

Sociocultural and Historical Contexts of African American English

EDITED BY

Sonja L. Lanehart

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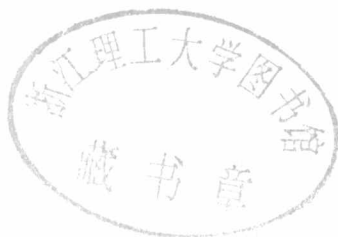
Sociocultural Contexts
of African American English



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University of Georgia



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Special thanks to my husband, Paul, for giving me the idea to undertake such an effort and to Salikoko Mufwene and Michèle Foster for being the first ones to sit down with me over dinner one night in Chicago to discuss planning for the conference and to be the first ones to commit to participating in it. Special thanks to John Baugh and Walt Wolfram for providing advice and guidance and going beyond the call of duty on more than one occasion. Special thanks to Dorish Kadish for all her advice as one who had been in my shoes the year before and gave me all the inside information I needed to negotiate and arrange all the details that go into organizing such a conference. Also, I would like to thank Emily Williams, my Linguistics Program research assistant Fall 1999, for all her hard work.

Sincere thanks to all the conference presenters for their commitment to language use in the African American community. They did a wonderful job.

I would also like to thank all those people who came to the conference from around the world to hear and share ideas about language use in the African American community. I know the conference presenters benefited from their comments as did I.

Finally, I would like to thank the University of Georgia community for their participation and support, especially those teachers who felt the conference was important enough to bring their classes to participate.

Foreword

Over a quarter of a century ago, late writer Toni Cade Bambara, wrote:

Most folks finally agree that yes, Virginia, there is a Black English. But at that point agreement ends and folks splinter into fifty seven directions, most shouting that it's a low life ignorant shameful thing that must be wiped out. Some arguin in terrible tones of reasonableness that it's ok for literature classes, learn a little Dunbar with your Shakespeare, but it holds us back from respectability and acceptance. "On the Issue of Black English", *Confrontation* 1.3 (1974)

To be sure, there are folks who continue these lines of debate today even as we usher in a new millennium. However, as Bambara also taught, "there's another crew that don't say nuthin at all, just steady workin, investigatin the grammar, roots, forms, styles of Black English and tryin to design materials in its spirit so that Bloods can develop multi-media competency and the capacity to make things happen . . ." Therein lies the major contribution of this volume: it investigates African American Language in all its multifaceted complexity and applies this research so that U.S. slave descendants can "make things happen".

A word about the use of "African American Language". Yes, I do think that the speech of U.S. slave descendants is a language. Of course, as many scholars have pointed out, the language-dialect distinction cannot be resolved on strictly narrow linguistic grounds. Linguist Wayne O'Neil put it this way:

. . . languages are defined politically, not scientifically. For example, Swedish and Norwegian, though mutually intelligible, are counted as different languages (in contradiction with the common-sense test) simply because a political boundary divides Sweden from Norway, while Cantonese, Fujianese, Mandarin, and so on, though not mutually intelligible, are considered to be dialects of Chinese because they are historically related, typologically alike, and located within the national boundary of the People's Republic of China . . . Thus, a way of speaking becomes a language by declaration . . . a way of speaking is a language if you say it is. "If Ebonics Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?" (1998)

Further, "African American Language" is a broad term, used to refer not only to the language of the U.S. Black community, but also to Gullah, to Haitian

Creole, to Jamaican Creole, and to other “Black languages” (Creoles) of the Americas.

Editor Sonja Lanehart was clearly on a mission when she undertook the task of planning a state of the art conference focusing on the communication system of Africans in America — also known as Ebonics, Black Talk, African American Vernacular English, Black English, African American Language, Spoken Soul, and African American English, the term used in this volume. It was an ambitious goal, to assemble major researchers of African American English at the University of Georgia for two days. (Illness kept me from participating.) The fact that Lanehart pulled it off is tantamount to a coup. And judging from the quality of the conference papers assembled here, the scholars did not disappoint.

The presence — and dominance — of outstanding African American linguists in the collection assembled here attests to the emergence of a critical mass of Black linguists that did not exist back in the day when Bambara was teaching composition to Black college students and bemoaning the “adrenalized attitudes that surround the issue of Black English. . . and cause so many to squander precious energy jumpin up and down”. Due, in part, to the solid work of such scholars who are able to pose questions as cultural insiders, at one and the same time participants and scientific observers, many issues that were raised but went unexplored back in the 1970s are now receiving in-depth analyses — e.g., the relationship between enslavement practices and the language of the enslaved; capitalizing on the linguistic traditions of the “root culture” in literacy and schooling; linguistic-cultural norms of reprimand; gender, age and popular culture manifested in African American Language; the role and perspective of the Black community relative to language issues. At the same time, old questions and controversies are benefiting from new data and the reinterpretation of existing data bases — e.g., the origin and historical roots of African American English. These issues and others are investigated in this volume of new, exciting, cutting edge work by some of the top scholars in the field.

Toni Morrison had this to say about our language:

It's the thing Black people love so much — the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them. It's a love, a passion . . . The worst of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language. There are certain things I cannot say without recourse to my language. From *The New Republic* (1981)

Most importantly, then, these insightful, creative essays remind us that for those who live and work in the Black community, the study of African American Language is not just an academic exercise, it is our life. Written on the eve of the new millennium, *Sociocultural and Historical Contexts of African American English* is a critical, one-of-a-kind volume for teachers, students, and scholars. Props to Lanehart for her vision.

Geneva Smitherman, Ph.D.

