Introduction

The study of African American language is the study of how people of African descent use language as a cultural resource that in turn represents, constructs and mediates social reality. I learned this truth as I was growing up on Chicago's segregated South Side in the late 1950s. When people in my childhood neighborhood talked about language and communication, as they frequently did, they referred to racial, social and regional differences and the importance of style and ambiguity in conversing with those in positions of power, especially under white supremacy. They also expressed great love and respect for conversations that were deeply ambiguous. Everyday conversations were always filtered through proverbs, references to past events and people. The past was never a concept about time but about perspective, the type of perspective that meant that even young children were told the truth about life in America – "All you *have* to do is stay black and die."

There were always people "passing through" our home. My family included my grandfather, father, mother, aunts, uncles and five sisters. Together we lived on the top two floors of a three-story apartment building – with our apartments separated by sixteen stairs in the front and fourteen in the back. To us kids this separation meant little, as we proved daily when we jumped (or flew), in one fell swoop, from our place at the top of the back steps to the rest of my family at the bottom. From my perspective, whoever visited the family visited me, and I always tried to find a comfortable spot under a table or out of the way so that I could hear the fantastic stories told by our many guests. They included jazz musicians like Hazel Scott, Billy Eckstine and Sarah Vaughn, Pullman porters, politicians, laborers, underworld dealers, dancers and various representatives from the "respectable" middle class. One of my most vivid memories of these times is of an extraordinary woman named Mrs. Jackson.[1]

Mrs. Jackson always walked slowly, dragging her feet and shifting her weight from one hip to the other – as she carried two enormous weathered leather bags. She seemed to be hidden under layers of deeply hued fabric. When she completed her greetings, which included hugging and

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teasing adults and children alike, Mrs. Jackson would collapse onto a chair. Breathing a sigh of relief, but holding onto her bags, she would look at my sisters and me as though she knew everything about us. We thought she was a strange woman, and we liked that about her. We would sit in a row on the couch and wait for her to catch her breath. Once she was settled she would look at us, as though she could see deeply within, and ask in a sonorous voice: "What do you know about slavery?" She would lean close and whisper; "Do you know who Paul Robeson is?" "Have you heard of Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglas, the Harper's Ferry?" I'm not sure whether we knew any of the names and events before she spoke them but one thing was certain. When those names came across her lips we knew that we were about to learn something that was not just an important and great secret, but that was also the best secret of all! She was prepared to guide us through history to knowledge of what it meant to be black in America – and we knew that some of the answers were in her bags.

As she spoke, Mrs. Jackson would reach deep into her sacks and pull out her "special treasures" of tattered books and pamphlets. She would whisper the word *special* as though her books' very existence depended on our valuing them. Mrs. Jackson would then perform dramatic readings of slave narratives that were both enlightening and frightening. Then she would have us reenact our escape from slavery to freedom on the Underground Railroad!

My sisters and I competed for roles that included the slave catcher, evil overseer, the evil plantation owners, the benevolent yet complicit plantation wife, the sell-out and scared slave, the knowing survivor and, finally, the brave warrior on the way to freedom! It was never clear who would get to hold the whip and who would be on the receiving end under the evils of slavery as reenacted through sibling rivalries. No matter when Mrs. Jackson arrived, I always wanted to be the warrior slave on the way to freedom. Mrs. Jackson would exhort us to get the "real feel" of slavery. She insisted that in our respective roles, masters should talk like masters – "speak direct, enunciate, sound cold!" She also insisted that slaves should talk like slaves. She'd say, "You're slaves, so speak slowly – like you don't know nothing! Bow your heads to the white people! If they notice what's on your mind they'll catch you, give you the whip and take you back!"

We encountered evil in all forms on our escape from slavery. We reveled in our walk and flight to freedom and mourned those who never made it. We learned to laugh and cry about slavery and racism in America. We learned how to live with both the truth and the lie with humanity, dignity and resolve. Until my Underground Railroad experience, I never

understood why my mother would get so angry when I said, "OK, I hear you" in response to an order or advice she gave. I thought she was irritated because she knew I intentionally didn't respond immediately and directly. After my walk to freedom, I understood that my mother meant much more when she said, "I know you hear me – But girl, you'd better start listening!" She was warning me that words not only describe – they reflect and construct cultural experience. And hearing is only the beginning.

My childhood memories about language and wisdom in the black community remain vivid not only because they are about family, but also because they are recalled in everyday interactions. And participating in them not only brings me home, but it rekindles the joy of a community that strongly believes that the most difficult aspect of communication is figuring out what someone actually means, and why they said it the way they did. And this is tied to the importance of character – something you can't claim yourself, but has to be verified by those around you. Whether one's character is good or bad is not the point. What matters is that you must be able to express who you are and be able to determine who you are dealing with. And the analysis of people is through social relations, language and the presentation of self. That's why people who don't respect African American English (AAE) scare me, especially if they're black. I mean, how will they know when they've been told the secret? What if they "miss that train?"

