral, who was the founder and Secretary General of the African Independence Party of Guinea and the Cape Verde Islands (PAIGC). The basic languages are Portuguese for colonial society, and the tribal ones (for tribal culture), with as much use of creole as is possible. However, it is obvious that when PAIGC began to train cadres for armed struggle and decided to set up a school in Conacry, Guinea, and an office in Senegal, that French was a necessary language for revolutionary ends. Also, when cadres had to be sent to Socialist Europe and China for special training, French has more uses than Portuguese as a means of communication. English is also important. This is true because of the recent escalation of USA military intervention in African affairs. The PAIGC must be able to analyze the activities of this imperial power, as well as communicate with English speaking revolutionary forces in the USA as well as in Europe. All of these languages must be used because they are all necessary.

Martinique is an island of the Antilles half way between Puerto Rico and Trinidad. Although the Carib Indians were able to keep Columbus off their island when he tried to land in 1502, the French finally colonized them in 1635. Today there are about 250,000 people on the island, and the assimilationist French policy makes it an actual political subdivision of France. This means that the people are presently able to attain a better life only by becoming as French as possible. Fanon has written that "The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter-- that is, he will come closer to being a real human being--in direct relation to his mastery of the French

language." This is the dictate of colonialism. "The Middle class in the Antilles never speak Creole except to their servants. In school the children of Martinique are taught to scorn dialect. One avoids Creolisms. Some families completely forbid the use of Creole, and mothers ridicule their children for speaking it. But on the other hand: "In any group of young men in the Antilles, the one who expresses himself well, who has mastered the language is inordinately feared; keep an eye on that one, he is almost white." In France one says, "He talks like a book." In Martinique, "He talks like a white man." The situation even gets more complicated when Fanon writes of how the Sengalese would try and learn the Creole of Martinique because on the whole the Islanders were more "white" and had more French status to offer.

This is interesting because it is a situation within which the search for identity cannot easily call upon traditional culture. The tribal languages are simply not intact. The fact is that today Black linguists in the islands are challenging the view that creole is a bastard child of Europe, tracing the structure and sounds of Creole back to the trading centers of West Africa. Also they contend that their Creole is an example of but one of the historical stages in the development of any language, and therefore deserves the status of any useable language of the world.

The use of English and Spanish as the Languages of Revolution and Sciences should be obvious and clear since most of the Caribbean and the Americas use these languages. No country can be so close to a major imperialist power and refuse to exploit their oppressor's language as a tool of their own liberation. Nor can a country be so near a revolutionary country like Cuba and not move to utilize Spanish.

The position of Black people in the United States is one in which assimilation is pervasive. While in the official US Census Black people are 12 percent of the total population (approximately 25 million Black people), an intelligent Black estimate might reasonably go as high as twice that many. This places Blacks in the United States next to Nigeria as the second largest national grouping of Black People. But as far as literacy in a European language is concerned, the Census estimate of well over 90 percent literacy places Black people in the US well out in front of any other Black national grouping. The fact is that virtually all Black people in the US speak English, except for a few recent immigrant groups (e.g., Haitians).

We must take note however, that there are recognizable dialects based on social class, region, and life style. This is no different than any nation of people who have had a varied set of socio-historical experiences. The more education a Black man gets the better he uses English. The same is true for living in the city versus living in the country, having a job versus running the street, association with white people versus doing a totally Black thing. Black people in this country have been cut off from tribal languages, and must communicate in English (although at times we can use it in culturally specific ways that defy translation).

There are at least three reasons why Black people in the US have tried to adopt an alternative to the English language. 1. Passing: The impact of USA colonial brutality sometimes resulted in Blacks trying to escape their Blackness by assuming another identity. The most frequent example of this is choosing to speak Spanish and choosing a Mexican, Puerto Rican, or Cuban identity. 2. Religion: There is a major connection in Black history between assuming an African or Eastern identity and the religion of Islam. So,

resulting from different organizations at different periods of history, there have been and are people who are using Arabic both as a religious language as well as a potential alternative for English generally. 3. Politico-Cultural Communication: And last, there has been a trend to search for an African language which has a high usage among African people and is also associated with a progressive political movement. This has been the case with Ki-Swahili. Every since the recent resurgence of PanAfricanism and cultural nationalism, particularly as manifested in the call for Black studies, Tanzania has been the model for those who would have Ki-Swahili be our national Black language.

