

Living Language

An Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology

Laura M. Ahearn

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2012
© 2012 Laura M. Ahearn

Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

Registered Office

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ,
United Kingdom

Editorial Offices

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK
The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

For details of our global editorial offices, for customer services, and for information about how to apply for permission to reuse the copyright material in this book please see our website at www.wiley.com/wiley-blackwell.

The right of Laura M. Ahearn to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the UK Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, except as permitted by the UK Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic books.

Designations used by companies to distinguish their products are often claimed as trademarks. All brand names and product names used in this book are trade names, service marks, trademarks or registered trademarks of their respective owners. The publisher is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book. This publication is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information in regard to the subject matter covered. It is sold on the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering professional services. If professional advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional should be sought.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ahearn, Laura M., 1962–

Living language : an introduction to linguistic anthropology / by Laura M. Ahearn.

p. cm. – (Blackwell primers in anthropology)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4051-2440-9 (hardback) – ISBN 978-1-4051-2441-6 (paperback)

1. Anthropological linguistics. 2. Language and culture. I. Title. II. Series.
P35.A38 2011

306.44–dc22

2010049292

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This book is published in the following electronic formats: ePDFs 9781444340532; Wiley Online Library 9781444340563; ePub 9781444340549

Set in 11.5/13.5 Bembo by SPi Publisher Services, Pondicherry, India
Printed in Singapore by Ho Printing Singapore Pte Ltd



10

Language, Race, and Ethnicity

Multiple dimensions of difference and inequality can shape, and be shaped by, language use. Gender (discussed in the previous chapter), socioeconomic class, age, regional identity, caste, and profession are just a few of the many types of social variation that can intersect with linguistic practice – often in complex, overlapping ways. This chapter focuses on two other common forms of social differentiation as they are instantiated in, and molded by, linguistic practices: race and ethnicity. Some of the issues we will address in this chapter include the following:

- *The rule-governed nature of African American English (AAE).* Contrary to many inaccurate representations of AAE as “sloppy” standard English, scholars have been demonstrating for decades the regularities at every linguistic level for AAE, just as they have been for all other dialects, registers, and languages. How does this scholarship relate to the key terms of the book, especially language ideologies and indexicality?
- *The Ebonics controversy.* When the Board of Education in Oakland, California, declared in December 1996 that students in the district “possess and utilize a language described in various scholarly approaches as ‘Ebonics’ (literally Black sounds) or Pan African Communication Behaviors or African Language Systems,” and that this way of speaking is “genetically-based and not a dialect of

English" (Baugh 2000:43–44), a huge controversy emerged that revealed the very different language ideologies held by scholars, celebrities, and various members of the public regarding African American English. What can we learn from this controversy?

- *Racist language.* In the movie, "Terminator 2: Judgment Day," the character played by Arnold Schwarzenegger is taught various expressions, such as "Hasta la vista, baby," that are supposed to make him sound more like a "real person" rather than a robotic cyborg. Is this sort of Mock Spanish (Hill 1998:683) an instance of racist language? What kinds of linguistic practices constitute racism?
- *Language and racial/ethnic identities.* In the United States, people often belong to, or interact with, multiple races and ethnic groups. Moreover, mass media and other elements of popular culture expose individuals to the linguistic practices associated with various races and ethnic groups. How do these complexities play out in actual social contexts?

Before turning to these questions, it is first necessary to define "race" and "ethnicity" in at least a provisional way so that it is clearer what we are studying when we begin to explore language, race, and ethnicity.

Defining Race and Ethnicity

Many misconceptions surround the concept of race. Jane Hill, a well-known linguistic anthropologist and the former President of the American Anthropological Association, maintains that most white Americans share a largely inaccurate "folk theory" of race and racism, one of the main components of which is a belief in "race" as a basic category of human biological variation, combined with a belief that each human being can be assigned to a race, or sometimes to a mixture of races (Hill 2008:6–7). Hill argues that this folk theory is widespread and taken for granted – but mistaken in most respects, according to the vast majority of anthropologists and other social scientists. Indeed, the official statement on race of the American Anthropological Association begins with these two paragraphs:¹

In the United States both scholars and the general public have been conditioned to viewing human races as natural and separate divisions within the human species based on visible physical differences. With the vast expansion of scientific knowledge in this century, however, it has become clear that human populations are not unambiguous, clearly demarcated, biologically distinct groups. Evidence from the analysis of genetics (e.g., DNA) indicates that most physical variation, about 94%, lies *within* so-called racial groups. Conventional geographic "racial" groupings differ from one another only in about 6% of their genes. This means that there is greater variation within "racial" groups than between them. In neighboring populations there is much overlapping of genes and their phenotypic (physical) expressions. Throughout history whenever different groups have come into contact, they have interbred. The continued sharing of genetic materials has maintained all of humankind as a single species.

Physical variations in any given trait tend to occur gradually rather than abruptly over geographic areas. And because physical traits are inherited independently of one another, knowing the range of one trait does not predict the presence of others. For example, skin color varies largely from light in the temperate areas in the north to dark in the tropical areas in the south; its intensity is not related to nose shape or hair texture. Dark skin may be associated with frizzy or kinky hair or curly or wavy or straight hair, all of which are found among different indigenous peoples in tropical regions. These facts render any attempt to establish lines of division among biological populations both arbitrary and subjective.

As definitive as the AAA's statement is about the lack of a consistent biological basis for the concept of race, it should not be read as arguing that race does not exist. Race is clearly an important social category that influences people's life trajectories and identities. Many scholars in fact view it as a, or even *the*, central organizing principle in the United States. But the social fact of race does not support the folk theory described by Hill above.² Reflect for a moment upon the following paradox: because of the so-called "one-drop rule," a white woman in the United States can give birth to a black child, but a black woman cannot give birth to white child. Such reflection should lead to an appreciation for the social foundations of the concept of race (Ignatiev 1995:1).

