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THEORIES AND POLITICS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH

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INTRODUCTION

Scholarly research and public attitudes concerning the language behavior of African Americans have evolved throughout the twentieth century, from early theories that described it in relation to various types of US speech spoken by those of British descent (121, 122, 123, 183) to increasing efforts to describe its features, use, and function within or among members of the African American speech community (42, 163, 177) irrespective of other varieties of American English. To explore and critique this evolution, I situate much of this review within the theoretical and political arguments that have portended each analytical shift. These arguments, while centered around language, concern the larger question of how to address the multicultural contact first experienced by Africans and their descendants, who were both sold and born into slavery in the United States, as well as how to interpret the role and constitutive elements of African American culture and language in American society today.

In the United States, comments about the language of African Americans are consistently linked to comments about African Americans' cognitive ability and culture (eg. 26, 64, 87, 183), so it is not surprising that some linguists lament the shroud of controversy often accompanying research on African American varieties (12, 20, 21, 160). This controversy reflects the multilayered political and ideological issues embodying scholarly work with any marginalized group that is characterized or marked by language use. It also intro-

duces the problematic of both researchers and/or members as social actors in this process. This review addresses many of the fundamental questions concerning linguistic analysis and linguistic ideology (92, 138), language ideology (101, 130, 134, 193), language and identity (22, 23, 48, 49, 57a, 73, 76, 114, 130, 132–134, 150, 181), and the politics of linguistic representation (92, 144). These issues have been embodied in scholarly work on African American language behavior and culture since the publication in the early 1900s of poetry by Paul Laurence Dunbar (46), one of the first American authors of “pure” African ancestry.

Dunbar’s achievements were plagued by debate within and between both black and white America over the communicative and linguistic norms and values of Americans of African descent. Dunbar was treated as a novelty of his time because few African Americans had advanced literacy skills, and it was routinely argued that only African Americans with discernable European ancestry possessed such skills (146). Additional irony accompanied Dunbar’s work because, though well educated, he wrote many of his poems in plantation dialect—the early twentieth century literary version of the vernacular—because, according to Johnson (88), Dunbar believed that plantation dialect was the only variety that a white readership would find acceptable.

Although Dunbar’s writings are often cited as the first example of a culturally rich and insightful portrayal of typical black life of the time, they were also vilified by African American writers and critics (88, 117, 146) as generally sentimental, humorous, childlike, optimistic, and agonizingly uncritical of slavery. This rather harsh assessment occurred because Dunbar’s cultural portrayals were constructed with categorically stereotypical language that, according to the above writers, confirmed and reconstituted racist stereotypes of African Americans. The ideological and political conflict surrounding Dunbar’s writing is reflected in the research of some linguists who considered the phenomenon of educated African Americans using non-educated varieties of language subversive (eg. 121, 182) and others (eg. 172) who considered criticism of such varieties by educated African Americans as pathological and reflective of self-hate.

The polemics surrounding Dunbar’s work embody nearly every issue that has emerged concerning African American language over the last thirty years: Is African American English a language or a dialect? Who speaks it? What are its linguistic origins? From which social, cultural, and political conditions did it emerge? What are its identifying features? In what context is information about it gathered? Why does it exist? What are the social and political implications of its continued existence? What is its orthographic representation? And what is the role of African American activism in the scholarly representation of culture and language?

AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE AND LANGUAGE: IDEOLOGIES AND POLITICS

The political and scholarly debate over what to call African American English (AAE)¹ reflects the debate over the role of African Americans in the history and culture of America (cf 161, 175). Simply put, the conflict concerns whether African Americans are culturally distinct, when compared to other Americans who have also experienced multicultural contact. American anthropological theories on race and culture, while effectively arguing against racial determination of culture, have also argued that differences between African Americans and other Americans are not cultural (27, 28). Instead, as Szwed (175) and others (124, 184) report, the theory that persisted in both anthropology and sociology was that slavery deprived African Americans of any cultural roots (eg. 25). Ironically, anthropologists interpreted African American acceptance of their scholarly theories as self-hate (or low self-esteem) and as proof that African Americans are ashamed of their African and slave heritage (184). Some sociologists (eg. 136a, 142) interpreted the anthropological view to mean that African American behavior that did not mirror white behavior was pathological or deviant, while others (eg. 56, 57) considered attempts to mimic white behavior pathological. The assumption of deprivation and deviance certainly affected scholarly views of the language of African Americans (26, 72, 145, 178, 182): AAE was viewed variously as an ineffective attempt to speak AE and/or an indication of cognitive and/or environmental deficiency.

