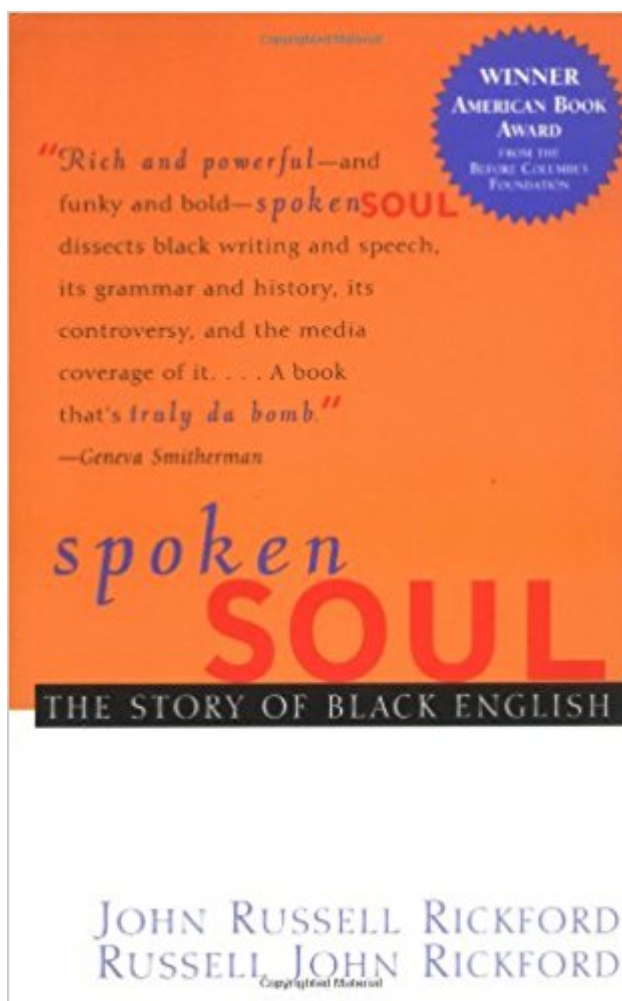


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# Spoken Soul: The Story Of Black English



## Synopsis

In Praise of Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English""Spoken Soul brilliantly fills a huge gap. . . . a delightfully readable introduction to the elegant interweave between the language and its culture.""âRalph W. Fasold, Georgetown university""A lively, well-documented history of Black English . . . that will enlighten and inform not only educators, for whom it should be required reading, but all who value and question language.""âKirkus Reviews""Spoken Soul is a must read for anyone who is interested in the connection between language and identity.""âChicago DefenderClaude Brown called Black English ""Spoken Soul."" Toni Morrison said, ""It's a love, a passion. Its function is like a preacherâs: to make you stand out of your seat, make you lose yourself and hear yourself. The worst of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language.""Now renowned linguist John R. Rickford and journalist Russell J. Rickford provide the definitive guide to African American vernacular Englishâfrom its origins and features to its powerful fascination for society at large.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In 1996, an America Online poll about Ebonics sparked more responses than did its survey on O.J. Simpson. And that's just a taste of the controversy and debate that Black English has provoked over the years. Called "Spoken Soul" by Claude Brown, author of *Manchild in the Promised Land*, the dialect of African Americans has been lauded, derided, questioned, and discussed for decades, but never so comprehensively and fairly as in this historic, sociologic, and linguistic overview and

analysis by John Russell Rickford (the Martin Luther King Jr. Centennial Professor of Linguistics at Stanford University) and Russell John Rickford (a journalist, formerly of the Philadelphia Inquirer). They discuss the attitudinal impact of socioeconomic factors, as well as the effect of generation and gender. They look at the place of black vernacular in literature and family, identity and culture, education and politics. And they track previous debates, from Paul Laurence Dunbar's considerations in the late 1800s to the black intelligentsia of the Harlem Renaissance to the issues raised by the civil rights movement of the 1960s to the recent Ebonics discourse. Part 2, entitled "This Passion, This Skill, This Incredible Music," takes a close look at the richness of Spoken Soul, as recorded in literature (both black and white), from John Leacock's 1776 play *The Fall of British Tyranny* to DMX's rap lyrics of today. They look at the language of preachers and comedians, actors and singers, and scores of writers, and then they delve deeper, into the components of the living language, examining the vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and history of the black vernacular. And finally, the Rickfords discuss the role of Spoken Soul in terms of African American identity. The result? A thoughtful, erudite, and provocative narrative that lifts the discussion of Black English out of the knee-jerk negativity that arose from the Ebonics controversy of 1996 and into the loftier and more appropriate realms of linguistics, literature, and culture. --Stephanie Gold --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

A lively, well-documented history of Black English with particular focus on the recent Ebonics controversy. John Russell Rickford (Linguistics/Stanford Univ.) and Russell John Rickford, a Philadelphia Inquirer reporter, dispel myths that Black English is simply substandard English. Too many people took the Oakland, California school board's decision on Ebonics to be "one more spirited attempt at multiculturalism." The authors contend that Spoken Soul, the dialect of African-Americans, is rich and potent, with a distinct, consistent pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar largely derived from African roots. For example, the ubiquitous "be" fills in the gap for a missing past and present continuous verb in standard English, and "teses" is a correct plural for "tests" to avoid a triple-consonant ending. Though they agree that all African-Americans must master standard English for survival in school and success in the business world, they emphasize the value of Spoken Soul as a linguistic tool not only among black people, but in society at large. Culling examples from the work of such acclaimed writers as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Maya Angelou, they show how even writers who had ambivalent feelings towards Black English employed it to enrich American literature. Preachers, lyricists, and comedians still use it. How then can educators teach their students standard English without debasing a rich oral linguistic tradition?