A brief review of American history and a few cross-cultural examples demonstrate the ways in which race, rather than being a primordial biological essence, is better thought of as a process of racialization or racial formation. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant write in their well-known book, *Racial Formation in the United States*:

[R]ace is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies. Although the concept of race invokes biologically based human characteristics (so-called 'phenotypes'), selection of these particular human features for purposes of racial signification is always and necessarily a social and historical process. (1994:55; emphasis in the original)

Thus, just as the concept of gender, discussed in the previous chapter, allows us to understand the various cultural and social meanings people associate with perceived or actual biological differences in reproductive hormones, chromosomes, or genitalia, so, too, does the concept of race provide us with insight into the cultural and social meanings people associate with other kinds of perceived or actual biological differences, such as skin color or hair type.

At one point in the history of the United States, for example, many groups now unquestioningly considered "white" were initially not included in this privileged category.³ Benjamin Franklin, for example, wrote in the eighteenth century that Swedes and Germans were "swarthy," and he did not include them among the "white people," who consisted, according to Franklin, solely of the English and the Saxons. "This example," Jane Hill comments, "shows how what seem to us today like fundamental perceptions may be of very recent historical origin ... Contemporary White Americans can no longer see 'swarthinness' among Swedes, and find it astonishing that anyone ever did so" (Hill 2008:14).

The Swedes were not the only group not to be included among "white people" in the past. Irish immigrants to the United States, for example, were at first subject to discrimination and oppression, much as they had been in Ireland, and were excluded from white society, but over time they and other European immigrant groups allied themselves together in opposition to African Americans as they formed the American (white) working class (Ignatiev 1995:183–184). Jews have

undergone a similar process, according to Karen Brodtkin: "In the last hundred years, Jews in the United States have been shuttled from one side of the American racist binary to the other" (1998:175). At the turn of the last century, Jews in Europe and the United States "were considered a separate, inferior race, with a distinguishable biological identity justifying discrimination and even genocide" (Ferber 2007:113). Even now, Abby Ferber notes, contemporary white supremacists define Jews as nonwhite. One white supremacist publication, *The New Order*, states that Jews are "not a religion, they are an Asiatic race, locked in mortal conflict with Aryan man" (Ferber 2007:112; emphasis in the original). Ferber describes the process she went through while researching white supremacists as one in which she at first took for granted her unmarked, privileged status as a white American. As she read more and more hateful, anti-semitic materials written by contemporary white supremacists, however, Ferber became more aware of the many people who do not automatically accept her whiteness, and this has provided her, she says, some degree of insight (albeit partial) into the experiences of nonwhite people in the United States.

The parameters and nuances of racial classifications in countries other than the United States have been studied by anthropologists and other social scientists for many years. In Brazil, for example, scholarly debates have focused on the meanings of multiple Brazilian racial categories that intersect in complicated ways with class, gender, and sexuality.⁴ In Nepal, the country I know best ethnographically, there is nothing like the black-white binary commonly attributed to the United States, and until recently, the concept of "race" was not mentioned in public debates at all. Instead, caste, ethnicity, and religion have been the most salient forms of social differentiation for Nepalis. During the 1990s, however, a group of activists from various Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups drew upon outdated social science research from the last century to posit three main races in the world (Hangen 2005, 2009). Susan Hangen, an anthropologist who has conducted fieldwork on this topic in Nepal, reports that a politician in eastern Nepal stated the following during one of his speeches in 1997:

We are a Mongol community, we are not a caste either; we are Mongol. For example, in this world there are three types of people. One is white with white skin like Americans, for example like sister here

[referring to me] ... The other has black skin and is called Negro. The other is called the red race like us: short like us; stocky like us; with small eyes and flat noses like us. (2005:49)

By invoking this outdated tripartite racial classification, the politician was attempting to unite a number of linguistically and culturally diverse ethnic groups, such as Rais, Magars, Limbus, Gurungs, and Sherpas, under the umbrella of one political party, the Mongol National Organization (MNO). The hope was that unifying these disparate but similarly disadvantaged groups would help them oppose Nepal's high-caste Hindu ruling groups. One person told Hangen, "We didn't know that we were Mongols until the MNO came here" (2005:49). Hangen's research is a fascinating example of the complexities, contradictions, and cross-cultural differences involved in the concept of race.

Several other anthropologists of Nepal have conducted research on how certain Nepali ethnic groups have come into being.⁵ Arjun Guneratne (2002), for example, has studied the formation of a single Tharu ethnic identity. The Tharus are considered to be (and consider themselves to be) the aboriginal residents of the Terai, a strip of jungle that runs across the southern border of Nepal with India (Guneratne 2002:39). They have long shared the ethnonym (the name given to an ethnic group) "Tharu," but they do not all share a single language or set of cultural practices. In fact, most Tharus have much more in common linguistically and culturally with non-Tharus living near them than they have with Tharus from other parts of Nepal. The Nepali state, however, grouped all Tharus together in its key classification of all castes and ethnic groups in 1854, and in more recent times, Tharu elites have created an organization designed to promote a pan-Tharu ethnic identity. Thus, Guneratne argues, "a common ethnic identity does not have to be predicated on a shared culture" (2002:10). Instead, according to Guneratne, ethnic formation is more accurately studied as a phenomenon having to do with economics, politics, and nation-state formation. Cultural elements are often foregrounded, posited, or brought into existence as part of this ethnicizing process, but the origins are often material rather than purely cultural, Guneratne maintains (2002:200). "Ethnic groups are thus not fixed phenomena but are constantly being created and re-created anew; objective

realities such as differences of language, territory, religion, and custom are transformed into the basis of a subjective consciousness or self-awareness," he writes (2002:11).

Bonnie Urciuoli approaches the process of ethnicization differently in her research on Puerto Ricans in New York City, contrasting ethnicization with racialization and situating both within the context of class and gender identities in the United States. According to Urciuoli (1996), racial discourses "frame group origin in natural terms." Ethnic discourses, in contrast, "frame group origin in cultural terms" (1996:15). Racialized people, Urciuoli writes, are considered out of place; they are dirty, dangerous, and unwilling or unable to participate constructively in the nation-state. In contrast, the cultural differences said to be characteristic of ethnicized people are considered safe, ordered, and "a contribution to the nation-state offered by striving immigrants making their way up the ladder of class mobility" (1996:16). Within this landscape of social inequality and exclusion, Urciuoli states that language differences are often racialized. That is, an inability to speak English, or an inability to speak English "without an accent" (cf. Lippi-Green 1997), marks someone as disorderly and unlikely to experience social mobility – as someone, in other words, who does not fully belong in the United States.