Although the situation described above represents the dominant view of anthropology and linguistics until the late 1960s, there were, in fact, competing views concerning African American culture and language. Herskovits (79–81) and others (e.g. 85, 115, 173, 174) introduced the notion of African continuity. Herskovits greatly influenced Turner (179), who presented, through the use of word lists, the first conclusive evidence of Africanisms in Gullah. Dalby (36, 37), Dillard (42), and Stewart (169) later identified features of AAE [e.g. absence of the copula (“Sinbad funny.”) and use of a marker *be*

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I use African American English (AAE) to refer to the language varieties used by people in the United States whose major socialization has been with US residents of African descent. AAE is both a cultural and historical term in that it acknowledges that speakers are of African descent and connects US speakers with those in the African diaspora in general and the English-speaking diaspora in the Americas in particular. I use American English (AE) to refer to the general discussion of US varieties of English when it does not focus on social or cultural language markedness and in cases where class, region, gender, and age are not the focus of discussion. These AE varieties include those known as standard, network, and mainstream as well as working class, southern, Brooklyn, etc. As Mufwene (140) reports, there have been several other terms used for AAE over the years, the most widespread being Negro speech (123), Negro Nonstandard (170), Black English (42), Black English Vernacular or Black Vernacular English (105), Ebonics (84), and Bilalian language (162).

for habitual aspect (“Whoopi be tellin’ jokes on T.V.”)]. But it was not until Labov and his team of researchers (112) applied to the study of AAE the methodological innovations he had introduced to dialectology (103) that linguists and social scientists began to consider that the language use of African Americans did not represent impaired cognitive development.

VERNACULAR SPEECH AND CULTURE

Labov (105, 113) refuted the attempts of some sociologists to consider African American behavior that is different from white middle class as deviant and socially pathological (e.g. 34, 142, 61). He also countered psychological theories linking African American language behavior to deficits in culture, intelligence, and personal character (26, 72, 178). Labov (104, 105, 112) examined the grammatical and phonological features of AAE in various linguistic environments and contexts, and he discussed the relationship of these features to American English (AE). He argued that rather than reflecting deprivation and deviance, AAE grammatical and phonological features are related to AE in logical and systemic ways (104, 105).

Labov and many others (e.g. 16, 17, 41, 42, 171) were instrumental in limiting the influence of the deficit theory on the education of African American children and in reopening the debate about the nature of AAE. His research introduced quantitative methods to analyze what he called linguistic variables: structural items that occur frequently in natural conversation and whose frequency of occurrence is highly stratified according to age, class, etc (107:8). Labov’s strategy was effective against the racist theories mentioned earlier and introduced new and more accurate measures for identifying and analyzing variation and language use. Yet, one aspect of his arguments inadvertently mirrored the depiction of the African American community by some anthropologists and sociologists (56, 136a, 142, 184) as ashamed of its historical origins and cultural practices.

Labov’s description of AAE or vernacular speakers as “black youth from 8 to 19 years old who participate in the street culture of inner cities” (105:xiii) exists in contrast to “lames,” the term his young participants used for those outside their peer group, who, coincidentally, did not use AAE features with the same frequency of variation as did the street youths. Labov’s use of the term vernacular is problematic for three reasons. First, Labov considered the language variety spoken by the participants in his study to be the authentic or core AAE. Second, he invoked cultural and social descriptions to contrast his core group with the lames (105:259). This description of vernacular or core black culture (compare 74) constructs authentic African American membership and language as male, adolescent, insular, and trifling. By default, everyone else in the black community, regardless of age, is a lame. Because lames

do not participate in core culture, having “suffered a loss of some magnitude” (p. 287) in terms of verbal skills, do not use AAE features in ways significantly related to vernacular members, and speak some version of AE (compare 167), they are not culturally African American.