University Distinguished Professor of English

Michigan State University

March, 2000

About the contributors

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John Baugh is Professor of Education and Linguistics at Stanford University, where he has been since 1990. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1979. He has also held appointments at the University of Texas at Austin and Swarthmore College in linguistics, anthropology, and sociology. His major research interests have been in sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, and educational linguistics, with particular attention to studies of minority groups. He has served as Vice Chair of the Board at the Center for Applied Linguistics, as President of the American Dialect Society, and as a member of the National Advisory Committee to NSF in the Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences. He is author of *Black Street Speech: Its History, Structure, and Survival* (1983), *Out of the Mouths of Slaves: African American Language and Educational Malpractice* (1999), and *Beyond Ebonics: Linguistic Pride and Racial Prejudice* (2000) as well as co-editor of *Language in Use: Readings in Sociolinguistics* (1984), *Towards a Social Science of Language* (1996), and *African American English: Structure, History and Use* (1998).

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Denise Troutman is Associate Professor of American Thought and Language and Linguistics at Michigan State University. She teaches writing to first-year students and linguistics to undergraduate and graduate students. Holding appointments in two departments, Denise publishes work on both writing and linguistics, with an emphasis in discourse analysis. Currently, she is developing theoretical explanations of African American women's language. Some of her publications include "Tongue and Sword: Which is Master?" in *African American Women Speak Out on Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas* (1995), "Culturally Toned Diminutives within the Speech Community of African American Women" in *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies* (1996), "Black Women's Language" (co-authored) in *Reader's Companion to U. S. Women's History* (1998), "Whose Voice is it Anyway? Marked Features in the Writing of Black English Speakers" in *Writing in Multicultural Settings* (1997), "Discourse, Ethnicity, Culture and Racism" (co-authored) in *Discourse Studies: A Multi-disciplinary Introduction* (1997), "Dialects of Power: Ebonics Personified" in *Teaching Grammar in Context: Lessons to Share* (1998), "The Power of Dialects" in *Lessons to Share on Teaching Grammar in Context* (1998), and "Breaking Mythical Bonds: African American Women's Language" in *The Workings of Language: From Prescriptions to Perspectives* (1999). Forthcoming works include "We Be Strong Women", to appear in *Communication and African American Women: Studies of Rhetoric and Everyday Talk*, "And Ain't I a Woman: African American Women and Language", to appear in *Discourse and Society*.

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>Foreword</i>	ix
<i>About the Contributors</i>	xii

Part 1: Introduction

1. State of the art in African American English research: Multi-disciplinary perspectives and directions <i>Sonja L. Lanehart</i>	1
2. What is African American English? <i>Salikoko S. Mufwene</i>	21

Part 2: African American English and its relationship to other varieties of English

3. The relationship between African American Vernacular English and White Vernaculars in the American South: A sociocultural history and some phonological evidence <i>Guy Bailey</i>	53
4. Co-existing grammars: The relationship between the evolution of African American and Southern White Vernacular English in the South <i>Patricia Cukor-Avila</i>	93
5. The voice of the ancestors: New evidence on 19th-century precursors to 20th-century African American English <i>David Sutcliffe</i>	129

Part 3: Language Use in the African American Community

6. Something to <i>Shout</i> about: African American Vernacular English as a linguistic and cultural treasure <i>Mary B. Zeigler</i>	169
-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----

7. "Nuthin' But a G Thang": Grammar and language ideology in
Hip Hop identity 187
Marcyliena Morgan
8. African American women: Talking that talk 211
Denise Troutman
9. Directness in the use of African American English 239
Arthur K. Spears

Part 4: African American English and Education

10. The role of family, community, and school in children's
acquisition and maintenance of African American English 261
Toya A. Wyatt
11. Pay Leon, Pay Leon, Pay Leon, Paleontologist: Using call-and-
response to facilitate language mastery and literacy acquisition
among African American Students 281
Michèle Foster
12. Applying our knowledge of African American English to
the problem of raising reading levels in inner-city schools 299
William Labov
13. Applying linguistic knowledge of African American English to
help students learn and teachers teach 319
John Baugh

Part 5: Conclusion

14. Reconsidering the sociolinguistic agenda for African American
English: The next generation of research and application 331
Walt Wolfram
- Index* 363

CHAPTER 1

State of the art in African American English research: Multidisciplinary perspectives and directions

Sonja L. Lanehart
University of Georgia

1. Introduction

The papers for this book were presented at a State of the Art Conference at the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia, 29–30 September 1998. I wanted to gather together people who do research in language use in the African American community, regardless of their discipline, to engage particular questions I felt needed to be addressed in one place. The most fundamental question for me was one I get asked most often about this topic: What is African American English? I also had several other questions which stemmed from my belief that all languages have a history and sociocultural context that delineates the language and makes it what it is at a particular point in time. Likewise, I am quite sensitive to the fact that languages are used by people — individuals and groups — and are not divorced from the people that use the languages. Hence, we cannot talk about a language without considering and trying to understand the people in and of their sociocultural and historical contexts. In other words, the language and the people are inextricably linked — especially when it comes to talking about language use in the African American community — as evidenced in the work of Geneva Smitherman (see, for example, Smitherman 2000) and attested by Toni Morrison during an interview in response to the question, “What do you think is distinctive about your fiction? What makes it good?”

The language, only the language. The language must be careful and must appear effortless. It must not sweat. It must suggest and be provocative at the same time. It is the thing that black people love so much — the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them. It's a love, a passion. Its function is like a preacher's: to make you stand up out of your seat, make you lose yourself and hear yourself. The worst of all possible things that could happen