No matter how race and ethnicity are defined or studied, language is central to the ways in which these forms of social differentiation are conceptualized and actually experienced. Let us turn now, therefore, to a closer look at the linguistic features and rule-governed nature of African American English, which, according to William Labov (2010:15) and Marcyliena Morgan (2002:3), is perhaps the most closely studied nonstandard dialect in the world (though the terms "nonstandard" and "dialect" have political implications that we will discuss further below).

The Rule-Governed Nature of African American English

To the ears of many Americans, the speech variety known as African American English (AAE, also known as African American Vernacular English [AAVE], Black English [BE], Black English Vernacular [BEV],

and Ebonics) sounds like incorrect or sloppy Standard American English (SAE). As the well-known linguist Geoffrey Pullum notes: "The majority of English speakers think that AAVE is just English with two added factors: some special slang terms and a lot of grammatical mistakes. They are simply wrong about this" (1999:41). AAE, like all other languages and dialects around the world, is rule-governed. In other words, AAE is a linguistic system that has its own phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Many of AAE's features are shared with other dialects of English, such as the regional variant of English spoken in the southern United States, or Cockney English, which is spoken mostly by working-class Londoners.

Not all African Americans speak AAE, and even among those who do speak AAE there are regional differences and of course many different language ideologies regarding the advantages, disadvantages, and meanings associated with speaking AAE. There are also, however, broadly overarching similarities among AAE speakers in all regions of the United States. For example, although AAE speakers in Texas, Louisiana, and Pennsylvania pronounce the vowel sounds in the words "hair" and "here" differently (Green 2002:1-2), they share similar rules for the use of the habitual, invariant verb "be," though the rates of usage of these sorts of grammatical structures vary depending on the relative amounts of residential and educational segregation in states such as California, Georgia, and Pennsylvania (Labov 2010:20).

Some African Americans speak absolutely no African American English. There is of course nothing biological in people who are identified by themselves or others as African Americans that makes them speak AAE. Rather, AAE is a language variant that, like all other language variants, is learned in particular social settings. Thus, African Americans such as President Barack Obama, for example, who was raised by his SAE-speaking white mother and grandparents, can speak the standard dialect in a way that is indistinguishable from others of all backgrounds who speak the same dialect. Many African Americans can code-switch between SAE and AAE, appropriately adjusting their speech styles to the particular social context much as bilingual individuals code-switch between two different languages for different addressees, and there are more "standard" variants of AAE that some individuals use in certain circumstances. Such code-switching can

help build subtle alliances or identities or can index unequal power relations among speakers (Morgan 2002:73–74).

So, what are some of the rules and patterns of AAE that are often mistaken for incorrect SAE? Let us look at some of the most frequently commented upon linguistic features of AAE: the use of invariant or habitual “be”; copula deletion; double negatives; the reduction of final consonants; and pronouncing the word “ask” as “aks.”⁶

Invariant or habitual “be”

Perhaps one of the most widely stigmatized and misinterpreted features of AAE is the use of “be” in its unconjugated, or invariant, form. Sentences such as “He be singin” (Pullum 1999:46) or “He be talkin when the teacher be talkin” (Baugh 1999:6) do not indicate a failure to conjugate the verb “to be.” Instead, the invariant “be” does important grammatical work in these sentences because it indicates habitual behavior or a usual state of being. Replacing the “be” in such sentences with “is” or “are” would change the meaning. Thus, “She be happy” would indicate a perpetual state of happiness, whereas “She is happy” (or simply, “She happy” – see the next section on copula deletion) would indicate only a momentary feeling of happiness.

The invariant “be” is only one of a whole class of auxiliaries that enable AAE speakers to choose among a much wider array of moods and aspects in their verb forms than are available to SAE speakers. The use of such aspectual and preverbal markers as “come,” “go,” “done,” and “steady” provide AAE speakers with semantic possibilities and nuanced eloquence that cannot easily be translated into any other dialect of English (Labov 2010:20; Green 1998). Such verb forms are often overlooked or misunderstood by standard English speakers because they sound just like standard English words, and yet their usages and meanings are totally different – and totally rule-governed.

Non-AAE-speaking individuals who attempt to come up with examples of AAE often misuse the invariant “be.” Examples of such grammatical errors – that is, sentences that would be ungrammatical within the rules of AAE – abounded during the 1996–1997 Ebonics controversy, which we will discuss below. Geoffrey Pullum (1999:53–54) describes two such grammatically incorrect usages of the invariant “be” that appeared during the Ebonics controversy, both of which

were part of a fictional conversation that distinguished African American (but non-AAE-speaking) columnist William Raspberry constructed between an imaginary AAE-speaking taxi driver and an imaginary alter ego of Raspberry himself. The first mistaken use of the invariant "be" occurs in this sentence: "What you be talkin' about, my man?" Pullum notes that Raspberry clearly means for the taxi driver to be asking, "What are you talking about right now?" But because the invariant "be" indicates habitual action, the meaning to native AAE-speakers is something more like, "What do you habitually talk about?" The second mistaken use of the invariant "be" in this made-up dialogue is this sentence from the taxi driver: "I don't be offerin' you my grub." Again, from the context, the intended meaning clearly refers to the present time, not to habitual action – something more like, "I am not offering you my food right now," rather than, "In general, I don't offer you my food."

