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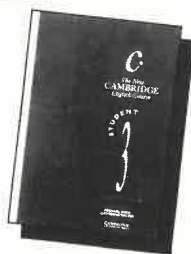
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Perceptions of Black English Vernacular:  
 An Investigation of the Linguistic  
 Ramifications of Race, Gender, and Class

Jennifer Lynn Eberhardt är doktorand i socialpsykologi vid Harvarduniversitetet, där hon under handledning av Roger Brown är i färd med att slutföra en avhandling om rasbaserade stereotyper och attributionsteori (den teori som behandlar hur individer och grupper tillskrivs vissa egenskaper). Hon har också intresserat sig för relationer mellan etniska grupper. I den här artikeln diskuteras hon variablerna ras, kön och samhällsklass med avseende på Black English, den typ av engelska som talas av en stor andel av USAs svarta befolkning.

It was once believed that Black English lacked several requirements for logical thought, and thus limited the intellectual processes of its speakers. It was not until the mid-1960s that linguists and other researchers/scientists began to recognize Black English as a legitimate language rather than as an inferior, illogical, and deficient form of American Standard English (Labov, 1969). The origin and development of Black English can be traced from West African tribal languages, to Caribbean Creoles, to the language spoken on Southern American plantations, and, finally, to the black migration north. Although this is true, it was not until recently that descriptive linguists have attempted to analyze in detail the distinct phonological, syntactical, prosodic, narrative, and rhetorical features of Black English.

Reactions to spoken language that is characteristic of a group often reflect the perceiver's stereotypes about the group in question (Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner & Fillenbaum, 1960). In this sense, the longstanding denial of the legitimacy of Black English in the past appears to reflect the personality characteristics that white Americans attribute to Black English speakers. Although Black English has been recognized as a distinct language by linguists and among the academic community generally, many white Americans continue to perceive Black English speakers as exemplifications of negative stereotypes (e.g. unintelligent, uneducated, incompetent, hostile).

Less clear, and probably more consequential, is understanding how black people themselves perceive Black English speakers. Although 80 percent of African-Americans speak the language at some time, the social perceptions of blacks by blacks has been minimally researched. It is not at all clear whether African-Americans attribute positive characteristics to Black English speakers or whether they share the same beliefs about the language as white Americans.

The answer to this question may not be straightforward. When assessing African-American perceptions of Black English speakers, it may be important to consider the gender of the speakers as well as their socioeconomic class. In other words, African-American males who speak Black English may be perceived differently from African-American females who speak Black English. I would like to argue that African-American male speakers of Black English make a more favorable impression on other blacks than do African-American female speakers of Black English. Conversely, black female Standard English speakers are viewed more positively than black male Standard English speakers. In addition, it is predicted that blacks of lower socioeconomic status construct more positive judgments about Black English in comparison to middle class blacks. However, a strong language-gender correlation is expected to hold across both groups.

The language-gender relationship has been barely touched upon in the study of Black English, yet its implications are far reaching. Given that a common language is one of the major elements in a culture, it is interesting that it may not be equally accessible to both genders. If the predictions made here are correct, how females are able to speak a second language (Standard English), yet remain attached and connected to the African-American culture, becomes an important sociological issue. Moreover, the phenomenon may have a strong correlation with the academic success of African-Americans of low socioeconomic status. Given that Black English is still considered by many to be an inferior form of Standard English, if black males are induced more than black females to speak the language, then black males will have a much harder time successfully completing academic requirements. Because African-American males may be more likely to communicate in a language that is incorrectly considered by many to be at best inadequate, they may be more likely to continue to be economically as well as educationally disadvantaged.

The goal of this paper is to explore these linguistic issues within the context of the urban underclass. In particular, I will discuss the influence of social markers such as ethnicity, gender, and class on linguistic behavior, and I will investigate the linguistic correlates of educational opportunities available to inner-city youth.

### **The Relation of Language to Ethnicity**

Language and ethnicity are intimately tied. In a vast number of societies around the world this relationship gives rise to the reconfiguration and solidification of group boundaries. In fact, major socio-structural shifts affecting ethnic groups in many countries have been accompanied by changes in language policies (Giles & Coupland,

1991). Language can be a powerful tool for effecting changes in ethnic relations as well as a reflection of the existing social structure.