Finally, in contrast to the way the African American community was defined, the white community was referred to as a Standard English-speaking community except on the rare occasions when white vernacular varieties were mentioned. In these cases, the AE vernacular referred either to the working class or to informal varieties irrespective of age, gender, or whether speakers were found in the home or on the street.

The African American community’s consistent resistance to the above formulation of the speech community has befuddled many linguists who view their work as thwarting rather than perpetuating racist stereotypes. Oddly enough, it was precisely because Labov’s arguments were powerful and persuasive that his work became the focus of the conflict over how to define the African American community. It also challenged the already intense debate among and between linguists and members of the African American community on the origins of AAE, its linguistic and pragmatic features, and how the frequent use of these features contributes to definitions of the speech community.

THEORIES OF THE ORIGIN(S) OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH

Discussions about the constitutive phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic features of AAE are characterized by discussions of whether it is best to describe their historical ancestry primarily in terms of AE varieties, other languages and varieties in the African diaspora, African languages, or a combination of the three (cf 139). In linguistic terms, the first view is considered to be the dialectologist or sociolinguistic position (11, 51, 52, 53, 82, 99, 102, 105, 121, 160, 183, 192); the second and third approaches reflect the creolist or substratist position (9, 36, 37, 39, 42, 169, 179, 188, 189, 190); and the fourth view, the multiple influence position, has been held at various times by both sociolinguists and creolists, depending on the linguistic level of analysis and whether the research was a synchronic or diachronic study (6, 19, 138–140, 149, 152). Although many linguists analyze and collect data using more than one perspective, each approach is based on specific notions of representative speaker and linguistic features and suggests different ideologies concerning the conditions and contexts under which AAE emerged.

Sociolinguists and creolists consider the features of AAE to be variable (105), but they disagree over the reason for and significance of the variation. Often embedded in this discussion is recognition that these theories have

political implications for educational psychology and language arts and planning programs. Consequently, and perhaps unfairly, members of the African American community view proponents of various theories as holding specific political beliefs because of the way policy makers have adapted their theories or because linguists have not appreciated the political terrain their work encompasses. For example, although many African American writers (e.g. 13, 77, 91) and some language arts scholars and linguists (31, 40, 162, 177) widely support the creolist/substratist view, they severely criticize what they perceive to be the tendency of sociolinguists to reinscribe racist stereotypes about African American language and culture by comparing AAE features to AE without considering African language influences.

Linguists are divided over whether AAE should be described as it functions and appears across a wide range of everyday interactions, cultural contexts, and social variables within the African American community, or whether it should be defined in relation to other languages. This theoretical issue has led to widespread disagreement over how to describe its features and how to determine the significance of their occurrence across contexts.

THE FEATURES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH

There are many excellent reviews of the features of AAE (e.g. 20, 21, 33, 140, 149, 150, 152, 160). Most of the variable phonological and syntactic features and lexical principles associated with AAE have been reported from as early as 1865 (40). With few exceptions (20, 166), the features identified were marked in relation to AE and were thought to operate differently. Linguists often acknowledge that a full description of AAE does not exist (e.g. 110, 150), but only a few studies (125, 129, 131, 154, 163) have considered African American language use across a variety of cultural and social contexts within a network of speakers. Although linguists discuss the importance of representative numbers of core participants (20, 107, 150, 151), the number of tokens across speakers, rather than the number of speakers who use tokens, is the significant unit of measure (e.g. 113). Essentially, linguistic features have not been gathered according to anthropological notions of “naturally occurring speech” (i.e. recorded in and across cultural events and/or social contexts). Instead, the focus has been on the effect of the interviewer/recorder on the type of speech (e.g. casual, monitored) (107, 113, 150, 154) or formal versus informal conversational topics (107). As a result, features have been identified and counted in relation to linguistic contexts or the type of discourse undertaken (33, 138, 140).

