1   White styles: language, race, and youth identities

Introduction

At Bay City High School, a large, multiracial urban public school in the San Francisco Bay Area, race was a frequent topic in classrooms, hallways, and the schoolyard. But it was also an uncomfortable topic for many students, who preferred not to be racially labeled. One such student was Damien. A tall, thin sophomore with pale skin and wiry light brown hair, Damien was a talented artist and athlete who spent much of his time at school with a group of African American boys. His speech was influenced by African American Vernacular English, the linguistic variety used in his friendship group, and his clothing and hairstyle reflected current African American youth fashion. Damien attracted the curiosity of a number of his classmates of all ethnoracial backgrounds, because they could not figure out whether he was in fact black, and he himself refused to discuss his racial identity. By controlling this information and affiliating with African American youth language and culture, Damien was able to present an identity that aligned him with his friends without allowing others to categorize him racially.[1]

Damien's situation, which was unusual but by no means unique at Bay City High School, presents a number of challenges to commonly held views of identity as either a social category or a psychological state. First, individuals do not passively inhabit identity categories to which they have been assigned; rather, they negotiate and navigate these categories in a variety of ways within social interaction. As a result, the social classification of any given individual is not necessarily obvious to others, and one's assigned social category is not always the same as one's social identity. In the above case, for example, Damien's classmates were unable to classify him racially, and although some students believed he was European American, he did not embrace this category as his racial identity, at least at school.

Second, identities are not merely a matter of individual psychology. They are fundamentally the outcome of social practice and social interaction, because it is only within and by means of interaction with others in the course of daily

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activities that identities become evident and consequential, to oneself as well as to others. Damien's affiliation with African American youth culture, after all, was only evident because of the ways in which he displayed his involvement in that culture through his speech, his activities, and his choice of friends. Nor are identities entirely based in individual subjectivity, for how one presents one's own identity is shaped by how one interprets the identities of others, and an individual's self-presentation may be quite different from how she or he is interpreted by others.

Third, no single aspect of identity is independent of other aspects. Race and ethnicity are not separable from other components of identity such as gender, social class, sexuality, and so on, and an individual's identity cannot be arrived at simply by listing the social categories to which she or he is assigned. Identity instead operates as a repertoire of styles, or ways of doing things that are associated with culturally recognizable social types. Individuals position themselves stylistically and are stylistically interpreted by others as they present themselves within a given social context as specific kinds of people who engage in particular social practices. These styles go well beyond familiar demographic categories like race and gender to encompass entire ways of being in the social world – from talk to clothing to everyday activities – that involve more culturally specific sorts of identities. In this way styles create distinctions within as well as between broad social categories: Damien's style, for example, was influenced by African American youth culture, but other styles were available to students at Bay City High School, and each of these local styles was inflected by race, gender, social class, and other broad dimensions of identity.

This book is rooted in an understanding of identity as the social positioning of self and other. Social actors may take up various kinds of positions with respect to one another (Bucholtz and Hall 2005): similarity and difference, or *adequation* and *distinction*; realness and falseness, or *authentication* and *denaturalization*; and legitimacy and nonlegitimacy, or *authorization* and *illegitimation*. While these identity relations – and no doubt others besides – often work together, considering each of them and their component parts separately is analytically valuable, since it allows for a greater degree of specificity about the sorts of positions and relations involved in particular instances of identity construction.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted in the mid-1990s at Bay City High School, in the following chapters I examine how white teenagers in the multiracial context of the school used language along with other social practices to position themselves both stylistically and racially within interaction. Scholars have recognized for decades that language is vital to the processes through which identities are created, mobilized, and transformed. The so-called "linguistic turn" or "discursive turn" throughout the humanities and social sciences has called attention to the ways that language brings the social world

into being. But much of this scholarship, coming as it has from outside of linguistics and related fields, focuses on some aspects of language and not others, and often what is termed *language* or *discourse* in this research is quite different from the object of investigation in studies conducted by linguists. One central goal of this book is to demonstrate that the conceptual and analytical tools of sociocultural linguistics further enrich the study of identity all across the disciplines by revealing in delicate detail precisely how language is pressed into service as part of ongoing identity projects, as well as how the identity work of individuals is implicated in larger sociopolitical structures and processes.