Language functions as a marker of ethnicity because it is a compelling symbol of ethnic identity. In fact, most ethnic groups have a distinct linguistic style that is indicative of group membership. Oftentimes those who are not fluent in the language of the ethnic group are denied the rights and privileges to full membership (Giles & Johnson, 1981). Because loyalty to the group can be symbolized through linguistic loyalty, non-fluent speakers are held suspect. Moreover, sharing a common language may reflect the sharing of a common past and a common destiny (Ryan, 1979). In this respect, language functions as a symbol of ethnic solidarity. Furthermore, as language serves to bind members to a common thread, it functions as a gatekeeper, holding non-fluent members at the outermost periphery of the group. Speaking another language then, may threaten one's ethnic identity and lead to a sense of cultural anomie (Lambert, 1980). This can be especially problematic for members of low status groups such as African-Americans who attempt to speak the language of the mainstream.

Ethnic markers in speech may occur at all levels of language. These include markers of phonology, grammar, morphology, discourse and narrative styles as well as ethnic differences in paralinguistic cues such as rhythm, pitch, and intonation. Many researchers have suggested that our reactions to the speaking patterns of any individual fall in line with preconceived notions about the group to which the speaker belongs (Lambert, et al., 1960). Consequently, it stands to reason that because African-Americans are a stigmatized group in this country, their speech will be stigmatized as well. Although many features of Black English appear in other American dialects, when they appeared in African-American speech, past researchers have been inclined to treat them as signs of linguistic inferiority, cognitive deficits, cultural deprivation, and intellectual incapacity. Interestingly enough, these ideologies fall directly in line with racial stereotypes about African-Americans.

### **The Relation of Language to Gender**

Gender also serves as a social marker that often can be reflected linguistically. Researchers have investigated gender differences in phonology, pitch/intonation, grammar, lexicon, codeswitching and speaking time in cross sex dyads (for an excellent review of this see Smith, 1979). However, unlike ethnic markers of speech, gender-linked speech does not function as a primary indicator of group membership (Giles, 1979). Although there are differences in male and female speaking patterns in most cultures, usually these differen-



ces do not approach the magnitude of ethnic group differences. Moreover, many of the perceived differences in men's and women's speaking patterns lack clear empirical support (Thorne, Kramarae, and Henley, 1983).

Trends in linguistic choice patterns, however, do occur within ethnic groups as well as between them. The choices that females make across ethnic groups may not be entirely inconsistent and/or contradictory. Quite the contrary, these choices may reflect gender differences in both the community structure within ethnic groups (e.g. social networks) and differential opportunity structures outside of the group (e.g. employment; Nichols, 1983). Because the social positioning of women differs across cultures, so too will their speaking patterns. Furthermore, there may be significant gender differences in the allocation of rewards for speaking the dominant language (Smith, 1979). In some cultures, females are considered both competent and feminine for exhibiting mainstream speech, whereas males, when using identical linguistic features, may be considered more competent yet less masculine and less loyal to the culture. It is important to note then that certain linguistic features do not function as inherent representations of power and prestige. Features prestigious for one group may not be perceived as such for another.

#### **Emergence of an Underclass: Linguistic Ramifications**

Socioeconomic status is yet another social marker of speech but like gender, linguistic correlates of class have not been adequately conceptualized within a broad theoretical framework. However, socioeconomic status is a particularly salient variable for understanding the attitudes and usage of Black English Vernacular. In fact, the creation and maintenance of Black English was largely due to the institution of slavery and the legally enforced residential, social, economic, and educational segregation that followed. It is important then to continue to examine the degree of isolation of African-Americans from mainstream culture. There are many socioeconomic changes that have recently taken place within African-American communities that may have serious linguistic consequences.

#### **What is the Urban Underclass?**

In 1987, William Julius Wilson put forward a major theoretical analysis of the growing problems within the urban ghettos. His argument was that although the great advances made during the Civil Rights Era improved the quality of life for some African-Americans, for many these advances were ineffective. Wilson especially criticized affirmative action programs because they tend to help only those already in positions to move up the socioeconomic ladder; that is they primarily help the black middle class. However, as this middle

class moves up, many other black Americans are becoming worse off and experiencing unemployment and poverty at levels more severe than those in the 1960s. They are plagued on a number of levels by sociostructural forces that threaten their livelihood. It is these members of society that Wilson labels "the underclass". He considers them "the truly disadvantaged".