One phonological feature that was stereotyped earlier (140) as AAE but is widespread in many AE dialects is the variable absence of interdental fricatives such as *think*, *then*, substituted by /t/ or /d/ in word initial position. In

intervocalic and word final position these interdentalals are pronounced /f/ and /v/, producing /wIf/ or /wIv/ for *with*, and sometimes /t/ producing *m^nt* for *month* (15, 32, 53, 140). AAE is often characterized as /r/-less (15, 32, 105, 119) or non-rhotic (140) in word final position, thus producing /mo:/ for *more* or, before a consonant, producing /hɔd/ for *hard*. There is also the general phenomenon of consonant simplification or absence, usually in word final position. Thus, *must* is often pronounced /m^s/. For the alveolar stops /t,d/, Labov (105) suggests an AAE rule where deletion applies in AE monomorphemic words such as *past* and less often in polymorphemic words such as *passed*. Some creolists argue that unmarked verbs in AAE are typical of Caribbean Creoles where the tense system is not verbally marked (15, 42, 140, 169, 170) so that, for example, *walk* and *walked* are both produced as *walk*.

There has been renewed discussion of the phonological feature, /r/, because of its contrasting use and function in AE and AAE. Bailey & Maynor (11) argue that the use of postvocalic /r/ in the South suggests that black and white varieties are diverging (7, 158). They believe that white use of postvocalic /r/ is increasing, while AAE is not participating in the change. Butters (33) questions Bailey & Maynor's claim of an enormous decrease in /r/-lessness for whites as well as blacks because the researchers did not account for regional variation among whites (33:40), and other studies (e.g. 141, 180) suggest a decrease in /r/-lessness within the lifetime of older African American speakers. Categorical claims like Bailey & Maynor's are further challenged by findings (20) that in formal contexts, AAE speakers actually self-monitor their use of /r/.

AAE methods of pluralization, possessive marking, and verbal agreement also differ significantly when contrasted with AE. Labov (109) argues that unlike white varieties, AAE does not use verbal -s in subject-verb agreement. As a result, AAE speakers do not have underlying third singular -s. When it does appear, Labov considers it is a case of hypercorrection, a stylistic feature used when speakers shift their speech to Standard English. Mufwene (140) suggests that AAE third person singular -s further supports the theory that it is related to Caribbean varieties, which exhibit similar characteristics. Myhill & Harris (141) claim that verbal -s marks the historical present in AAE, although Rickford (154) considers the absence of third singular -s nearly categorical among his young speakers. The occurrence of /s/ where the form can represent pluralization, possession, and subject-verb agreement can also depend on the speech event (20). Baugh (20:96) reports that third person singular -s is the least likely form to occur, followed by possessive and plural, respectively. In contrast, Butters (33) argues that the form's only importance is that it can occasionally lead to misunderstandings between AAE and AE speakers (cf 113).

For creolists and sociolinguists, the most significant grammatical feature of AAE, especially in terms of its historical development and genetic and/or typological relationships, involves the occurrence and function of the copula *be*. For example, the AE sentence “She is the president” can also be “She the president” in AAE. Fasold (52) argued that AAE *be* represents a substantial difference in tense usage compared to AE, and Baugh (19) called it one of the best examples of dialect distinction. Early accounts of the occurrence and usage of *be* were reported widely (9, 51, 112, 169, 170, 191). These discussions centered on whether or not the copula exists as a grammatical category in AAE. Current research has considered various arguments on how the AE copula is deleted in AAE and how it is grammatically inserted (19, 84, 105, 138, 140, 152, 153, 189, 190).

AAE’s habitual marker *be* has also been the focus of theories regarding black and white speech differences. Rickford (151a) offers persuasive evidence that *be* emerged as part of a decreolization process involving *does*, rather than from other varieties of English. Mufwene (140) describes it as *be* + nonverbal predicate, as in “I be tired by the end of the day,” meaning “I am [usually] tired by the end of the day.” When a verb heads the predicate phrase, the verb must be in the progressive, as in “She be talkin’ every time I come.” Although these constructions are usually non-stative, they also occur with stative constructions (133, 148). In addition to arguments that AAE and AE are less similar than in the past, Bailey et al (10, 11) suggest that younger speakers are introducing a grammatical change that is not occurring with older speakers. They believe that younger speakers use *be* as a verbal auxiliary in AAE and that they are in the process of revising the meaning and syntactic distribution of *be* to a verbal auxiliary. Some linguists (e.g. 33, 152) disagree with this claim and argue that constructions like “I be kickin’” may be common among adolescents and teenagers because they are age-graded forms rather than a sign that AAE is changing.

