



JAMES B *If Black English Then Tell M*

BY THE TIME James Baldwin was born in 1924, he was known as one of America's best African American writers, despite the fact that he was not a "black writer," preferring instead to be known as an American writer. He had already published *Notes on the Mountain* (1953), an autobiography of his childhood in a church in Harlem. The book drew on his experiences as a preacher between 1945 and 1950. Indeed, he has said that the rhythm of his writing was a result of his great resources as a writer.

Baldwin's childhood was spent in Harlem, New York. His father was a preacher whose alcoholism distorted his personality. As a result, Baldwin's writing explored how damaging hatred can be to the individual. He explored the damage that racism and prejudice can do to many of his novels, stories, and essays, as well as on the damage to the African American whole. Interestingly, although Baldwin was an African American writer, he lived primarily in France. He was in the United States occasionally, but he had gone to France in part to avoid American racism. He was near Richard Wright [1908–1960], a fellow African American writer.

Baldwin's novel *Giovanni's Room* (1956) dealt with racial subject matter and involved a love story. The main character is torn between his love for a woman. Again, the subject of race is biographical; Baldwin refused to id

From *Collected Essays*.

JAMES BALDWIN
*If Black English Isn't a Language,
Then Tell Me, What Is?*

BY THE TIME James Baldwin (1924–1987) wrote this essay in 1979, he was known as one of America's foremost African American writers, despite the fact that he refused to refer to himself as a "black writer," preferring instead to regard himself as simply an American writer. He had already become famous for *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), an autobiographical novel about a single day in a church in Harlem. The book drew on Baldwin's personal experiences as a preacher between the ages of fourteen and sixteen. Indeed, he has said that the rhythms of the gospel church were one of his great resources as a writer.

Baldwin's childhood was spent as one of nine children in a family in Harlem. His father was a preacher whose hatred of whites distorted his personality. As a result, Baldwin grew acutely aware of how damaging hatred can be to an individual. His early essays explore the damage that racism and hatred did to his family, and many of his novels, stories, and essays center on these same themes and issues—as well as on the damage hatred does to America as a whole. Interestingly, although Baldwin is regarded as a uniquely American writer, he lived primarily in France from 1948 on, returning to the United States occasionally to lecture and teach. (He had gone to France in part to avoid American racism and in part to be near Richard Wright [1908–1960], author of *Native Son* [1940].)

Baldwin's novel *Giovanni's Room* (1956) moved away from racial subject matter and involved an exploration of gender and romance. The main character is torn between love for a man and love for a woman. Again, the subject matter is somewhat autobiographical; Baldwin refused to identify himself as a gay writer

From *Collected Essays*.

primarily because he felt the important issue was to be able to love whomever he chose, man or woman. In many ways, his professional career was spent trying to avoid being labeled as one kind of writer or another.

Baldwin was equally adept at writing in multiple forms—plays, novels, short stories (*Going to Meet the Man*, 1965), and essays—making it all the more difficult for people to categorize him. After writing the play *The Amen Corner* (1955; published 1968), which centers on a woman evangelist married to a jazz musician, he won a Guggenheim Fellowship. His essay collection *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (1961) established him as one of the finest writers of expository prose in America. *Another Country* (1962), addressing interracial and sexual themes, raised his stature to a novelist of distinction. One of his most famous essays, "The Fire Next Time" (1963), long enough to virtually fill an issue of the *New Yorker*, established him as a spokesperson for civil rights and black rage. The essay begins with an exploration of his encounter with Black Muslim separatists and then speaks loudly and clearly about the anger and sense of futility experienced by millions of black Americans.

Baldwin was known throughout his adulthood as a sparkling talent and a witty and fascinating person. However, he was also an alcoholic and grew increasingly unreliable in his later years. He rarely showed up anywhere on time and often failed to meet publishing deadlines. Some critics have suggested that his personal habits contributed to the falling off of his later work.