William Raspberry was not the only African American columnist to write inaccurately or disparagingly about AAE. *New York Times* columnist Brent Staples did so as well in a column printed on January 24, 1997 and reprinted in Baugh (2000:x–xi). The ambivalence or even outright hostility toward AAE felt and expressed by some African Americans can be interpreted as an example of what Pierre Bourdieu calls misrecognition – the failure to recognize that the status accorded the standard variety of English is arbitrary and merely a function of politics and power. Many African Americans, however, fully recognize that SAE is the prestige dialect solely because its speakers are the group with the most prestige socially, politically, and economically in the United States. John Baugh, for example, states the following: "Pragmatic reality forces the burden of adjustment on groups who are outside positions of influence and power. It does little good to claim that street speech is a valid dialect – which it is – when the social cost of linguistic and other differences can be so high" (Baugh 1983:122, cited in Lippi-Green 1997:185).

Copula deletion

Another common grammatical feature of AAE that causes confusion among some non-AAE-speakers is copula deletion – in other words, the omission of the conjugated form of "to be." So, in AAE it is

perfectly grammatical to say, "She happy," rather than "She is happy." This is not a random or haphazard omission; copula deletion follows rigorous rules, even though they operate largely below the level of awareness in the minds of most AAE speakers. These rules are similar to the ones in SAE that let speakers know when it is appropriate to use a contraction. For example, it is grammatical in SAE to use a contraction in the sentence, "She's happy," but not in the sentence "I know how happy she is" because contraction is not allowed when the verb is accented or emphasized, as it is at the end of a sentence. Just as the sentence "I know how happy she's" would be ungrammatical in SAE, so, too, would copula deletion be ungrammatical in the AAE sentence "I know how happy she ____" because copula deletion in AAE, like contraction in SAE, follows careful and rigorous (though usually unconscious) rules.

Many other languages in the world, including Russian, Hebrew, Arabic, and Swahili, to name just a few, feature copula deletion in some or all of the tenses of the verb "to be." In the Hebrew sentence, *hu babayit* ("He [is] in the house/at home"), for example, the form of the verb "to be" that we use in SAE for this purpose is omitted. This is not sloppy Hebrew – in fact, to attempt to insert some sort of present-tense form of the verb "to be" in this sentence in Hebrew would be ungrammatical. The directly analogous sentence in AAE is, "He at home." An AAE speaker who utters this sentence is being no more ungrammatical than a Hebrew speaker who utters *hu babayit*.

Double negatives

Double or even triple negatives are another grammatical form that can be found in AAE, as well as in many other languages and in other dialects of English. Working-class Londoners who speak the Cockney dialect regularly use double negatives, for example, and examples from popular culture, such as the classic Rolling Stones hit from the 1960s, "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction," are common. But are double negatives automatically ungrammatical or illogical, as some claim? Jenny Cheshire (1998:119–120) traces the use of multiple negatives in English back many centuries and notes that such usages were common in Chaucer and Shakespeare, as can be seen in these two examples:

But nevere gronte he at no strook but oon. (Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*)
 [But he never groaned at any of the blows except one.]

I have one heart, one bosom, and one truth
 And that no woman has; nor never none
 Shall mistress be of it, save I alone. (Shakespeare, *Twelfth*
Night III.i.172–174)

Multiple negatives seem to have fallen out of favor, according to Cheshire, during the eighteenth century when grammarians attempted to set a prescribed way of speaking and writing English for “polite” or “cultivated” members of society. Over time, double negatives came to be stigmatized, at least in certain communities of practice.

It is an accident of history, however, that has stigmatized double or multiple negatives. In many languages such as French, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, and Hungarian (to mention only a few), *not* using a double negative is ungrammatical. In French, for example, *je ne veux rien* means “I don’t want anything,” with *ne* (“not”) and *rien* (“nothing”) as the two negatives. Just as to say, “I don’t want nothing” in standard English would be ungrammatical, to leave out the second negative in any of these languages – or in AAE – would be ungrammatical.

Some people argue that using two negatives is “illogical” because two negatives is a positive according to formal logic or mathematical principles. But if this were so, then the use of three negatives, as in the sentence, “I can’t get nothin’ from nobody,” would go back to being a negative and would no longer “violate” these principles. Clearly, this sentence would be as objectionable as ones with only two negatives to the prescriptivists who want to impose the grammatical rules of one dialect of English (the standard one) on all other dialects. While there may be many good reasons for preferring standard English over other dialects of English in certain instances, nevertheless, as Labov (1972a) famously demonstrated decades ago in his classic article, “The Logic of Nonstandard English,” logic and grammaticality are not among them. The preference of one dialect over another is one based on social, political, or economic factors – it cannot be based on linguistic factors because all dialects are equally logical and grammatical.

The reduction of final consonants

AAE differs from other dialects of English not just in its morphology and syntax but also in its phonology. Again, according to the language ideologies of some people, these differences in pronunciation are considered haphazard, sloppy, or unsuccessful attempts to achieve the SAE pronunciation. As Pullum (1999:50–51) outlines in detail, however, the phonology of AAE is also rule-governed and therefore highly regular. Contrary to the belief, for instance, that AAE speakers “drop their consonants right and lef’,” Pullum explains that there is a very specific rule that determines when final consonant reduction is permissible in AAE. To understand the rule that applies in these cases, it is necessary to know that “stop consonants” include the letters p, t, k, b, d, and g.⁷ It is also necessary to understand that some consonants are voiceless and therefore involve no vibration of the vocal cords. The stop consonants p, t, and k are voiceless, as are other non-stop consonants, such as s, f, and sh. Voiced consonants, in contrast, involve the vibration of the vocal cords, such as the stops b, d, and g, as well as other consonants such as j, v, or z, to name just a few. Okay – now we are ready for the phonological rule that governs the permissibility of final consonant reduction in AAE:

A stop consonant at the end of a word may be omitted (and usually is) if it is preceded by another consonant of the same voicing. (Pullum 1999:51; emphasis added)

According to this rule, Pullum notes, AAE speakers would not drop the final consonant in words such as *dump*, *belt*, and *sink* because although they all end in stops, the p, t, and k stops are all voiceless, while the sounds that precede them in these words are voiced. Only the words that follow the rule above are eligible for final consonant reduction in AAE. Thus, a word like *left* may be pronounced as *lef’* by a speaker of AAE because the final voiceless stop, t, is preceded by an equally voiceless f sound. Similarly, *old* can be pronounced *ol’* in AAE because the final voiced stop, d, is preceded by an equally voiced l sound (Pullum 1999:51). Although this phonological rule operates below the level of awareness of most AAE speakers, they have no trouble implementing it consistently. For many SAE speakers,

however, the rule is imperceptible and therefore assumed to be absent. This assumption is mistaken.