Much of the theoretical debate surrounding the features of AAE has centered around whether or not AAE is participating in a change that is occurring in AE. The debate has little to do with what occurs in AAE (compare 38) or whether AE affects AAE. Fortunately, the discussion of these issues has encouraged some sociolinguists to review weaknesses in sociolinguistic methodology (e.g. 33, 152, 180, 189) to try to clarify some of the arguments and suggest new approaches for study.

DISCOURSE AND VERBAL GENRES

Descriptions of men’s discourse styles and verbal genres have dominated the scholarly literature on African American communication and folklore (1, 5, 58, 93, 94, 105, 106). Most of the attention has focused on signifying in the

form of “sounding” or “playing the dozens,” which is a form of verbal play performed mainly by adolescent boys (1, 5, 54, 58, 94, 96, 105, 106, 115). Although playing the dozens may be an important part of adolescent male activity, members also recognize it as a language socialization activity (cf 68, 69, 159), especially for conversational signifying. Mitchell-Kernan describes signifying as “the recognition and attribution of some implicit content or function which is obscured by the surface content or function” (126:317–318). Gates (59:48) considers signifying to be “the trope of tropes” of African American discourse and believes that it functions as a stylish critique of African American rhetorical and cultural styles. Gates’ definition is a far cry from earlier assessments that signifying functioned as a way for adolescent males to cope with overbearing mothers and as an outlet for racial oppression (44). In fact, scholarly descriptions of verbal play probably suffered most from anthropology’s reluctance to describe US African American experience as a cultural one (described above). Some folklorists and anthropologists (especially 5, 93, 94) successfully placed signifying within verbal performance genres, but they focused on the place where they saw these performances—the street—as the locus of men’s cultural and social activity. Everyday life stories generally are not the focus of discussion in the street, where fantastic, fantasized, and improbable tales of heroism, strength, wit, and virility function as semiotic or symbolic capital (29, 155). Renewed interest in the characteristics of signifying and the dozens is largely the result of the recognition of its centrality in African American discourse (59, 128, 135, 163, 168) and its use among popular stand-up comedians in the United States.

The notion of play involved in the dozens differentiates the real from the serious (cf 5, 18, 63, 97, 98) by placing that which is culturally significant (e.g. mothers, identity, political figures, economic independence) in implausible contexts. Whether a context is plausible or implausible is culturally determined. For example, a signifying episode that includes a police officer who “serves and protects” would be considered an implausible context in signifying episodes. Once the implausible or unreal state is established, these cultural signs interact with the context through irony, sarcasm, wit, and humor in order to play with the serious signifier. If it is plausible that the sign fits the context, the interaction is considered to be an insult rather than play.

The dozens are often characterized by “your mother” (or “yo mama”) statements, which both highlight and subvert the notion that mothers are sacred (163). These statements should not be misunderstood to relate specifically to someone’s particular mother since that is not a requirement for participation (compare 105, 106). “Your mother” statements are a device used to practice and perform verbal skill. This practice often occurs in the presence of family members, including mothers, who help judge their effectiveness and

comment on the wit or irony in the statements, often offering other examples they deem more impressive.