They must, insist the authors, develop an awareness and appreciation of Spoken Soul. They must avoid thinking of Black English as ``bad English'' or ``lazy English.'' They must learn its distinct grammar and pronunciation so that they can contrast it with standard English. Only then will they be equipped to teach the masses of black youngsters the language skills they need to survive in the larger world. A polemic that will enlighten and inform not only educators, for whom it should be required reading, but all who value and question language. -- Copyright Â©2000, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

I really enjoyed this book

I am still reading the book, however this topic has been a journey into a different and interesting world that I didn't realize existed which has enabled me to broaden my perspective not only on this significant segment of our society and our culture, but with others as well.

Mailed quick in great condition. Have not read yet, but looks like quite an informative book to later be used for class.

The book was awesome, i loved it. Would recommend to anyone who wants to seriously learn about the way we speak and why.

I worked in St. Lucia in the Windward Islands in the late 1960s doing research. The French armed the slaves during the Napoleonic Wars to help them fight the British. The slaves did not give up their weapons or their freedom after the wars. There is a strong tradition of freeholding on the island that goes back to the those days. The people are friendly but independent and proud. When I hiked up mountain trails to talk to people, they would insist on feeding me and were extremely kind. They spoke a French patois so I had to communicate with an interpreter. I found that language was not a great barrier because people were very expressive in their faces and body language. It was a great experience. This book reminded me of that experience because it gives the reader a respect for the culture of African Americans. I know little about linguistics. I recommend reading the 4 star review of Otis H. King and the 5 star review of Tara Gibb, they understand this book far better than I do. Any book that helps people understand these issues is important and valuable. I create and maintain educational websites, Midwest Independent Research. I have one on race, [mwir-race.blogspot.com](http://mwir-race.blogspot.com).

SPOKEN SOUL: The Story of Black English is a comprehensive introduction to African-American Vernacular English by the father-and-son writing team of John Russell Rickford and Russell John Rickford, one a journalist and the other a linguist. It was published by Wiley in 2000. SPOKEN SOUL essentially consists of three distinct parts that may not all appeal to the same audience. The first part is a basic presentation of AAVE as a phenomenon in the African-American community, with a history of how it has been embraced or shunned by African-American intellectuals. Much of this part seems essentially directed to AAVE-speaking Americans in an attempt to instill pride in their heritage. What I take issue with, however, is the author's tendency to praise AAVE as more expressive than Standard English. African-Americans must retain AAVE, they write, because with it they can say more than speakers of Standard English. Now, this may be in some sense true, but it needs a boatload of qualifications. One shouldn't reinforce the public's tendency to hold the Sapir-Whorf fallacy, and the authors seem to perpetuate stereotypes that African-Americans are naturally smooth and suave, "soulful", while white Americans are square and lack some essential mojo. The second part of the book is a linguistic description of AAVE. The authors attempt to outline the ways in which AAVE differs from Standard English in a fashion easy for layman to understand. I nonetheless think that most readers are going to find this too hard going unless they have prior training in basic linguistics. For me, the diachronic dimension in this description was especially interesting, presenting how the community is split between some scholars who see a great deal of influence on AAVE from West African languages, and others who feel that AAVE is based more on the non-standard British dialects of their neighbouring whites. The third part is an ample history of the Ebonics controversy of the 1990s, when the Oakland School Board's consideration of using AAVE in instruction got picked up by the media and generated controversy all over the US. This history even includes a detailed description of Ebonics jokes that appeared in newspapers and how faithfully they represented AAVE as it really is. I personally found this section the most unpleasant to read, as I've tried hard to retreat into the ivory tower and ignore how the general public inevitably mangles any linguistic matter that reaches them. Sociolinguistically-minded readers, however, will find this a useful summary. The authors' sources are listed in detail at the end of the book. All in all, this is a book with a great deal of useful information, but no readership is going to be entirely satisfied. As a linguist, I dislike some of the oversimplifications, while readers without any real training in linguistics may find even this relatively simple to be too abstruse. Also, it would be good to see a second edition of this book, as I'm sure scholarship has moved much further over the last ten years.

Recommended to me by a colleague, I had my doubts about *Spoken Soul*. Linguistics is intellectually rigorous, and frankly I was a little intimidated. Furthermore, like many Americans, I had always thought of "ebonics" as slang. That "ebonics" (or "African-American vernacular English" - AAVE) is in fact a language, governed by grammatical rules and with a rich history is the subject of *Spoken Soul*. Written by Stanford linguistics professor John Rickford, *Spoken Soul* begins with a primer in linguistics. It is testament to the brilliance of Rickford that he clearly and easily explains speech analysis, linguistic syntax and grammatical rules so the layperson can understand. From here, Rickford shows how AAVE is, in fact, a language - going so far as to illustrate its etymology to West African languages (through sentence structure and grammatical rules.) The last chapters of the book - on the controversy of teaching ebonics in schools- was of less interest to me, but certainly relevant to the larger issue of language and power in a society. The book is a real eye-opener, not only in terms of the broader implications of the power of language (consider for a moment vanishing languages around the world - and the reasons why this is happening), but also testament to the living linguistic heritage of African-Americans. I am a big fan of Richard Wright, August Wilson and Zora Neale Hurston. To understand now that the voices their characters spoke (and that some of my students speak) isn't "poor English" but a language (or dialect if you will) of its own was a profound realization to me. Recommended reading.

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