My decision to focus primarily on European American students in my analysis emerges from the specific historical, cultural, and geographic context in which I did my research. At the time of my study, Bay City High had no racial majority; the two largest racialized groups were European Americans and African Americans. But these two groups encompassed a wide range of variability, and I became interested in the diverse ways that white youth positioned themselves stylistically in relation to one another as well as to students of color, and especially to black youth. I also noticed that even European American teenagers with different styles racially positioned themselves in strikingly similar ways. Due in part to widely publicized and highly sensationalized racial tensions between black and white students during the time of my research, many students, teachers, parents, and community members viewed the school as racially divided. In this context, my study became an examination of how European American youth linguistically constructed a range of identities for themselves and others within the ethnoracial landscape of Bay City High School at a time of significant racial turmoil.

The experience of white students at Bay City High in the mid-1990s was part of a much larger ethnoracial shift that is still taking place across the United States, a shift in which youth are at the very forefront. Even within the extremely diverse San Francisco Bay Area, the setting of this study, many adults live in largely white social worlds. Their children, however, often do not. Public schools are increasingly sites of ongoing cross-racial encounter, as school populations become "majority minority" – that is, predominantly composed of students of color – not only in California but all across the United States (e.g., Prescott 2008). As the relative numbers of European Americans decline in public schools, white students confront race and especially their own whiteness on a daily basis, sometimes for the first time in their lives.

But even those white youth whose schools remain more or less racially homogeneous may also encounter racial difference through their engagement in youth culture. For the past two decades, many European American teenagers have had to take some sort of stance toward the dominant form of African American youth culture, hip hop, which has emerged as the most influential form of youth culture both nationally and internationally in this time period.

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Developing in primarily black communities in New York City in the 1970s, hip hop encompasses MCing (performing rap rhymes), DJing (musical improvisation using a mixer and turntables), breakdancing, and graffiti art, among other practices. Members of the Hip Hop Nation – an ingroup term for the culture – also share a distinctive linguistic style, which includes slang, genres of verbal performance, and typically at least some elements of African American Vernacular English (Alim 2006).

Not all European American youth embrace hip hop – on the contrary, as I demonstrate in this book, this style is only one choice among others – but many white teenagers must take a position toward hip hop culture's music, fashions, and other stylistic practices, whether that position is passionate involvement, passing interest, indifference, or active disdain. As the newest form of African American youth culture to claim this sort of stylistic authority among European American youth, hip hop is merely the latest iteration of a longstanding series of cross-racial appropriations of black cultural and musical forms, including jazz, blues, rock, reggae, and soul (e.g., Daley 2003; Hall 1997; Jones 1988; McMichael 1998). To be sure, in a number of local communities, Latino and Asian American forms of youth culture may also become stylistic resources for white teenagers, and conversely, cultural practices originating among European Americans may be taken up by youth of color. However, in the high school where I conducted the ethnographic fieldwork for this study, like many others around the country, African American youth culture shaped stylistic practice for young people of all races and ethnicities.

My analysis focuses in particular on how white youth identities at Bay City High School were constructed in significant part through language. In the following chapters, I examine the multiple styles of whiteness that were available to European American teenagers as they aligned themselves with local youth cultures, both black and white. In this process, language, from pronunciation to slang to grammar, was a crucial symbolic resource that allowed youth to locate themselves not just in relation to adults on the one hand and young children on the other but more importantly in relation to their peers. In addition to this symbolic dimension of language, I demonstrate the role of white youth's talk about race in reproducing larger American ideologies of racial difference. Such discourse generally promoted white interests by downplaying the structural power that European American students at the school enjoyed as well as the significance of race itself. Yet in this ethnographic setting whiteness was also unstable, as European American teenagers navigated competing discourses of race offered up by their parents, their peers, and the school. The instability of whiteness was evident in the complex ways in which white youth talked about – and often around or against – racial topics.

The present chapter discusses the importance of language in constituting racial identities as social realities and the need to examine such identities in the

cultural and interactional contexts in which they emerge. I first discuss the centrality of language in maintaining and transforming race (and its related counterpart, ethnicity) in the United States in various ways. I then consider how recent sociocultural linguistic research on identity and style helps shed light on racial issues, especially in relation to youth. Finally, I examine the different ways in which whiteness is conceptualized as an ethnoracial category and argue for an understanding of whiteness as a racial identity that emerges through language and other forms of social action in specific cultural contexts. In this way, the present book adds to a growing field of research on the linguistic aspects of race and their critical role in constituting and altering the racial order.

Language and race

Language is often overlooked as an analytic concern in research on race, yet it is nonetheless central to how race is culturally understood. Language and race intersect in three main ways: in the use of racial terms, in discourse that takes race as its topic, and in the symbolic use of linguistic forms as ways of speaking associated with specific racialized groups. While these issues potentially over-lap, each involves somewhat different aspects of meaning, both linguistic and social.