The urban underclass is qualitatively different from the working class black communities of the past. Members of the underclass are characterized by a weak attachment to the labor force, they reside in areas where more than 40 percent of the people live in extreme poverty, they predominantly reside in female-headed households that are welfare dependent, and consequently they exhibit aberrant behavior such as crime and drug addiction.

Though Wilson is concerned with non-normative behaviors, he develops a structurally grounded explanation. Specifically, he asserts that the primary causes of the problems within the urban underclass stem from the extensive economic restructuring that occurred in the United States during the last two decades. During this time, America shifted from a goods producing economy to a service producing economy (particularly in the Northeast and Midwest regions). This is central because black males were overrepresented in goods producing industries and grossly underrepresented in service producing industries, which in the face of an industrial transition caused them to disappear from the labor market at a rapid rate. Furthermore, due to massive educational failure, black males do not possess the high level skills necessary to move into service oriented positions. This was compounded by the fact that the goods producing industries that did survive became smaller in scale and moved away from ghetto areas, moving to the suburbs or other countries. Regrettably, these industries were not the only entities moving away from the cities. There was also a sizeable out-migration of the black middle class from the urban ghettos, which left these communities with neither viable human nor financial resources to buffer the shocks.

#### **Ethnolinguistic Vitality: Effects on Black English Vernacular**

There is a dearth of research addressing the linguistic correlates of the underclass. In fact, the only area in which Black English Vernacular has been examined within the context of the urban underclass is at the level of linguistic divergence. This has been due largely to the initiation of William Labov and his colleagues (for more discussion on this see Sankoff, 1986). However, many researchers who focus upon the divergence of specific features of Black English Vernacular from white vernaculars have ignored the impact of social psychological processes that drive linguistic attitudes and usage.

Because residential, economic, and social isolation factors reduce the likelihood of social mobility, they may also reduce the significance of adopting Standard English speaking patterns. As the possibility of members of the underclass achieving socioeconomic mobility decreases, their identification with the mainstream may decrease as well. It is of great importance to understand how African-Americans perceive these structural changes impacting their culture. Subjective vitality may interact with objective structural conditions to determine the adoption of particular linguistic and behavioral strategies that maximize a positive group identity and that protect the viability of the culture (Giles, et al., 1977; Saint-Blancat, 1984).

Howard Giles and his colleagues have described how these variables may interact by proposing a theory of "ethnolinguistic identity". Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory states that groups and individuals strive to achieve and maintain a positive social identity. When their social identity is threatened, they can react by implementing a number of strategies; these include individual mobility (attenuating stigmatized linguistic features), social creativity (accentuating stigmatized linguistic features), or social competition (attempting to change language policies). The choices that individuals and groups make among these strategies are determined by a complicated set of factors. Giles & Johnson (1981) assert that objective and subjective ethnolinguistic vitality are crucial components in the decision making process. Ethnolinguistic vitality is composed of three socio-structural variables: demographic factors (e.g. group size, birth rate, geographic concentration, out-migration), status factors (e.g. social, economic, political, linguistic prestige), and institutional support factors (e.g. representation in mass media, education, industry, government, culture, and religion).

By far, the majority of factors contributing to high ethnolinguistic vitality for the urban underclass are demographic. Minority languages are much more capable of surviving in situations where minority members are highly concentrated in specific geographic areas, where there is a steady influx of people who will speak the language, and where there is low migration into the mainstream. Another factor contributing to high ethnolinguistic vitality is the differential out-migration of the black middle class from these communities. This alienation and separation from the primary black speakers of Standard English may aid in producing communities with much more homogeneous and marginal speech patterns. Paradoxically, the same factors which most threaten the vitality of the underclass are the same factors which most contribute to the survival of the group's language.

The general hypothesis of the theory is that as perceived and objective vitality increase, the more likely it is that the language of the

group will be preserved. However, Johnson, Giles, and Bourhis (1983) recognize a notable exception to this. That is "... where members identify highly with their group, commitment to their group and language may *i n c r e a s e* with the perception that its vitality is threatened or is seriously eroded (p. 261)". This exception most certainly characterizes the plight of the urban underclass. Not only is the vitality of the group threatened, exit is close to impossible. Furthermore, the conditions of threat and isolation arresting the livelihood of group members are perceived as illegitimate and unjust. Drastic increases in residential, social, and economic isolation, along with reductions in status and institutional support, together increase the symbolic function of Black English in underclass environments. Conversely, it can be predicted that more middle class blacks will choose individual mobility techniques (i.e. speaking Standard English) because they are neither as immobilized or as threatened as is the underclass.