When the essay that follows was written in 1979, however, Baldwin was at the top of his game. He saw America with clear eyes, and while he had hopes for the civil rights movement, he did not think there were serious chances of significant change in American life. He was living in the south of France in a very small town that seemed almost unchanged since the late Renaissance. In France, he felt much freer than he did in the United States—something he wrote about in the essay "Stranger in the Village," which appeared in his *Notes of a Native Son* (1955). It was in the 1960s that Baldwin styled himself a transatlantic commuter, living part of the time in St. Paul de Vence or other places in southern France, as well as in New York and New England.

Baldwin's Rhetoric

As a young man Baldwin began preaching in his father's church. Some of that preacherly style is reflected in his writing, especially

when, as in this essay, he feels he is, to some extent, his writing rises to point out that he cannot let pass. He refers to the use of black English as "the present state of this essay, a black teacher introducing the special language of black America." Baldwin seems to be responding to the question of black English because he was angry at writers who had rejected his use of language. In the essay below, he was aware that his language was a barrier toward black liberation. An interview with Baldwin, titled "James Baldwin Finds the New

Baldwin's concern for language was that language could control people. He thought that language essentially defines black people and that black Americans must define themselves in terms of their language.

Because his byline is France, Baldwin was in a number of places where French is spoken. He had trouble understanding the French of Parisian in northern France will have more trouble than one from Marseilles, which is in southern France. He may have trouble understanding people from Guadeloupe. His point is that the language in ways that are reflected in their language is nominally French does not mean the same language.

He insists that "language is also a way of revealing the private identity" and that "language from a public community (para. 4). The way in which black English would sound if there were no white people in the States" (para. 5) is something he can understand. It would be vastly different from what it is now. The ideas in his essay. In order to impress the reader on the subject and the seriousness of the issue, he discusses how blacks use language "permits the reader to see the reality" (para. 6). If white society creates a different society, then black English will reveal the truth about America itself.

After a few lines of historical background, Baldwin maintains that "[a] language comes into existence out of necessity [Baldwin's italics]," by which he means that people had different languages had to create a common language in order to communicate. When he tells us

"[t]he brutal truth is that the bulk of the white people in America never had any interest in educating black people," he implies that black people had to educate themselves. They created their own language as a way of speaking truths that the white people could not understand because they disavowed black language. Language, he implies, can be an instrument of oppression. In the America that Baldwin lived in and "emigrated" from, there were more than a few examples of efforts at and results of oppression, including assassinations and uprisings. Language, as he implies, is a force to be understood in all its power.

PREREADING QUESTIONS: WHAT TO READ FOR

The following prereading questions may help you anticipate key issues in the discussion of James Baldwin's "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?" Keeping them in mind during your first reading should help focus your attention.

- How can language define the "other"?
- Why does black English permit our society "its only glimpse of reality" (paras. 5 and 6)?
- Why did black English develop?

If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?

St. Paul de Vence, France—The argument concerning the use, or the status, or the reality, of black English is rooted in American history and has absolutely nothing to do with the question the argument supposes itself to be posing. The argument has nothing to do with language itself but with the *role* of language. Language, incontestably, reveals the speaker. Language, also, far more dubiously, is meant to define the other—and, in this case, the other is refusing to be defined by a language that has never been able to recognize him.

People evolve a language in order to describe and thus control their circumstances, or in order not to be submerged by a reality that they cannot articulate. (And, if they cannot articulate it, they *are* submerged.) A Frenchman living in Paris speaks a subtly and crucially

different language from that of t sounds very much like a man li have great difficulty in apprehend or Martinique, is saying, to say n although the "common" language has paid, and is paying, a differen in which, as it turns out, they are the same things: they each have ve control.