Once a “your mother” sequence is launched, it is usually acknowledged as being in play within an interactive episode when another person responds with a statement and is therefore in competition with the initiator (1, 97, 105, 106). The episode continues until someone delivers enough witty, acerbic, and indirect statements that the audience or interactors determine the winner. As Hutcherson (86) explains, the true essence of the dozens is the relationship between choice of signs and the logic of the implausibility. For Hutcherson, this logic is culturally loaded and refers to African American local theories (cf 60, 116) that include knowledge of cultural celebrations as well as US racism, bigotry, and injustice. One of Hutcherson’s “logical” examples is “Your mother is so fat they won’t let her have an X jacket because helicopters keep trying to land on her back” (86:52). The local information necessary to understand the irony in the signification is that the X jacket is in reference to an emblem associated with Malcolm X, an African American leader and activist known for his criticism of US racism and anti-capitalist leanings. Malcolm X was assassinated in 1965 and a movie depicting his life was released in 1991. The X appeared on clothing of urban youth in the early 1990s as part of the massive commodification of Malcolm X. The helicopter reference is related to both a knowledge of landing markings and a first-hand knowledge of how helicopters (called ghetto birds) patrol, constantly scan, descend, and land in urban areas.

Morgan (129, 132, 135) considers all forms of signifying to be part of the system of African American indirectness (see also 59). She identifies two dominant types: pointed and baited. Pointed indirectness involves mock targets, while baited indirectness focuses on attributes that suggest a particular target. In this sense, either a mock target or attribute can serve as the intermediary of the message (194) in that the success of the communication is determined through the social collaboration of the African American audience or hearers (cf 47, 98).

LANGUAGE AND GENDER

A cursory glance at the body of work on AAE elicits the question, “Where are the women!?” Although reviews of language and gender studies have noted that African American women have either been excluded or marginalized (48, 57a, 78, 168), they were mentioned. For example, Abrahams (2:9–10) reports that the women refused to participate in his Philadelphia folklore project with no explanation and later describes them as not participating in verbal play, and “restrained in their talk, less loud, less public, and much less abandoned” (3:242), when compared to men. In his later examination of the representation

of women's speech styles in literature, he suggests that women may have the same expressive acuity as men (4:77).

Early reports, although rare, characterized African American women's language and role in communicative practices as (a) linguistically conservative when compared to men (107, 191), (b) targets of male discourse and interaction (1, 2, 96, 105), (c) collaborators in male street remarks (96), and (d) controllers and censors of men's interactions (2, 44, 96). Mitchell-Kernan's (125) was one of the few works of the 1970s that did not describe urban African American women as aggressive, controlling, domineering, and emasculating. In contrast to the other community research studies of the 1960s and 1970s (112, 191), Mitchell-Kernan's (125) ethnography discussed a range of social contexts and cultural perceptions of members. Her study mainly of women in West Oakland, demonstrated that women participated in conversational signifying (125:65–106) and used linguistic practices similar to those used by men (105, 191). Although Mitchell-Kernan (125) did not report on a large number of speakers, she discussed the importance of both topic and social context (e.g. formal vs informal) for the type of and distribution of features produced (pp. 107–109). Her findings seemed to have little influence on research in the African American community. This may be because she was, I think, personally attacked in a major review of her work (95). The review was filled with innuendo and criticism regarding Mitchell-Kernan's methodology, class, gender, and knowledge of the black community. Before discussing her work, the reviewer described Mitchell-Kernan as "a young attractive Black woman (p. 969)" as part of an explanation for why she was accepted in the community and why men were willing to talk to her. The reviewer also referred to her middle-class image (p. 970) in arguing that her analysis of verbal performance and member assessments and attitudes of language misrepresented and distorted community attitudes (p. 917). When these comments are related to earlier discussions about lames and authenticity, it seems that the only African American working on language in the community at the time was not qualified because of gender and class categories (along with race), for which the other researchers were not criticized. In many respects, it is a vindication of Mitchell-Kernan's work that 15 years later Gates (59) relied heavily on her description of signifying as a foundation for his theory on African American discourse.

Fortunately, the body of work on both women's language use and community views of their own language practices is growing. Current research examines and critiques the prevailing literature on African American women and girls' interaction (14, 65–69, 78, 129, 130, 131, 135, 168), and narratives (50, 55, 130, 131). Goodwin's (65, 66, 69) analysis of he-said-she-said disputes among African American girls reveals the elaborate lengths to which they are willing to go in order to determine who said what behind someone's back and

whether the person reporting is, in reality, an instigator attempting to start trouble. Morgan (135) explores how signifying is conversationally constructed through the systematic use of particular grammatical, prosodic, and discursive structures to convey indirect messages. Stanback (168) provides one of the few discussions of discursive features of middle-class black women's interactions and notes that they use both AAE and AE linguistic and discourse features. Women's interactions also form the bases for Morgan's analysis of pointed and baited indirectness in African American discourse and interaction (129, 135) and for her discussion of counterlanguage (129, 132). Similarly, much of Rickford's (152–154) work on variation and style-shifting in AAE is the result of long-term interviews with a young woman community participant.