For the most part, all three of the above alternatives are grounded in cultural notions about the utility of language changes. However, since there is no significant difference between the Black man's cultural language by birth in the USA and the language of north American society (Black and white), the real question is whether there is any development toward a revolutionary language. The best that can be said is that several are possible, but only a very few vanguard Black radicals have started. One possibility is connected with Cuba. Blacks have been involved with the Cuban revolution from the beginning, and since the late 1960's through the Black Panther Party, the Venceremos Brigades, and as a haven for political refugees. Cuba has made Spanish a living revolutionary alternative for Black People in the United States. In addition, it is necessary to note that the struggle of the Chicano people of California and the Young Lords of the East and Midwest have brought the Spanish speaking communities right here in the United States forward to join the revolutionary struggle of national minorities against the racist imperialist government of the United States.

A second revolutionary alternative is French. Three of the most important places for Black revolutionary activity where the French language is spoken are Montreal Canada, and the countries of Guinea and Congo-Brazaville. The north American center of Black activity for the French speaking Black people of the West Indies (Haiti, Martinique) and Africa revolves around university centers in Montreal. (This is enough, although it is important to mention the potential revolutionary conflict between the semi-colonized French Canadians and their English countrymen who rule with the help of England and the United States. Guinea and Congo-Brazaville are the French speaking centers of revolution in Black Africa (not to mention Algeria in North Africa, the country which gave political asylum to both Eldridge Cleaver and H. Rap Brown)

These three national examples provide us with a typology of Black language patterns. The key to the typology is the cultural function of language. And as indicated, this can be either traditional tribal language, a creole or patois, or a colonial language. Although it is not as obvious, a second factor is the relative connections one's societal language provides with revolutionary movements. This typology, as suggested in the above table, is illustrative of a language continuum and not a set of discrete types. The table is intended to isolate and abstract the key components of language functions and not to minimize the complex reality of human systems of communications.

These three basic types of languages can be further organized into two basic functional categories. These two categories are the most basic distinction that can be made, and must be understood as historically dynamic categories rather than mere static niches into which any language might fall. Languages change their functions just like everything else that is a part of human history.

(And remember, even those things that don't seem to change are given different meanings when other changes give rise to a new historical consciousness among the people). The two new categories are:

1. Language of Identity: the basic process of establishing how we think, how we perceive the world, and how we communicate in the most natural way (especially in primary group situations like the family and friendship groups).
2. Language of Utility: this is a basic category for all language uses that meet concrete needs, enabling one to transcend his language identity and successfully carry on programmatic activity in any language.

We can reexamine the above national examples by analysing the language patterns using these two new categories. The amazing reality for Black people throughout the world, as we begin to live out the 20th Century, is that most of us are still in the language prison of traditional tribes, or, at best, some stage of using Creole. Exceptions to this are found in cases where colonization has been most effective, middle class city people on the continent of Africa and the Islands, and most Black people in the United States. But the languages of traditional culture still shape the basic identity of most Black people in the world today. However, this is not the only view of the matter.

Given the legacy of colonialism, over 90 percent of the population of Africa is subject to one of three colonial languages as officially used by a government and/or by the popular communications media and in the schools:

English.....	58%
French.....	31%
Portuguese	6%
TOTAL	95%

It is also important to take a close look at a map of the African continent and examine the locations of colonial language influences. There is land subject to French language usage stretching from Guinea to Algeria to Tanzania (Guinea, Mali, Algeria, Niger, Chad, Central African Republic, Congo).

The key question is how to devise a way to simplify the language diversity of Black people in the world, as well as the full accounting of any costs that such a practice might involve. The Black language of identity must speak to the realities of Black life today as well as take into account the changing world. We are approaching the dawning of the 21st century man and must not look to the past for inspiration. We must examine the ways in which we have gotten from the past to the present and turn all of the experiences into positives by manipulating historical events in order to bring as many people as possible into the next century, as capable and powerful as possible.