Pronouncing the word "ask" as "aks"

AAE also contains a few idiosyncratic phonological features, some of which it shares with other dialects of English. One of these is the pronunciation of the word "ask" as "aks." Even though the *Oxford English Dictionary* establishes that the variation between these two pronunciations goes back hundreds of years, many SAE speakers, Rosina Lippi-Green notes, characterize the use of the pronunciation "aks" as "the most horrendous of errors" (1997:179). And yet, this pronunciation is shared by other English dialects. (Indeed, my daughter's pale-skinned, strawberry blond kindergarten teacher used "aks" regularly.) Critics, such as a call-in viewer of the "Oprah Winfrey Show" in 1987, say things like, "I guess what I'd like to say is that what makes me feel that blacks tend to be ignorant is that they fail to see that the word is spelled A-S-K, not A-X. And when they say *aksed*, it gives the sentence an entirely different meaning" (Lippi-Green 1997:180). And yet, as Lippi-Green demonstrates, there is a "large-scale lack of correspondence between sound and symbol in English" (1997:180). The call-in viewer herself provides several examples of this, Lippi-Green notes, when she fails to aspirate the *h* in *what* and pronounces *spelled* as *spelt* and *different* as *difənt*. Also, instead of pronouncing every sound in *sentence*, she put a glottal stop in the middle of the word, as many SAE speakers do, producing something that sounds more like *se-əns*. So, pronouncing "ask" as "aks" is one of many, many examples of instances when speakers pronounce English words differently from how they are spelled.

Despite the decades of research that have demonstrated the existence within AAE of all of these (and many other) rule-governed phonological, morphological, and syntactic features, according to the language ideologies of many people, AAE remains a highly stigmatized dialect of English. "The real problem with black English," Lippi-Green concludes, "is a general unwillingness to accept the speakers of that language and the social choices they have made as viable and functional" (1997:201). Most scholars (e.g., Labov 2010) believe that AAE will continue to be stigmatized as long as African Americans themselves suffer discrimination.

The Ebonics Controversy

On December 18, 1996, the Board of Education in Oakland, California, passed a resolution declaring that students in the district "possess and utilize a language described in various scholarly approaches as 'Ebonics' (literally Black sounds) or Pan African Communication Behaviors or African Language Systems," and that this way of speaking is "genetically-based and not a dialect of English" (Baugh 2000:43–44). The Board of Education therefore resolved that the Superintendent should set up:

the best possible academic program for imparting instruction to African-American students in their primary language for the combined purposes of maintaining the legitimacy and richness of such language whether it is known as "Ebonics," "African Language Systems," "Pan-African Communication Behaviors" or other description, and to facilitate their acquisition and mastery of English language skills. (Baugh 2000:44)

The Board of Education concluded its resolution by declaring that special fundingshould be allocated to this program, and that the Superintendent should apply for additional state and federal funds earmarked for this purpose. Many commentators assumed that the main goal of the Board was to acquire federal Title VII funds allocated for bilingual education, though the Board subsequently denied this (Baugh 2000:48).

In passing this resolution, the Oakland Board set off a firestorm of debate, much of it ill-informed but extremely interesting linguistically, centering largely on the following questions:

- 1 Is AAE (or "Ebonics," as the School Board called it) a dialect of English, or a separate language?
- 2 How should speakers of AAE and other nonstandard linguistic variants be taught SAE in school? Should AAE be used in educational materials in order to facilitate the acquisition of SAE proficiency, much as bilingual education programs use materials in the students' native languages in order do the same thing?

To these two questions, which were extensively debated at the time, we might add a third: what can we learn about language and race in

the United States nowadays by looking back to the Ebonics controversy of 1996–1997?

First, the issue of the status of AAE, or “Ebonics,”⁸ as a language or a dialect is a contentious one. As was discussed already in chapter 6, there is no set of agreed-upon criteria that will determine whether a way of speaking constitutes a dialect or a language. One cannot say, for example, that if two ways of speaking share at least 68 percent of their vocabulary and 74 percent of their grammar, they are dialects, and if not, they are separate languages. No such metric exists. Instead, the distinction is often a political one that is enmeshed in relations of power and inequality. Ways of speaking associated with nation-states or the groups in a given society with the highest prestige or wealth are generally termed languages or “standard” dialects, while the ways of speaking of less prestigious minority groups that do not control a nation-state are generally considered “mere” dialects, and often “nonstandard” dialects at that. Thus, Mandarin and Cantonese are considered two dialects of Chinese even though they are mutually unintelligible, while Serbian and Croatian, or Hindi and Urdu, or Swedish and Norwegian, are called separate languages, even though their speakers generally have no trouble understanding one another. There is clearly no easily applied measure of linguistic relatedness that accurately and uncontroversially determines whether two ways of speaking should be labeled languages or dialects.

Thus, the status of AAE as a separate language versus a dialect of English is a social and political matter that has little to do with linguistic facts. Scholars who study the history and origins of AAE fall on both sides of this debate. John Baugh, for example, an eminent African American linguist whose work on linguistic profiling will be discussed below, writes the following: “Any suggestion that American slave descendants speak a language other than English is overstated, linguistically uninformed, and – frankly – wrong” (Baugh 2000:41). Geneva Smitherman, on the other hand, another distinguished sociolinguist and educator, disagrees, using AAE itself to state her opinion: “Yeah, uhm sayin ‘language,’ cause I think it is a language” (2005:50).

