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Language and Ethnicity

What is ethnicity? Is there a "white" way of speaking? Why do people sometimes borrow features of another ethnic group's language? Why do we sometimes hear an accent that isn't there? This lively overview reveals the fascinating relationship between language and ethnic identity, exploring the crucial role it plays in both revealing a speaker's ethnicity and helping to construct it. Drawing on research from a range of ethnic groups around the world, it shows how language contributes to the social and psychological processes involved in the formation of ethnic identity, exploring both the linguistic features of ethnic language varieties and also the ways in which language is used by different ethnic groups. The first overview of this important topic, *Language and Ethnicity* will be welcomed by students and researchers in sociolinguistics, as well as anybody interested in ethnic issues, language and education, interethnic communication, and the relationship between language and identity.

CARMEN FOUGHT is Associate Professor of Linguistics at Pitzer College, Claremont, California. Her research focuses on issues of language and ethnicity, including the dialects associated with Latinos and Latinas in California, bilingual acquisition, and language attitudes. She is author of *Chicano English in Context* (2003) and *Sociolinguistic Variation: Critical Reflections* (2004).

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To John R. Rickford and Walt Wolfram

charismatic colleagues,
pioneering contributors to the study of language and ethnicity,
and outstanding mentors to generations of other scholars

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Preface

This book is an introduction to the relationship between human language and **ethnicity**. Its purpose is to provide an overview of the main concepts, issues, and debates, as well as a guide to the key research findings in the field. It is the next volume in the Cambridge series "Key Topics in Sociolinguistics," which is appropriate because language and ethnicity is perhaps the epitome of a key topic in our field. Many of the early **sociolinguistic** studies, which launched an entire research tradition, dealt with the relationship of language to ethnicity. Since then, numerous studies of individual communities in which ethnicity plays a role in language variation have been conducted. There is no single work, however, which provides an overview of the main issues and implications of these studies. There are several volumes with the terms "language" and "ethnicity" or "**ethnic identity**" in the title (e.g. Dow 1991, Fishman 2001), but these have tended to focus on questions of nationalism, language rights, and the role of language competence in group identity, rather than variation within a particular language. In other words, books that say they are about "language and ethnicity" are, in practice, more often about "bilingualism and nationality." Because these macro-issues have been well covered in the literature, I have chosen not to address them in detail here, although where bilingualism or **code-switching** illuminates some interesting facet of identity construction, I have included it in the discussion. Mainly, though, I hope to provide a clear and accessible introduction to how ethnicity affects variation within a language or **dialect**, and particularly how that variation is significant for individuals within a group as they seek to express who they are.

Given theoretical shifts in the field of sociolinguistics such that the construction of identity is now treated as central, it is surprising that we have numerous recent works surveying the role of language in the construction of **gender**, for example (e.g. Coates 1998, Talbot 1998, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003), and almost none that survey its role in the construction of ethnic identity at the individual level. There are

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in-depth studies of particular **ethnic groups** (e.g. Rickford 1999, Fought 2003) and more recently a few eclectic collections that unite contributions on very disparate topics (e.g. Harris and Rampton 2003), but no one comprehensive work on how the process of constructing an ethnic identity through language works, from start to finish. My goal is to offer the reader a window into the social and psychological processes that are involved in the construction of ethnic identity, and to show how language is both a mirror for reflecting these processes and a part of the process itself. By drawing on research from a wide range of different ethnic groups around the world, I hope to provide readers with a larger picture of how language and ethnicity are related. Moreover, my focus will be on both *form* (**linguistic variables**) and *function* (uses of language), tying together the **variationist** sociolinguistic approach and other, more **discourse**-oriented approaches, which are sometimes treated as secondary in sociolinguistic research but provide valuable insights that cannot be neglected.

I have divided the book into three sections. The first looks at general issues in ethnicity and language, beginning with the question of what we mean by "ethnicity," and moving on to an overview of the complexities of how ethnic identities are constructed through language. The second section looks at the process of constructing ethnic identity in specific groups. There is a chapter each on African Americans and on Latino groups in the USA, both of which have been the focus of copious research. These groups offer two very different windows into the relevant issues, particularly because in one group the variation occurs within dialects of English, while in the other language choice and code-switching both have an important role. Another chapter compares and contrasts the construction of ethnic identity in three very different multiethnic settings around the world. There is also a chapter on the construction of ethnic identity by dominant "white" groups, and one that looks at dialect contact in interethnic settings and how research in this area has informed sociolinguistic theory. The last section focuses on questions of language use. It explores the role of **pragmatics** and **discourse features** in ethnic identity, and how these can lead to miscommunication. It also looks at issues of language prejudice and the consequences of linguistic biases for society. Finally, there is a chapter exploring the relatively new topic of "**crossing**": the use of language associated with an ethnic group to which the speaker does not belong.

I don't know if I would say that language is a sensitive topic, but ethnicity most certainly is, and so I have thought hard at every turn about how to discuss these topics in a way that is both informative

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and ethically responsible. I have done my best to respect everyone. I have tried not to use the words "the African-American community" as if it were one big entity, or talk about what "Latinas" do, as if there were a consensus among them all. I have tried not to act as though the United States is the center of the known universe. I have tried not to claim anything that I could not possibly know without going through the day as a Black South African or an elderly Maori man, or a member of any other group to which I do not belong. I have written about these complex topics in my own voice, which I feel is the only way I could have any hope of addressing them truthfully, even if it means that I deviate at times from the level of formality we normally associate with academic styles. I have tried to tackle complicated and emotionally charged questions with honesty and open admission of the many ways in which I (in particular) or we (in general) simply may not have answers.

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