AFRICAN AMERICAN ATTITUDES TOWARD AAE

Between the late 1970s and 1980s, two major events highlighted disagreements about AAE between linguists and the African American community. The first event involved the legal decision of the Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School vs Ann Arbor School District Board (120). The case charged that school officials had placed African American children in learning disabled and speech pathology classes and held them at low grade levels because of AAE (164, 165). The King case was won largely because linguists (e.g. 110) argued successfully that AAE has systemic features that are not all related to English. The second event occurred in the late 1980s during a special symposium to discuss the findings and social implications of Labov's research project on "The Increasing Divergence of Black and White Vernaculars" (111). Labov, along with Bailey (11), argued that AAE and AE varieties, which they believed were previously on a course of convergence, were beginning to diverge, largely because of the social and historical factors of migration and continued segregation of races (7, 33, 70). Labov suggested that the only reasonable response to this situation was integration. Neither the King case's argument for representations of AAE in the schools nor Labov's suggestion that AAE speakers use more AE to enhance educational and economic success were supported by the wider African American community. Members of the black middle class (134, 164, 165) argued in the King Case that AAE and AE were not sufficiently different to impede comprehension of teachers or students and that the language of instruction should be AE. In contrast, once race, rather than class, was specifically identified in relation to using AE (113), community spokespersons argued that AE-speaking models were plentiful in the community (89, 167).

As the introduction to this review suggests, the most dissident and serious obstacle to representing AAE outside of the African American community has been its members (15, 21, 83, 134, 164, 165, 172). In some cases, linguists

have criticized members for not accepting their educational plans or theories about African American language and communication styles (e.g. 172). Yet the reasons for resistance to programs are only superficially class based.

It is impossible to provide a simple definition of the African American speech community or, for that matter, any urban speech community. This is true because of its complex history, and because the community expands and contracts across class and geographic lines. Considering its complexity, it is not surprising that one source of criticism of linguistic plans and proposals can be traced to early descriptions of the African American speech community and what constitutes membership. Confusion regarding who speaks AAE began in the late 1960s with the pronouncement from creolists and dialectologists that "80% of all Black people speak Black English" (42:229). In rendering his legal decision in the King case (see above), the judge referred to 80% of African American speakers of AAE. The "80% theory" emerged during the deficit/difference debates in an attempt to identify African Americans as a working-class people who have their own culture, history, and language and whose rights, therefore, must be protected. However, the theory that 80% of all African Americans speak AAE competes with the definition of vernacular speakers and culture (described above), which excludes those who are not male, adolescent, jobless, or underemployed and irresponsible.

How the African American community assigns class and status remains open to question, because the community historically has been denied access to traditional indicators of the dominant social class: housing, employment, and occupation. In his analysis of the basis of social prestige found in studies on the African American community between 1899 and 1960, Glenn (62) found that in all but one case, African Americans considered education more important than income and occupation in determining class and status. These findings corroborated Drake & Cayton's (45) earlier study of Chicago's African American community, where they found that during the 1940s, advanced education virtually secured membership at the top of the black social hierarchy of Chicago. Wilson (186, 187) argued that middle class African Americans are increasing in numbers and changing in terms of occupational choices, neighborhoods, etc. One consequence of the change is that African American middle and working classes are becoming more stratified. However, Dillingham (43) argued that in an ethnically stratified society, subjective feelings of ethnic group or racial identification become a more powerful determinant of behavior than do objective assessments of socioeconomic status (43). In a study of three hundred African Americans, Dillingham (43) found that the higher the class of the respondent, the higher the racial consciousness. Other studies (e.g. 100, 156) also reported that middle class African Americans may attach greater importance to racial identities than class identities (40a, 84a, 86a, 100, 156). African American newspaper columnists (35, 143) have cor-

roborated the notion that the middle class have either a strong African American and racial identity or a sense that as members of the middle class, cultural identity is continually examined. In light of the persistence of racial consciousness, it is not surprising that AAE marks cultural and racial identity across classes.