There is also debate among scholars as to whether AAE owes its distinctive linguistic features more to creoles such as Gullah or Jamaican Creole, or to various dialects of English – or to a combination of influences (Green 2002:8ff). All scholars working on AAE

acknowledge, however, that AAE owes its distinctiveness to the legacy of slavery in the United States. All scholars also agree that AAE, whatever it is called, is rule-governed – just like all other linguistic systems in the world. At the January 1997 meeting of the Linguistic Society of America, a resolution on the Ebonics issue was unanimously passed that stated the following: “What is important from a linguistic and educational point of view is not whether AAVE is called a ‘language’ or a ‘dialect’ but rather that its systematicity be recognized” (Baugh 2000:118).

Turning to the second question about how or whether AAE should be used in schools to facilitate the acquisition among AAE-speaking students of the standard dialect of English, it is important to note the serious educational crisis that the Oakland Board of Education was trying to address (however ineffectively or controversially) in its December 1996 resolution. As John Rickford (2005) reminds us, the Oakland school district was not alone in experiencing extremely high rates of failure and drop-out among its African American population. Other school districts throughout the United States faced similar disparities in school performance at the time – and still do today. The question remains how to address these educational disparities. Although this issue is far beyond the scope of this book, involving as it does complex issues of poverty, racial discrimination, and residential segregation, among other possible contributing factors, the extent to which speaking a nonstandard, stigmatized linguistic variant such as AAE contributes to school problems deserves to be studied further (cf. Labov 2010; Rickford 2005).

Some scholars and educators advocate using some AAE in the classroom in order to help students understand more explicitly the differences between AAE and SAE so that they can more easily master SAE. Such scholars (e.g., Labov 2010) maintain that the students who participate in these kinds of programs are likely to be successful in learning SAE and in developing pride in the linguistic practices of their homes. These debates parallel similar debates in the field of bilingual education – which, although they subsequently denied it, was exactly what the Oakland Board of Education was trying to point out in its resolution.

As a result of the barrage of criticism aimed at the Oakland Board of Education, the Board adopted a revised resolution in January 1997 that

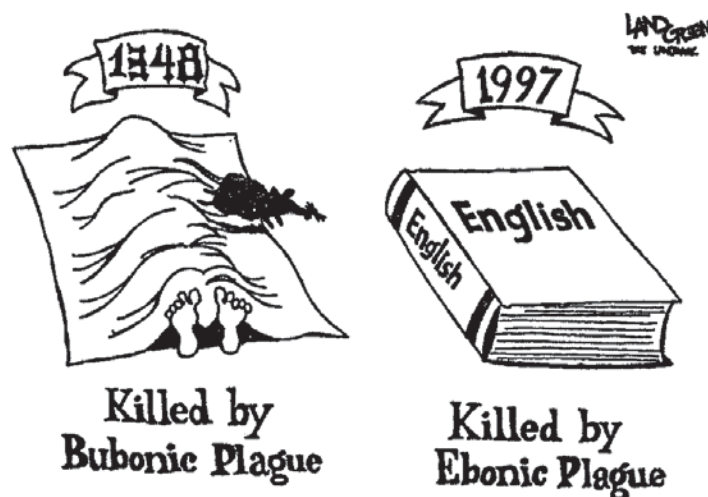


Figure 10.1 "The Ebonic Plague," January 2, 1997. Political cartoon that appeared in the wake of the Ebonics controversy.
Source: Don Landgren Jr.

removed the most controversial phrases, such as "genetically based," and more strongly stated the goal of moving students "from the language patterns they bring to school to English proficiency" (Baugh 2000:44–45). Nevertheless, the Ebonics controversy overall did nothing to improve the educational outcomes of AAE-speaking students in Oakland and elsewhere. No extra money was allocated to helping them become proficient in SAE, and no new AAE-related programs were funded.

Overall, however, were there other benefits that resulted from the public debate over Ebonics in 1996–1997? It is difficult to say, but since many of the commentaries printed in newspapers and broadcast on TV and radio during that time period repeated inaccurate linguistic statements, it is hard to argue that the public became better informed about language and race as a result of the controversy. Moreover, the vehemence and viciousness of some of the cartoons and jokes that made fun of Ebonics as a term and linked it to the Ebola virus and other plagues (see Figure 10.1) probably did more to reinforce racist stereotypes than challenge them. While many public commentators and private individuals had thoughtful things to say about the complexities of the issue, and while many individuals also eloquently described their ambivalences and anguish regarding race, language, education, and economic success, others used the Ebonics controversy as a way to channel their prejudices. Opinions that would have been

unacceptable had they been expressed about African Americans themselves became acceptable when they described the way some African Americans talked.

Racist Language and Racism in Language

Aside from the obvious racist slurs, what constitutes racist language? Jane Hill (2008) argues that the language ideologies that are dominant in the United States, combined with a widespread American folk theory of race, combine to ensure that the everyday talk produced by average white, middle-class Americans and distributed in respected media “continues to produce and reproduce White racism” (2008:47). Far from being an element of the past, Hill maintains, racism “is a vital and formative presence in American lives, resulting in hurt and pain to individuals, to glaring injustice, in the grossly unequal distribution of resources along racially stratified lines, and in strange and damaging errors and omissions in public policy both domestic and foreign” (2008:47–48). And this racism, Hill suggests, is largely produced in and through everyday talk – not through the obvious racist slurs that most people today condemn (though these of course contribute), but through unintentional, indirect uses of language that reinforce racist stereotypes.

As an example of this sort of covert racist discourse, Hill discusses Mock Spanish, which she argues is a way of racializing Spanish speakers in the United States. In order to understand how Mock Spanish can act in this way, according to Hill, it is first necessary to understand a key element of the American folk theory of race and racism. In addition to the mistaken belief, analyzed earlier in this chapter, that race is a biological entity, Hill also maintains that many Americans hold an equally mistaken view of racism: that it is a quality of individuals, and only of those few individuals who are virulently racist, such as white supremacists (Hill 2008:6–7). Instead, Hill argues (and many other scholars agree), racism is more a function of institutions, norms, and practices that facilitate the production of racist effects, so even when individuals do not intend to be racist or discriminatory, their actions may have these effects because of the institutions and norms they act within.