The Black language of utility must speak to the needs of science and revolution. We must ask ourselves what languages will be most useful in the context of world revolution, specifically the fronts of revolutionary struggle in the African world. Malcolm clearly dealt with these questions in his autobiography: "Aside from the basic African dialects, I would try to learn Chinese, because it looks as if Chinese will be the most powerful political language of the future. And already I have begun studying Arabic, which is going to be the most powerful spiritual language of the future."

This point of view that Malcolm takes is personal and reflective, particularly when we consider that it is reported on next to the last page of the autobiography. The major importance we ascribe to it here is to demonstrate that Malcolm was concerned about the functional uses of language for Black people.

There are two levels of struggle for a Black Revolutionary. One level is the grassroots struggle of getting involved with the people. Perhaps the best example of when this was not accomplished, and a large part of it was the language barrier, was Che Guevara in Bolivia. He failed to connect with the Indian peasants and was vulnerable to attack. The opposite of this is in Guinea-Bissau where the leaders of the PAIGC in preparing for the struggle studied the traditional tribal languages of the various tribes in Guinea-Bissau so they would be able to follow the dictates of Mao: The revolutionary must be able to flow among the people like a fish in water.

The other level is on the international scene. This consists of written documents (newsletters, articles, books, posters, letters, etc.) and conversation (meetings, conferences, travel, etc.). This is where lots of revolutionaries interact, for the most part representing national liberation organizations if not the socialist countries supporting them, and since Black people in the world get exposed to more than one colonial language, Black people from the United States are the most backward when it comes to international communication. We are language bound.

The language of identity problem is different for our brothers on the African continent from the rest of us in the West. Africa is still divided by some 800 languages and dialects (falling into four or five major linguistic families) and we have been united under colonial creole or European tongues. This is something we must turn into a positive for us and not mistakenly turn from it as a negative and run backwards toward traditional Africa. It is also important to realize that colonial nationalism is a fact of the 20th century. And this means that the task of studying tribal language is for the most part

left to the revolutionary cadres within the same national area, or at least region. International revolutionary interaction is necessarily a diplomatic action, just like the form of interaction between the imperialists. The message is "go among the people closest to you who share most with you and forge the revolution." Also prepare yourself to interact with revolutionaries doing the same thing wherever they most naturally fit around the world. And for the first task, one must turn to the language of the people; and for the second task, one must turn to the language of international dialogue.

One might safely say that only when the language of identity and the language of revolutionary utility are the same thing do you really have the beginning of a revolutionary society.

The key function of a language of identity is to create a national means of communication and shape a national personality. It is obvious then that the struggle on the African continent has as a first step the struggle on the African continent has as a first step the consolidation of language differences within the political contexts of struggle. For the most part this means colonial nations (meaning those resulting from the Berlin conference of 1895 at which time the continent was divided up between European powers), although this can mean regions or at least contiguous nations (e.g., the use of Ki-Swahili in the East African community of Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya). In the West this is not so great a problem as the impact of colonial languages or the creation of creole has in fact provided a national language of identity. (Exceptions to this include the Indian dialects of South and Central America, the Youruba communities of Cuba and Brazil, and the Gullah language Sea Islands off Georgia and the Carolinas).

When we turn to the language of utility we must first establish a framework by specifying the political priorities of a particular liberation struggle. The case of Guinea-Bissau would point to French because of the assistance given by President Sekou Touré in neighboring Guinea to their liberation struggle. Martinique would turn to English for a connection in the United States, or Spanish for a connection in Cuba (or even Puerto Rico). And Black people in the USA would turn to French or Spanish as noted above.

Never lose sight of this principle: Revolution is based on human struggle against human oppression; and a revolutionary will be successful only when he is able to understand what objective human realities will aid that struggle rather than indulge himself in subjective choices that neglect the objective condition of his people and their possibilities. It is this principle that turns our attention now to the programmatic question of what to do based on this analysis.

PROGRAMMATIC NOTES:

1. Language of Identity: The major note here is that we will move forward in a direct proportion to how many Black people are liberated from closed or localized language barriers. The program would be similar to that used in Tanzania, China, and Cuba. Revolutionary students must go furthest away from their natural centers in big cities and large universities and return to the small town and the rural people, as did the idealistic reformers of SNCC, and grow into revolutionaries in the cities, similar to the rise of the Black Panther Party. It is now time to return to the countryside and begin the serious systematic work of building our peoples' consciousness with ideological tools, perhaps the most important of which are language concepts and methods

of thought. We must change the rhythm of revolution and simply leave the urban police forces with no revolutionaries to shoot at while we go to the people farthest away from the man's watchful eyes and build revolutionary cadres into an army of liberation freedom fighters. The first task is ideology (language concepts and methods of thought). The rest will follow.