Moreover, we can predict how these strategies may differ for black men and black women. The black male's vitality is perceived to be more threatened than the black female's vitality (Gibbs, 1988). In addition, African-Americans tend to regard Black English speakers as more masculine than Standard English speakers (Dillard, 1972). Given this, it would appear to be more appropriate for males to speak the language than for females to do so across a variety of settings. In fact, black male usage of Black English Vernacular tends to be less situationally constrained than the female's usage (Folb, 1980). This is crucial because it may be that as the male becomes more endangered, situational constraints on when to use the language and when not to may become even less rigid. Whereas the African-American female's inhibition to speak Black English Vernacular arises from both in-group and out-group sanctions placed upon language usage, the African-American male's inhibition arises primarily from out-group sanctions, sanctions that are being increasingly ignored.

#### **African-American Perceptions of Black English Vernacular in the Educational Setting**

Education is becoming an increasingly important determinant of the social, economic, and physical well-being of American citizens. As American society moves further into the technological age, educational attainment is more consistently being used by employers as a variable to assess the competency and employability of new members entering the workforce. Although the educational system has been seen as the primary mechanism for the socioeconomic mobility of all American citizens, it has been historically ineffective at educating black youth. As education increases in importance, this ineffective-



ness will necessarily lead to even greater job market lockout than has been experienced in the past. For black Americans, instead of offering an avenue to the American dream, the educational system has reflected and compounded this lockout.

Moreover, the American educational system historically has utilized language differences as a mechanism to perpetuate the existing social stratification system. Black English Vernacular speakers are linguistically socialized in ways that are distinct from (and at times in opposition to) the linguistic patterns of the American mainstream. As a result, black children come to school with different communicative skills and a different understanding about what should be attended to and achieved through communication. Unlike the situation for immigrants, there was no official recognition of linguistic diversity affecting the schooling of non-standard speakers until the late 1960s (Williams, 1987). Furthermore, even though Black English has been recently recognized as a legitimate linguistic system by researchers, this recognition has not been transformed into teacher attitudes and behaviors that exhibit acknowledgement of this legitimacy. Speakers of non-standard varieties are considered deficient, both intellectually and socially. Moreover, teachers' linguistic attitudes are strongly related to the expectation and evaluation of students' academic performance (Seligman, Tucker, and Lambert, 1972; Frender, Brown, and Lambert, 1970).

Yet these studies alone can not account for the fact that other ethnic and immigrant groups with an equal or bigger mismatch of communicative styles tend to become academically successful. European immigrants especially, who have significant differences between their communicative styles and those of the American mainstream, readily adopt the styles and values of the mainstream. Furthermore, in other countries differences between non-standard and standard varieties are much greater (such as Japan, Switzerland, and Finland) yet they do not result in massive educational failure (Fishman, 1972).

This discrepancy is due to the fact that most linguistic studies fail to fully take into account differences in the African-American social structure as compared to other immigrant groups. Not only have linguistic differences been acknowledged as legitimate factors that may prohibit the effective schooling of most immigrant groups; often, special programs have been implemented so that the potential negative consequences emerging from these differences could be circumvented. Conversely, African-Americans migrated to the United States to become slaves in the fields rather than students in the classrooms. For decades after the abolishment of slavery, legally enforced segregation maintained inequalities and barred entry into full American citizenship. Both economically and educationally, the African-

American has been at a severe disadvantage. Although the laws have been changed, the disadvantages remain and are becoming frighteningly worse (Wilson, 1987).

A major difference between African-Americans and other European ethnic groups then, is that these ethnic groups can, want to, and do assimilate. They trust the American value system and they believe in the economic and social mobility of the individual. Due to historical lock out and consequential mistrust, African-Americans have adopted survival strategies that run counter to strategies recognized in the academic institution (Ogbu, 1982). They involve both high levels of solidarity within the African-American culture and high levels of mistrust of mainstream systems that have been historically known to simply perpetuate systemic inequalities. As disadvantages become more severe, it becomes even more likely that black Americans will adopt alternative survival strategies.

#### **Sex Differences in Academic Achievement**

Scholastically, blacks are at a disadvantage in comparison to whites on most evaluative criteria (National Research Council, 1989). However, although most African-American males and females share the same disadvantages due to race and class, African-American males are less likely to be academically successful than African-American females. Black males have lower grades, lower standardized test scores, and a lower academic achievement orientation as compared to females (Hare, 1977). The difference in the academic achievement of black males and black females has been well documented. Moreover, this difference appears at all levels of education.