The racial lexicon: terms and labels

Systems of racial labels have been used to classify human beings for the past three centuries and more. These systems are based on ideologies – cultural beliefs that serve the interests of some social groups over those of other groups. Ideologies are so pervasive that it is often difficult for their proponents to view the world in any other way. Yet all ideologies are produced in specific social and historical contexts as resources for gaining or maintaining power, and they are therefore subject to contestation and change.

As a concept, race does not account for actual patterns of human genetic variation (Long 2003). Yet as a sociopolitical system for classifying human beings, it remains a powerful force. When I refer to *race* in this book, I mean this social construct, not a set of categories with a supposed biological basis. At other times I use terms such as *racialization* and *racialized* to highlight the fact that current ideas about race are the contingent and changeable result of specific historical, cultural, and political processes.

Racial classification is often contrasted with ethnic classification, but these two ways of categorizing human beings are closely linked. Whereas race is ideologically grounded in the notion of biological difference, ethnicity is rooted instead in the notion of cultural difference based on language of heritage, national background, and other factors. Nevertheless, race and ethnicity also

share significant ideological foundations. Both forms of categorization rely on essentialism, an ideology that social groups are clearly delineated, internally homogeneous, and fundamentally different from other groups. Essentialism treats the characteristics of group members as inherent, fixed qualities that are either biologically or culturally determined (or both).

Race and ethnicity are deeply intertwined in both everyday and institutional forms of discourse. In principle, in institutional discourses such as government or medicine, *race* is reserved for categories that are based on observable physical qualities, and *ethnicity* for those based on language, culture, and national origin. In practice, however, the current classification system used within the United States combines both types of categories, and terms for ethnic and racial groups are often treated as synonymous: *African Americans* or *blacks*, *Asian Americans* or *Asians* (categories that sometimes also include groups of Pacific Islander descent), *European Americans* or *whites* (or sometimes *Caucasians*, a remnant of an earlier pseudoscientific system of racial classification). By contrast, within the US Census and similar institutions, Latinos (or Hispanics) are usually classified as an ethnic rather than a racial group, and Native Americans (or American Indians) are usually classified as a racial group, although individual tribal affiliation may sometimes also be specified. Ethnicity is further complicated by the fact that according to the most common definition, even the supposedly ethnic classifications in the above list are strictly speaking panethnic, since they incorporate multiple cultural, national, and linguistic backgrounds within a single overarching category (Lopez and Espiritu 1990).

The notion of ethnicity is applied asymmetrically across racialized groups. Ethnicity is often treated as obligatory for people of color but optional for whites: terms such as *ethnic food* in the grocery store or *ethnic models* in the fashion industry typically refer to cultures and people that are not classified as white. For many second-, third-, or later-generation European Americans, ethnic identity is an optional lifestyle choice displayed via such cultural trappings as ethnic food, costume, and holiday celebrations (Alba 1990; Waters 1990). Whites may alternatively choose to downplay their ethnic heritage and may even claim not to "have an ethnicity." It is more difficult for Americans of color to opt out of ethnicity, since they are ideologically positioned as racially and ethnically different from European Americans. Because American understandings of race are so closely interconnected with ethnicity, throughout this book I use the racial and (pan)ethnic terms for the above categories more or less interchangeably. The term *ethnoracial* is used where both race and ethnicity are relevant to the discussion; I also use *race/racial* as a cover term for both issues when the distinction is not crucial to the argument. I use the more specific term *ethnicity/ethnic* when I intend that particular meaning.

From the preceding discussion, it is clear that racial and ethnic labels, as well as the words *race* and *ethnicity* themselves, are by no means straightforward and therefore require analytic attention. The examination of racial terms typically involves some consideration of their semantics, or referential meaning. However, it is most useful to analyze lexical items not in isolation or in decontextualized lists but in discourse – connected stretches of language used in specific contexts.

The content and structure of racial discourse

Racial discourse includes all talk or writing about race or racialized issues, from everyday conversations to political speeches to discussions on the Internet. The linguistic analysis of racial discourse considers both content (what is said) and structure (how it is said), as well as the social context in which such discourse is produced, circulated, and interpreted by others. For many scholars outside of linguistics, however, the notion of discourse is often broader than it is for linguists, referring not simply to particular instances of speech or writing but more generally to the way in which a topic (such as race) is conceptually framed at a particular historical and cultural moment, especially within powerful institutional contexts like government, medicine, law, or education. Such cultural discourses are akin to ideologies in that they are culturally shared sets of beliefs that are often understood as simply "the truth" yet in fact bring social reality into being.