So, what is Mock Spanish? An example that Hill provides is from the film "Terminator 2: Judgment Day," in which Arnold Schwarzenegger plays a robot hero sent from the future to protect a little boy who will one day grow up to save humanity. The little boy, a character named John Connor, tries to teach the Terminator how to sound more "real" and "American" through the use of Mock Spanish phrases such as "No problemo" and "Hasta la vista, baby" (Hill 1998:683; 2008:144–145). Hill provides another example in the form of a hypothetical invitation to go out for a beer: "Let's get together and crack a few cervezas" (2008:42). Other examples include using the Spanish word for tomorrow, *mañana*, or other Spanish words or phrases in everyday English conversations.

Hill acknowledges that the users of Mock Spanish are not in any way being intentionally racist. On the contrary, she says, they believe that they are being humorous, cosmopolitan, and even respectful of Spanish speakers. "I have never found any evidence that they are not completely sincere in these objections, and I believe that the racializing functions of Mock Spanish are genuinely invisible to them," she asserts (2008:42). And yet, Hill also strongly maintains that Mock Spanish elevates whiteness and pejoratively racializes Spanish speakers through a process of indirect indexicality (cf. Urciuoli 1991, 1996). Unlike the direct indexicality involved in Mock Spanish, which explicitly indexes the speaker as humorous or cosmopolitan and is usually fully acknowledged by the speaker, indirect indexicality implicitly indexes negative stereotypes of Mexicans and other Latin Americans as treacherous, lazy, politically corrupt, or sexually loose (1998:683). Hill argues that people who use Mock Spanish must have access to these stereotypes in order to use and interpret the jokes or phrases. For example, someone who says, "*Mañana, mañana*," when answering a question about when s/he will complete a job is indirectly indexing the purported laziness of Mexicans. And the famous "*Hasta la vista, baby*," uttered by the Terminator, indexes the alleged treacherousness of Spanish speakers, Hill suggests. Without awareness of these racialized stereotypes, the Mock Spanish jokes would not be funny and the Mock Spanish phrases would not be intelligible. And when these stereotypes are invoked in this sort of indirect indexicality, Hill argues, the stereotypes are reinforced.

There are undoubtedly many such instances of covert racist discourse in Mock Spanish – and in Mock AAE or Mock Asian (also called

"Yellow English," see Reyes and Lo 2009) – that are illuminated in a valuable way by Hill's analysis. Nevertheless, her approach suffers from a weakness that she herself readily admits (2008:47): her analysis of Mock Spanish is based largely on examples from movies, newspapers, and other forms of mass media rather than from actual everyday conversations. Because we know that language is always multifunctional, I am sure that further analysis of Mock Spanish utterances in actual social contexts would yield a more complex set of meanings than simply covert racism. Utterances often accomplish many social tasks simultaneously, so it is not difficult to imagine instances of Mock Spanish that not only directly index the speaker's humor and indirectly index negative stereotypes but also challenge or parody those stereotypes in some way, for example. Hill alludes to some of the subversive potential in Mock Spanish and other similar linguistic practices (1998:685–686); it will be up to future researchers to investigate these phenomena further.

Other researchers have already begun to explore how other forms of racism are emergent in actual conversations. According to Valentina Pagliai (2009:553), racism is not a quality that individuals have in a static way but rather something that they *do* – that is, rather than being inherently racist individuals, Pagliai argues, some people enact racism through their behavior and conversations. In her research, therefore, Pagliai looks at how racialization occurs interactionally through the ways in which participants in a conversation agree with other speakers (or fail to disagree) when racist comments are made. For example, in this excerpt from a conversation that took place in a barber shop in Tuscany, Italy, the participants co-construct a negative, racialized assessment of immigrants, building on one another's at first subtle indications of disapproval in a deepening of the negative stance, leading to this increasingly racist set of remarks (Pagliai 2009:559–560):⁹

Giuseppe: illnesses, syphilis, who knows what they don't carry

Fabbri: all kinds of things

Giuseppe: malaria

Fabbri: dirt

Giuseppe: they bring dirt

Fabbri: of course

Giuseppe: everything

Pagliai calls this tendency to co-construct an increasingly racist discourse a "spiral effect," which she explains occurs because when speakers receive a positive reception for their mildly negative comments, they are emboldened to make more blatantly negative and eventually outright racist remarks. Thus, Pagliai argues, "The role of conversational agreement cannot be understated. It inevitably works at reinforcing racializing or racist discourses already present in the society, by reproducing them and creating consent around them" (2009:576).

Another way in which racism operates in language is through the process of what John Baugh (2003) calls "linguistic profiling." Focusing mainly on fair access to housing cases, Baugh has conducted experiments in which he called landlords two different times to inquire about the availability of an apartment, the first time using SAE, and the second time using AAE. (Baugh is able to code-switch seamlessly between the two.) In over one hundred calls, Baugh found that his AAE voice (or "guise," since this was a form of a matched guise test) received less than half the number of calls back from the landlords.¹⁰ As obvious as it is that we all make judgments about someone's voice on the phone — as young or old, gay or straight, female or male, and as black, Latino, Asian, or white, perhaps — it is quite difficult to prove this kind of discrimination in court. Moreover, there is a risk that the concept of linguistic profiling could be used against an innocent person. But Baugh's research shows definitively yet another way in which, consciously or unconsciously, racism can be enacted through language.

In a similar set of experiments, Rubin (1992) and Rubin and Smith (1990) conducted matched guise tests with undergraduates (Hill 2008:12). All their research participants heard the same four-minute tape-recorded lecture featuring a woman who was a native speaker of English, but half of the students were shown a slide of a white woman while they listened to the lecture and were told that this was the speaker, while the other half were shown a slide of an East Asian woman. The students in the latter group tended to report that the speaker had a foreign accent, and they even did significantly worse on a comprehension quiz on the material in the lecture — even though these students had heard exactly the same lecture as the students who were shown the photo of a white woman while they listened to the lecture! Clearly, racial categories and racialized language ideologies can influence perceptions even without our being aware of the process.