There have been a number of studies which investigate why this difference appears to take place. Many of these studies explore the possible differential treatment of black males and black females. Black males have the highest rates of expulsion and suspension. They are consistently tracked into low-skill classes throughout their educational careers, more so than students in any other race-gender category (Hare & Castenell, 1985). Other studies have attempted to address the male-female difference by focusing upon the differential opportunity structure available for black men and women both outside and inside of the educational system (Ogbu, 1982). Beliefs of differential social mobility and job opportunities for males and females may not only guide school performance but may dictate who speaks Standard English and who chooses not to.

It is clear that mainstream attitudes and behaviors are highly valued in the educational setting (Edwards, 1990). However, African-American males exhibit fewer characteristics of the mainstream than do African-American females. In fact, males who excel academically

experience much more ambivalence associated with these accomplishments than do high-achieving females (Fordham, 1988). Academic success seriously calls into question the black male's identification with his peers as well as with the black culture generally. Whereas African-American females have a relatively high school self-esteem and a high achievement orientation (Steele, 1990), African-American males learn to "disidentify" with the academic system at a very early age. They understand that the traditional routes to achieving economic success through education and skilled experience are simply not high probabilities for them. They therefore seek to obtain and to maintain their manhood via alternative routes. These routes place a heavy emphasis on peer group identification. In fact, whereas white males achieve high levels of self-esteem through the peer group, family and academic success, the peer group serves as the black male's sole source of esteem (Hare & Castenell, 1985).

Not only does the American education system block access for African-American males, but to a large degree the African-American male peer group works to compound that barrier. Loyalty to the peer group often means taking on values that run in opposition to mainstream values. If the African-American male chooses to take on values of the mainstream, he will run the risk of being locked out of the peer group. Although one may recognize that it is of practical concern to become functionally competent in the language of power, the immediate threat of crossing the peer group line may serve to circumvent any serious attempts to practice the communicative styles valued by the mainstream.

Many people within the African-American culture view the African-American male as an "endangered species". The chances for his survival and economic prosperity are believed to be much lower than those of the African-American female. This perceived threat may push the African-American male further outside of the academic system as compared to the African-American female. Hare & Castenell (1985) state that, "Black males are the most feared, least likely to be identified with, and least likely to be effectively taught". The more outside of the system the African-American male becomes, the more likely he is to develop strategies for coping outside of the system.

To the degree that African-American males and females will face different obstacles, expectations, fears, and ambitions in life, they will adopt distinctive behavioral patterns that reflect those orientations. To the degree that African-American males and African-American females hold different positions in the world based on their unique experiences, these differences should be reflected in the language. Not only may African-American males and African-Ameri-

can females be reared differently in order to adapt to their different expected life realities (Allen, 1978), but they may be linguistically socialized in qualitatively different ways. Because it is assumed that females have a greater chance at assimilating than do males, females may let go of Black English characteristics as a survival strategy much earlier than African-American males.

### Concluding Remarks

There is a greater need for researchers to deal with linguistic issues within the context of an existing social structure. This entails not only the description of what the context looks like, but the formulation of theoretical assumptions for how this context affects behavioral responses and the linguistic attitudes mediating them. Many of the phenomena discussed here have occurred in many other cultures within and outside of the United States. For example, there is a tendency in many cultures for females to use more mainstream features in their speech. Moreover, the kinds of strategies individuals and cultures adopt to protect themselves from a negative social identity extend far beyond the African-American culture.

However, the implications of these general principles are particularly devastating within the context of the urban underclass. In many cultures female linguistic styles symbolize their low status relative to men. Even when females use the language of power (mainstream speech) their social position remains unchanged. In fact, speaking the dominant group's language can be especially dis-empowering for most working class females. They are expected to accommodate and assimilate no matter what their situation. Females in the urban underclass may exhibit mainstream patterns for similar reasons but the effects of this behavior are far from status threatening. Because of their gender, African-American males are expected to be the rebels, the resisters. However, due to the precarious position the black male is placed in by American society because of his race, gender, and socioeconomic status, his linguistic actions reap significant costs along with benefits. Speaking Black English Vernacular may allow for a more positive social identity at the high cost of being further marginalized from mainstream American life. With this marginalization comes a life of threatened existence, both educationally and occupationally.

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