America's fascination with the language and interaction styles of African Americans has arguably resulted in it being the most studied and best-known dialect in the world. It shows no sign of abating. This is remarkable for several reasons. First, African Americans are only 12 percent of the US population and not all people of African descent speak varieties of AAE.[2] Second, there are competing and often contradictory arguments over its status as a language or dialect. Similarly, there are numerous social, political, cultural and linguistic arguments concerning its development and continued use.

Accordingly, this book explores African American language, verbal style and discourse in African American culture in particular and American culture in general. In this sense, I focus on language as both a cultural production and social construct. It is a cultural production because it is based on values and norms that exist throughout African American communities. It is also a social construct because it is the vehicle by means of which much social activity occurs and through which roles, relationships and institutions are negotiated. Consequently, this text reviews but does not dwell on purely linguistic arguments and the proofs and debates typical in linguistic science. Rather, one aim of this text is to place much of the linguistic discussion within the changing and

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complex African American and general American speech communities
and within their significant cultural, public, artistic, political, institutional
and social contexts.

The community where African American speech is employed is rich
and diverse in terms of members, contexts for usage and attitudes toward
it. A cursory glance at television programs, movies, music videos, news
broadcasts and popular publications gives some indication of the contra-
dictory attitudes toward black language and discourse style. Americans
hypocritically want to get rid of it, speak it, keep it, regulate it, stereotype
it, write it, call it a language, call it a dialect, rename it, claim it and blame
it for the problems of black youth!

The extent of the conflicted attitude toward African American English
erupted on December 18, 1996, when the Oakland, California, Unified
School District Board of Education approved a language education
policy for speakers of African American English that – they argued –
affirmed Standard English language development for all children. The
policy included a training program to enable "teachers and administra-
tors to respect and acknowledge the history, culture, and language that
the African American student brings to school." In referring to the chil-
dren's speech, the school district wrote, "This language has been stud-
ied for several decades and is variously referred to as Ebonics (literally
'black sounds'), or 'Pan-African Communication Behaviors,' or 'African
Language Systems.'" The Oakland plan incorporated African American
history and culture and Ebonics in the language arts curriculum. The
popular response was swift and akin to hysterical outrage. With few ex-
ceptions, progressive African American politicians and public figures like
the political leader Jesse Jackson and novelist and poet Maya Angelou
rushed to decry Oakland's proposal and express their anguish. The imme-
diate rejection of the Oakland plan aligned heretofore-progressive politi-
cians and artists with political conservatives who derided the decision as
one more example of liberal political correctness gone awry. The me-
dia circus that ensued was a surreal American replay of cultural critic
Kobena Mercer's (1994) analysis of the strange bedfellows that have
also emerged in Black British politics. Though to some, Oakland was
simply a case of "déjà vu all over again," for many linguists who study
African American language and communication, it was much more than
that.

The debates surrounding the declaration were similar to the acrimony
that followed two earlier proposals concerning African American English.
The proposals were the Ann Arbor legal case on Black English in edu-
cation, which was settled in 1979, and a later study in 1985 by William
Labov on the divergence of African American and white urban dialects

(Labov and Harris, 1986; Morgan, 1994b; Smitherman, 1981a, b). In the Ann Arbor case (also known as the King case), parents successfully sued their children's school because it consistently placed poor African American children in remedial classes. In the divergence studies scholars found that black and white children's language varieties were growing further apart and predicted that the black children's continued use of Black English would lead to further failure in school. These two highly publicized events concerning language education and socialization remain of great interest for several reasons. First, they both raised and politicized questions concerning what is African American English, who speaks it and why it exists. They also revealed that AAE research often conflicts with language and education policy and planning. The arguments also embodied the intricacies and webs of social and cultural life that entangle arguments of language and identity. Thus, the African American community's response to the various plans and proposals exposed the existence of a well-integrated ideology regarding language, culture and education. Perhaps surprisingly to linguists, popular culture's interest in and response to the plan highlighted the contradictions and festering antagonisms between the pervasiveness of African American culture and language in mass cultural production and resentment toward it. Finally, despite the fact that each proposal incorporated different views on the function of AAE in education, all plans were rejected by significant segments of the African American community. Thus in many respects the furor that followed the Oakland decision was not simply about education, or African Americans. Rather, it was about language as a symbol of culture, politics, nationalism, identity and power.