Language and Racial/Ethnic Identities

There are many fascinating uses of language that are associated with racial and ethnic identity formation. In addition to the rule-governed phonological, morphological, and syntactic features of AAE, for example, there are also distinctive semantic and pragmatic features of AAE – different ways, in other words, that language is used in social settings by AAE speakers compared to SAE speakers (Smitherman 1998). Scholars have studied AAE-specific oral traditions such as the call-and-response patterns often found in African American churches, gospel music, and hip-hop; linguistic practices such as “signifying,” which involves indirectness and cultural allusions; “instigating,” the fabricated conflicts Goodwin (1990) studies among African American girls in Philadelphia; and, most famously perhaps, “the dozens,” which is a competition between two speakers, usually young African American males, involving humor and ritualized insults. African American beauty parlors and barber shops have also been sites for social and linguistic research on the intersections among language, race, and identity formation. Among scholars working in these sites within linguistic anthropology is Lanita Jacobs-Huey (2006), who conducted a fine-grained cultural and linguistic analysis of hair care professionals in the African American community. Jacobs-Huey’s book also contains reflections on the ways in which hair, gender, race, and language all contribute to the process of identity formation among African Americans and “native” anthropologists such as herself (2006:129–147).

Some recent research by scholars explores communities in which race and language are intertwined in unexpected or hybrid ways. For example, Cecilia Cutler (2003) looks at how some white, middle-class teenagers in the New York area have adopted elements from AAE in their speech as a result of their affiliation with hip-hop. Many of these young people develop hybrid and shifting identities, thereby demonstrating the “subtle and intriguing process by which linguistic (and cultural) patterns unexpectedly diffuse across cultural boundaries” (Cutler 2003:213). They may, however, Cutler suggests, eventually revert in adulthood to the more prestigious and economically advantageous SAE that was their native form of English, but while they are

adolescents, they acquire a different form of prestige from adopting the "Hip-Hop Speech Style." Such linguistic practices raise complicated and interesting questions about identity formation, authenticity, and racialized language use.

Another promising approach to research on language, race, and ethnicity is evident in the volume *Beyond Yellow English: Toward a Linguistic Anthropology of Asian Pacific America*, edited by Angela Reyes and Adrienne Lo (2009). As these scholars note, Asian Americans are "uniquely racialized" in the US context. They comprise an extremely diverse group of ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and linguistic practices, and yet they are often lumped together as "model minorities" and "honorary whites," or else as "forever foreign" (2009:7). Linguistically, Asian Americans are often indistinguishable from other groups that use SAE; scholars have found very little evidence of ethnically specific speech variants among these individuals. And yet, just as Guneratne noted with regard to the absence of a single Tharu language not inhibiting the formation of a single Tharu ethnic identity in Nepal, Reyes and Lo argue that a distinctive ethnic dialect is not necessary for the formation of an ethnic identity.

Often, the identities that emerge through linguistic and cultural performances and practices are complex, multifaceted ones. Mary Bucholtz (2009), for example, describes how two female Laotian American high schoolers in San Francisco made different choices in the ethnic identities they crafted agentively, and also exhibited different linguistic practices that operated largely unconsciously but powerfully to affiliate them with different groups in the high school. One of the young women, Nikki, was a former member of the Crips gang and still dressed and spoke using the cultural and linguistic styles associated with gangs. Much like the young white people Cutler studied who borrowed from AAE in their speech, Nikki also used elements of AAE – though AAE was even more deeply enmeshed in her language use than was the case among the young people Cutler studied, as could be seen in her AAE-influenced grammatical features. For example, Nikki used AAE's habitual "be" in the sentence in which she reported her mother's remark upon learning she was involved in a gang: "I know what you be doing" (Bucholtz 2009:30). In addition, she used copula deletion in this utterance (Bucholtz 2009:28):

Nikki: and it's like,
 when you in a gang,
 right,
 (.) you have a little clique,=
 =your own clique,=
 =right.

In contrast to Nikki, Ada, the other Laotian American teenager Bucholtz came to know at the high school, decided that "the perpetuation of the model-minority stereotype was far less harmful than the very immediate dangers of gang culture" (2009:32). Thus, in her dress and language, Ada affiliated more with middle-class white students – the "nerds" of Bucholtz's earlier (1999) study – avoiding gang-related attire and speaking SAE, even though she, like Nikki, came from a working-class refugee family and was not yet quite fluent in English.

In these two case studies, Bucholtz demonstrates the importance of looking closely at actual linguistic and cultural practices in order to understand more fully how ethnic identities are emergent in social interactions. She also shows how, even though many Asian Americans may not speak a distinctive ethnic dialect, it is nonetheless extremely fruitful to see how these individuals "do" ethnicity through their linguistic practices.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored the often controversial, sometimes indirect, but always fascinating ways in which language relates to race and ethnicity. The rule-governed nature of AAE can be seen in the various phonological, morphological, and syntactic features of the AAE linguistic system – though many people still mistakenly consider AAE to be an imprecise or lazy attempt to speak SAE. The Ebonics controversy of 1996–1997 brought into the public realm many opinions and conflicts that had simmered below the surface for years in what Bourdieu would call *doxa*, as opposed to the for/against debates of orthodoxy and heterodoxy of public discourse. The overt and covert racism that could be seen in some of the comments, cartoons, and conversations during the Ebonics controversy can still be

found in other linguistic practices today – in some Mock Spanish (or Mock AAE or Mock Asian), for example, and more subtly in conversational co-constructions in which one participant agrees with, or at least decides not to disagree with, the racist comments of another participant, as Valentina Pagliai has shown.

Because race and ethnicity are so fraught, and also so intertwined with other dimensions of difference, inequality, and identity, such as gender, class, age, and region, it is absolutely crucial that research on these topics involves close attention to language use and, whenever possible, long-term ethnographic fieldwork, because these are the methods that are best able to shed light on the complex and controversial areas of language, power, and agency in the contemporary world.