What joins all languages, and life, in order, not inconceivably, to the acceptance, and achievement, for example, though it is not taught potential of becoming a political iss to its ancient and musical Provença a "dialect." And much of the tensio Wales, is due to the Basque and Wel languages to be destroyed. This dete Ireland for among the many indign undergo at English hands is the Engli

It goes without saying, then, that ment, means, and proof of power. It to identity: it reveals the private ide divorces one from, the larger, publ have been, and are, times, and places, could be dangerous, even fatal. Or, o but in such a way that one's antecede hidden. This is true in France, and is range (and reign) of accents on that coherent for the English and totally else. To open your mouth in England "put your business in the street": you h youth, your school, your salary, your se

Now, I do not know what white there had never been any black peopl would not sound the way they sound. cific sexual term, as in *jazz me, baby*, b the Jazz Age. *Sock it to me*, which mean been adopted by Nathaniel Hawthorne or hesitations at all, along with *let it a*

¹ **Provençal** The Occitan language, spoken i

² **Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864)** ○

different language from that of the man living in Marseilles; neither sounds very much like a man living in Quebec; and they would all have great difficulty in apprehending what the man from Guadeloupe, or Martinique, is saying, to say nothing of the man from Senegal—although the “common” language of all these areas is French. But each has paid, and is paying, a different price for this “common” language, in which, as it turns out, they are not saying, and cannot be saying, the same things: they each have very different realities to articulate, or control.

What joins all languages, and all men, is the necessity to confront 3
life, in order, not inconceivably, to outwit death: the price for this is the acceptance, and achievement, of one's temporal identity. So that, for example, though it is not taught in the schools (and this has the potential of becoming a political issue) the south of France still clings to its ancient and musical Provençal,¹ which resists being described as a “dialect.” And much of the tension in the Basque countries, and in Wales, is due to the Basque and Welsh determination not to allow their languages to be destroyed. This determination also feeds the flames in Ireland for among the many indignities the Irish have been forced to undergo at English hands is the English contempt for their language.

It goes without saying, then, that language is also a political instru- 4
ment, means, and proof of power. It is the most vivid and crucial key to identity: it reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity. There have been, and are, times, and places, when to speak a certain language could be dangerous, even fatal. Or, one may speak the same language, but in such a way that one's antecedents are revealed, or (one hopes) hidden. This is true in France, and is absolutely true in England: the range (and reign) of accents on that damp little island make England coherent for the English and totally incomprehensible for everyone else. To open your mouth in England is (if I may use black English) to “put your business in the street”: you have confessed your parents, your youth, your school, your salary, your self-esteem, and, alas, your future.

Now, I do not know what white Americans would sound like if 5
there had never been any black people in the United States, but they would not sound the way they sound. *Jazz*, for example, is a very specific sexual term, as in *jazz me, baby*, but white people purified it into the Jazz Age. *Sock it to me*, which means, roughly, the same thing, has been adopted by Nathaniel Hawthorne's² descendants with no qualms or hesitations at all, along with *let it all hang out* and *right on! Beat to*

¹ **Provençal** The Occitan language, spoken in southern France and parts of Spain.

² **Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864)** One of America's greatest novelists.

his socks, which was once the black's most total and despairing image of poverty, was transformed into a thing called the Beat Generation, which phenomenon was, largely, composed of uptight, middle-class white people, imitating poverty, trying to get down, to get with it, doing their thing, doing their despairing best to be funky, which we, the blacks, never dreamed of doing—we were funky, baby, like funk was going out of style.

Now, no one can eat his cake, and have it, too, and it is late in the day to attempt to penalize black people for having created a language that permits the nation its only glimpse of reality, a language without which the nation would be even more whipped than it is.

I say that the present skirmish is rooted in American history, and it is. Black English is the creation of the black diaspora. Blacks came to the United States chained to each other, but from different tribes: neither could speak the other's language. If two black people, at that bitter hour of the world's history, had been able to speak to each other, the institution of chattel slavery could never have lasted as long as it did. Subsequently, the slave was given, under the eye, and the gun, of his master, Congo Square,³ and the Bible—or, in other words, and under these conditions, the slave began the formation of the black church, and it is within this unprecedented tabernacle that black English began to be formed. This was not, merely, as in the European example, the adoption of a foreign tongue, but an alchemy that transformed ancient elements into a new language: *A language comes into existence by means of brutal necessity, and the rules of the language are dictated by what the language must convey.*

There was a moment, in time, and in this place, when my brother, or my mother, or my father, or my sister, had to convey to me, for example, the danger in which I was standing from the white man standing just behind me, and to convey this with a speed, and in a language, that the white man could not possibly understand, and that, indeed, he cannot understand, until today. He cannot afford to understand it. This understanding would reveal to him too much about himself, and smash that mirror before which he has been frozen for so long.