The importance of AAE among those middle class African Americans who were not socialized in the speech community is apparent, especially among youth, with the variety of AAE favored by rap and hip-hop artists (133). Baugh (22, 24) identified a developing tendency among upper middle class African American students attending elite college campuses to use lexical, phonological, and grammatical features of AAE in both formal and informal contexts. Research on language use among working and middle class African American adults (38, 167, 168) found that both AAE and AE are used in informal mixed class conversations irrespective of the class of the speaker. Morgan (135) also reported that working class speakers use both AAE and AE for conversational signifying. In addition, she (133) reported that hip-hop artists, who are self-described as using real street language, rely on AE grammar while using AAE phonological, lexical, and morphological style.

AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH AND IDENTITY

African American scholars and community activists in popular, theoretical, and research journals have written extensively about AAE and the politics of language use in the United States. Poets, writers, and musicians contributed to the developing positions that were often framed within a particular understanding of Africans before US slavery. AAE has been discussed from three related perspectives: 1. in terms of its expressive African character (13, 31, 77, 89, 136, 163), 2. as a symbol of resistance to slavery and oppression (31, 77, 91, 134, 162, 163), and, the opposite view, and 3. as an indicator of a slave mentality or consciousness (157).

In the first conception of AAE, the indigenous languages of Africa were considered to be symbolic of African culture, identity, and power. Some scholars attached metaphysical significance to African continuity (31:14). This attention to African identity and AAE has been addressed by language scholars (e.g. 162, 163, 176) as well as by writers of the African American experience (13, 90, 136). Rather than focus on the details or particulars of the historical origins of AAE, they have concentrated on how African language practices were used to adjust to the conditions of slavery and Jim Crow laws. The resistance theory of AAE is based on the function, nature, and importance of indirect speech and ambiguity in African American speech.

Perhaps the force in the African American community most resistant to the African influence interpretation of AAE is the Nation of Islam. According to Samuel 17X (156), speakers of AAE invoke a slave mentality because AAE developed during slavery and is emblematic of the subservient relationship between master and slave. Although this position has been critiqued (162), the perspective still echoes in current popular debates about AAE (90, 190).

The tension that emerges from AAE as a complex sign of both resistance and oppression problematizes any attempt to present plans or policies of AAE. Questions concerning the language legitimacy of African Americans who seek citizenship rights have been a recurring issue in American society (57, 126, 127, 190). Yet, as Mitchell-Kernan (126, 127) observed, the interplay between “good” English and AAE is extremely complex because both are considered crucial to improving life chances (cf 30, 89, 91, 165). Those who choose to accommodate the demands of non-African American society and use AE exclusively risk losing membership status and, as Mitchell-Kernan (126, 127) warned, risk being labeled as cultural misfits (cf 8, 90).

CONCLUSION

Many scholars who research African American language have done so in a climate of social injustice, intense political debate, and social scrutiny. This atmosphere, although complex in terms of competing ideologies among members and from the dominant culture, does not represent chaos. The language experience of the African diaspora is enmeshed with issues of culture, identity, memory, and citizenship. To advance the language study of African Americans, future theories, descriptions, and methods must reflect how language and communication styles constitute and construct African American identity. The result will be rich linguistic descriptions and theories that aim to describe the African American speech community across contexts, classes, age, and gender. These data can be a resource for linguistic analyses that explore the relationship between these thick descriptions of AAE and aspects of Creole and African languages and English. The study of interactions and verbal genres should also be considered within the larger cultural framework. As the fields of linguistics and anthropology continue to expand in order to address the increasing complexity of the African American experience, they will also continue to expand our knowledge and understanding of how speakers use language to construct politics, identity, and culture. In this respect, the study of African American language and culture is also the study of US culture and scholarship.

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