In the late 1960s, when linguists began to analyze what had been highly subjective depictions of black speech, they recognized the social importance of their work within a politically charged climate. What they could not predict was that AAE would continue to be central to African American identity in particular and the fields of sociolinguistics and cultural studies in general. For those who study language ideology and politics, it is not surprising that in the process of critiquing AAE, the larger society at times succumbs – albeit dazed and confused – to its charms. This has been in the form of caricatures like the white rapper Vanilla Ice, who attempted to invent a hard-core ghetto identity, to white rapper Eminem who, as black female rapper Missy Eliot put it, "knows he's white" because he focuses on his circumstances and his own perspective while demonstrating knowledge of urban African American cultural values. In either case, vexing questions of authenticity and exploitation abound within the reality of whites getting rich as they perform appropriated and well-circulated stereotypes of black youth behavior.

This appropriation, coupled with criticism, has led to more complex concerns from an African American community that is challenged by the following elaborate question: "What happens to identity when language styles, which constitute a group's culture, are removed from their cultural context and cast out onto film, novels, electronic networks, videos, police dramas, comic formats and so on?" This type of inquiry tends to unify the African American community, eliding social class conflicts, while provoking analyses of marginalization, power, racism, sexism, exploitation and cultural imperialism in American society. And it leads to the question that often throws black middle-class youth, who are socialized within African American culture but do not fit popular stereotypes, into unfathomable contortions: *Will the* real *and* authentic *intellectually defined black person please stand up?*

The ethical concerns inherent in these questions were highlighted in April 1998, when *Boston Magazine* referred to Harvard University's chair of the Department of Afro-American Studies and the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research as the "Head Negro in Charge" (HNIC). HNIC is a term created by African Americans that deconstructs and critiques white privilege and its effects. As such, it has multiple and often contradictory references. HNIC can be used to refer to African Americans who have assumed a position from which blacks have previously been excluded because of their race. And in this case it is a cultural high-five.[3] It can also be used to refer to blacks in positions of responsibility that are adored by whites in particular, but doubted by many blacks. In this instance, it is employed as a critique of collaboration with white privilege, implying that the black leader is following someone else's orders. So HNIC can be a direct compliment. It can also indirectly signify on the black person and is an admonishment. And it signifies on white people, who believe that they know and can select the one black person to represent all African Americans. Thus the referential meaning of the expression is contextually sensitive and politically laden.[4] Yet, the white editor of *Boston Magazine* confidently placed it on the cover and defended his use of the expression because "black people use it." But he neither questioned nor seemed to understand how black people used it and why the black perspective should have been addressed for the sake of all concerned. These types of popular incidents attach urgency to the question of "what to do" and demonstrate that language and verbal style, as products and instruments of cultural practice, which are simply "out there," without their cultural framework and social context are actually "somewhere" and susceptible to another culture's interpretive machinery.

This book is concerned with all of the issues described above and focuses on cultural beliefs and practices, social life and institutions, as well as

linguistic and historical information related to the African American
experience in the US. That is, its aim is to identify and analyze the
attitudes, norms, changes, developments and innovations of language
and verbal form and function within society. In this respect, this book
is one of many multidisciplinary bodies of work in African American
studies. It is based on cross-generational qualitative and quantitative anal-
yses that address gender and socioeconomic status and their impact on
language and identity. While it includes diverse sectors of the popula-
tion, it adds to the growing body of scholarship on women's language
and interaction. It incorporates language and communicative practices
within social and cultural frameworks as well as interpretations in the
arts, popular culture and education.

The analysis presented here is the result of fieldwork, interviews and
research I conducted with African American women, youth and fami-
lies over the past fifteen years in Chicago, Philadelphia, Los Angeles and
Mississippi. It has involved the collaboration of many men and women
who rejected the role of informer and became collaborators and contrib-
utors. In order to participate in these communities, I also explored the
material culture typical in the homes and neighborhoods. This has in-
cluded reading neighborhood newspapers, numerous magazines, watch-
ing television programs, going to movies in black theaters, listening to
radio programs and exploring all the materials that speech community
members deemed valuable.

African American English is important to African American people.
Whether they celebrate or criticize it, it is the evidence of what they have
been through. The speaker who relies on its most vernacular form repre-
sents his or her social world and the encroachments of racism and class
inequities. The successful adult who claims an allegiance to standard,
"good" speech uses language as proof that the escape from racism is suc-
cessful and over. The teenager who confronts and confounds the world
with language games and verbal usage that celebrates the dialect is rec-
ognizing its power. And the college student and computer specialist who
uses elite speech when working and AAE when theorizing and plotting
to overtake the world evokes home. African American English is part
and parcel of social, cultural and political survival. It is about ideas, art,
ideology, love and memory.

Despite the many changes that have occurred within the black com-
munity, African Americans remain central to national discourses about
identity, culture and representation. Yet many of these discourses, even
at the highest levels of power, are organized around misinformation, mis-
conceptions, and, at times, vicious stereotypes about African Americans.
By presenting more accurate portrayals of African American values and

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cultural practices, based on thoughtful and committed research, I believe
that black scholars can and must do their part in transforming these dis-
courses into more meaningful and productive exchanges of information,
experiences and possibilities.