Now, if this passion, this skill, this (to quote Toni Morrison)⁴ “sheer intelligence,” this incredible music, the mighty achievement of having brought a people utterly unknown to, or despised by “history”—to have brought this people to their present, troubled, troubling, and unassailable and unanswerable place—if this absolutely

³**Congo Square** In parts of eighteenth-century Louisiana, slaves were given Sunday as a free day. They often met, sang, played music, and danced in places reserved for them. One such place, Congo Square, survives today in New Orleans.

⁴**Toni Morrison (b. 1931)** African American novelist and Nobel Prize winner

unprecedented journey does not in language, I am curious to know what trusted.

A people at the center of the World so hostile a population, has not endured what is patronizingly called a “dialect” certainly, but we are not doomed, and we are not compelled to defend a mode

The brutal truth is that the bulk never had any interest in educating blacks to serve white purposes. It is not the language question, it is not his language that a child cannot be taught by anyone cannot afford to be fooled. A child cannot demand, essentially, is that the child that gives him sustenance, and enter a ger be black, and in which he knows that Black people have lost too many black

And, after all, finally, in a country worthy, a country that makes heroes of slaves, a country unable to face why so many are in prison, or on the needle, or standing in line, may very well be that both the child, and the parent, that they have nothing whatever to learn from a country that has managed to learn so little.

QUESTIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING

1. What does Baldwin mean by “black English?”
2. How is black English a “creation of the imagination?”
3. What effect did the black church have in the formation of black English?
4. How would you describe Baldwin's relationship to the black church?
5. Has Baldwin convinced you that black English is a “dialect?”
6. What is society's current view, more than Baldwin's, of black English? What essay was written, on the subject of black English?

SUGGESTIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING

1. Examine the terms Baldwin refers to in the text. Choose these terms to help define black English. What concept of reality in this and the next

unprecedented journey does not indicate that black English is a language, I am curious to know what definition of language is to be trusted.

A people at the center of the Western world, and in the midst of so hostile a population, has not endured and transcended by means of what is patronizingly called a "dialect." We, the blacks, are in trouble, certainly, but we are not doomed, and we are not inarticulate because we are not compelled to defend a morality that we know to be a lie.

The brutal truth is that the bulk of the white people in America never had any interest in educating black people, except as this could serve white purposes. It is not the black child's language that is in question, it is not his language that is despised: it is his experience. A child cannot be taught by anyone who despises him, and a child cannot afford to be fooled. A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiate his experience, and all that gives him sustenance, and enter a limbo in which he will no longer be black, and in which he knows that he can never become white. Black people have lost too many black children that way.

And, after all, finally, in a country with standards so untrustworthy, a country that makes heroes of so many criminal mediocrities, a country unable to face why so many of the nonwhite are in prison, or on the needle, or standing, futureless, in the streets—it may very well be that both the child, and his elder, have concluded that they have nothing whatever to learn from the people of a country that has managed to learn so little.

QUESTIONS FOR CRITICAL READING

1. What does Baldwin mean by "black English"?
2. How is black English a "creation of the black diaspora"?
3. What effect did the black church have in developing black English?
4. How would you describe Baldwin's relationship with white America?
5. Has Baldwin convinced you that black English is a language?
6. What is society's current view, more than thirty-five years after this essay was written, on the subject of black English as a language?

SUGGESTIONS FOR CRITICAL WRITING

1. Examine the terms Baldwin refers to in paragraph 5. Why does he choose these terms to help define black English? He refers to the concept of reality in this and the next paragraph. What kind of