While among the people in the USA, it is important to keep a balanced view of one's work. While it is necessary to generate in Black peoples' consciousness an awareness and identification with Africa, it is also necessary to prepare them for the actual stages of struggle most likely to emerge. And for this Spanish is a far more functional choice than a traditional tribal tongue, as well as French. Moreover, if they are to read the works of African writers, the vast majority can be read in the major colonial languages.

2. Language of Utility: As noted above, programatic notes for this section must follow the political priorities of a particular national situation. Without presuming to speak for the immediate program of any revolutionary party (which will obviously vary from Spanish in California, New York, and Florida; French in Louisiana, Detroit, etc.) it is possible to note the general tasks that must be carried on by revolutionary intellectuals. The task of the revolutionary intellectual is to seize reality and make it comprehensible to those who will use the knowledge in the revolutionary interest of Black people.

A. Involvement in Colonial Language Communities: It is imperative at this stage of history for cadres of Black intellectuals to take up residence in all major centers of the world in order to test an analysis of our struggle in the context of another body of knowledge, in the context of another people.

Isolationism is a thing of the past. We must have people in every major capital of the world and in all capitals or university cities of Black countries. And once there, our revolutionary intellectual cadres must be able to use the language of the locale with as much facility as it takes to function for the revolution. This means be fluent in the language. We must not be forced into this by having abroad only those who had to flee the US government. We must move to preserve our mobility and be able to come in and out of the US when we want to, at least as long as we can do it. We must become a force in world thought.

B. Monitor Checks on Colonial Language Information Systems:

We must wake up to the fact that a few colonial languages dominate information in the world today. We must be able to tune into this and keep a running check on things. How many Black people in the United States have read the original texts of Frantz Fanon, Sekou Touré, Che Guevarra, Patrice Lumumba, Ben Bella, Modibo Keita, and scores more? These texts are in French and Spanish as are the periodicals that come from Africa, Latin America, and Europe. We are limited to what appears in English, and have to have systematic translations going on to meet this need of getting through this language barrier. And once we turn from the popular sources of information, we become a drag on every Black liberation movement or country because if they are to communicate with Black people in the United States they must translate their work into English. Unfortunately, this cannot happen for all material so government publications frequently remain foreign to us, as well as local newspapers from around the world. We must wait for the oppressor or a socialist country (or a press like Monthly Review for Fanon, or Merit for Che) to translate the works for us, and then we must be satisfied with their translation because we don't know any better.

Black people ought to have monthly digests of pertinent news flowing through colonial language systems so we can build an international consciousness among our people, as well as be warned when the trend changes either for us or against us.

C. Liberation of Colonial Archival Materials: Among the tasks for the serious Black scholar in any area is the liberation of information buried in the colonial archival collections of European libraries. We need scholars who use German, Dutch, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Greek, Latin, and the other ancient languages. The basic task is to locate and inventory material so other Black investigators will know where to go to get the information. Next, we need to begin selectively translating those works which are central, in terms of objective information, colonial policy, or Black writing. We must also prepare the way for reclaiming anything that is still of value for Black people. Yes, I mean that serious scholars must prepare the way for someone to steal back anything of value for Black liberation.

SUMMARY

This paper has developed several basic elements of the struggle for Black language liberation. This is an ideological struggle for the tools of revolution. If we take the wrong turn we can end up in a new form of oppression rather than continue forward stronger than ever before. Language is a tool for thought and communication, a tool that will either unify people or separate them, a tool that will reveal secrets to the people or one that will trick the people and protect secrets. We must move toward Black language liberation.

We have shown how languages function in two basic ways:

1. Language of Identity
2. Language of Utility

These basic language functions are found within languages of culture, languages of society, and languages of science and revolution. All of these are present for every national group of people, and must be understood in order to have the basis for a revolutionary program of language liberation.