The book is organized into six chapters. Each chapter begins with an
analysis of field notes that frames issues within conversation and daily life.
The first chapter, "The African American speech community: culture,
language ideology and social face," focuses on the role of local knowledge
and history in the development of the urban speech community. Within
this chapter, many sociological and psychological descriptions of African
Americans and concepts such as social face and double consciousness
are discussed within a theory of language and social interaction.

The second chapter, "Forms of speech: verbal styles, discourse and in-
teraction," explores African American interaction and verbal style within
a complex system of social face and character representation that incorpo-
rates hearers, overhearers and others who may be in a position to evaluate
an interaction. In particular, it explores communicative practices indica-
tive of African American interaction including the verbal game of "the
dozens," conversational signifying, indirectness, turn taking, strategic
overlap and timing.

Chapter 3, "Language norms and practices," focuses on the symbolic
and practical functions of African American English (AAE) and General
English (GE). It explores the relationship between language, race and so-
cial class and issues of code switching, style shifting and identity "reading
dialect" and grammar. It incorporates data from Philadelphia to explore
the use, role and status of AAE and GE in narratives. Chapter 4, "When
women speak," is an analysis and critique of the current scholarship
on African American women's speech. This chapter uses ethnographic
observations and reviews the current literature to describe and analyze
discourse, conversation and verbal styles of African American women
across generations. It looks at women's language socialization and how
girls grow from instigating to incorporating conversational signifying and
other styles of interaction.

Chapter 5, "Urban youth language: black by popular demand," ex-
plores the language ideology and practices of urban youth affiliated
with the social organization, culture and politics of hip hop music. Hip
hop's impact on adolescent social networks and value systems is dis-
cussed in relation to crew and speech community formation, style, iden-
tity and language. Chapter 6, "Language, discourse and power: outing
schools," provides a comprehensive review of how African American
English scholarship has been employed in educational policy and how
the African American community responds to planning that incorporates

AAE usage. It reviews arguments concerning dialect readers and other planning instruments. In particular it examines the educational, political and cultural forces and issues behind the 1996 Oakland School District decision and other cases that affected the education of African American children.

The burgeoning arguments and discourses about texts, signs and signifiers have thrust linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics and linguistic philosophy into a more public arena. With this new recognition and audience has come an urgency to resist the separation of language and meaning from society and culture. This historical moment is therefore not simply the erasure or merging of boundaries, but the introduction of analyses which consider the complex, multilayered lives of people who have established, sustained and continue to maintain their communities and who live and work with others. Not surprisingly, while one aim of this book is to describe and analyze contemporary language and communication among African Americans in the US, its main focus is on language as an aspect of culture and the ways in which it mediates identity across cultural and social contexts. So in many respects this book is also an exploration and analysis of African American language ideology. It is about why and how a variety of language and a way of talking – whether denigrated or celebrated – remains something precious and worth preserving.

1   The African American speech community: culture, language ideology and social face

One hot, humid evening in August 1992, after about a month of fieldwork in Mississippi, I was driving alone on a desolate highway from Magnolia to Lexington. The car radio was blaring as a caller explained that she had ended her relationship with a man who had "done her wrong!" The deejay was in fine form as she kept playing "Drop that Zero," a song about a woman who could "do bad all by herself!" As I sang along with the fifth broadcast of the tune in one hour, I suddenly noticed something in the night that paralyzed me with fear. It was a road sign that read, "Crossing the Big Black River."

During my stay in Jackson and Magnolia, people would give me the names and locations of family and friends who lived near the Black River. These names were offered whenever talk turned to the times when "You had to *know your place* in front of white people!" And "You could get into trouble for *speaking* like a grown man or woman!" These statements were often punctuated with ironic laughter, knowing nods and tense smiles. Invariably, someone would quietly ask me: "Have you been to the Black River yet? You need to go." Or begin their story: "There was a store . . . " or "You remember when Booker T went to that juke joint near the Black River and . . ." Their voices would trail off, never completing the story, and they would say earnestly, "You need to go there." At first I thought the name was a joke. It wasn't. While I knew that I would understand their past and present lives much better if I visited the Black River, I also sensed that they were cautioning me.

Later, a friend confirmed my worst fears. Countless black people had disappeared near that river. The names were an offering and a way to remember loved ones who were killed "for trying to be a man." The name offering was also a warning and test to see if I knew better than to go asking questions about black life and racism in those parts. I wrote in my notes, I have to learn to hear their warning – "Cousin Joe who 'wasn't never afraid of nobody'" The country store that was "always full of white people!" The bar and fish and chicken shack that they were never allowed to enter from the front – and the Black River. I had heard them.

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