This understanding of discourse is also shared by a rather different approach to discourse, interactional analysis, which views spontaneous spoken language as the machinery that produces the social world moment by moment. In this approach, the structures of power authorized by institutional discourse are less central, and the agency of social actors instead takes center stage as speakers negotiate meaning within interaction. A fundamental principle of interactional analysis is that through talk, language users orient to the world as socially meaningful and thereby continuously and jointly create social reality, including their own and one another's identities (Antaki and Widdicombe 1998; Tracy 2002). For this reason, interactional researchers speak of social actors as actively "doing" race, gender, and other identities within interaction rather than simply "being" members of various social categories (Fenstermaker and West 2002). Thus in a very fundamental way, talk about race brings race into being by bringing it into discourse. At the same time, such talk also enables speakers to negotiate and challenge what race means in a given social context.

The relationship between race and language, however, is not always as overt as the use of racial labels or racial discourse. The final point of intersection between race and language, racialized linguistic practice, involves a different kind of meaning, one created not by the semantic reference of racial lexical

items or the use of racial discourse but by symbolic associations between linguistic forms and racialized meanings.

The semiotics of racialized linguistic practice

Although interactional analysts typically focus their attention on the content and structure of discourse as it unfolds, speakers can "do" identity via other linguistic (and nonlinguistic) resources as well. Understanding this process requires attention to the social semiotics of language – that is, the use of linguistic forms such as words, pronunciations, and grammatical structures as symbols of social meaning. Racialized linguistic practices are ways of using language that are semiotically associated with racialized groups. Such practices can operate at the level of entire languages (such as Mandarin Chinese) or dialects (such as African American Vernacular English) or at the level of individual linguistic features (such as the inclusion or omission of the sound /r/ after a vowel in words like *brother*).

Language is a key resource for ethnoracial identity – and, indeed, for all identity work – because of the complexity and flexibility of linguistic systems in building the social world. Linguistic structure operates simultaneously on multiple, interconnected levels, from the production and organization of individual speech sounds (phonetics and phonology) to the smallest units of meaning like prefixes, suffixes, and word roots (morphology) to complete words (lexicon) to their combination into sentences or clauses (syntax). Although linguists conventionally divide their object of study into these discrete levels for purposes of analysis, all of these levels operate in unison as a system to produce discourse, or language in use.

Linguistic forms can gain symbolic associations, including racialized associations, through indexicality. Indexicality is the process of creating a link between a semiotic form, such as a linguistic structure, and a contextually specific meaning, such as an identity, via juxtaposition or co-occurrence in a particular context. In other words, the form indexes or "points to" the meaning (Silverstein 1976). One kind of indexical meaning that a linguistic form may acquire is an association with a specific stance or viewpoint. Within sociocultural linguistics, *stance* is defined as a social actor's public display of her or his orientation to ongoing interaction with respect both to the talk at hand and to the other participants (Du Bois 2007). Stances are indexes of speaker subjectivity that involve evaluation and displays of affect (or emotion) as well as claims of certainty or uncertainty. As particular linguistic forms are habitually used to take particular stances in ongoing linguistic practice, they may come to be associated with these stances (Ochs 1992). For example, as I discuss in Chapter 4, some European American teenagers at Bay City High School used the affiliative slang term *blood* (which is roughly similar in function to other

affiliative address terms like *dude*, *man*, or *bro*) to index a casual, friendly stance toward a white peer. Through their use in staking out the speaker's positionality within an interaction, stances serve as building blocks of identity.

A second level of indexical meaning can be created when a linguistic form comes to be associated not only with a specific stance but also with a social category whose members are thought to habitually take such a stance (Ochs 1992). For example, the term *blood* was viewed by many white teenagers at Bay City High as belonging to black youth, because the term originated among African Americans and was used primarily by African American speakers. Consequently, a European American teenager who used the term *blood* could be seen not as using a generally available resource for doing casual friendliness but instead as illegitimately "talking black." This interpretation simplifies the indexical field – that is, the range of available semiotic meanings of a given linguistic form (Eckert 2008) – by erasing or backgrounding some meanings and highlighting others.

The process of moving from one indexical meaning to another is always ideological (Silverstein 2003). The associations created between linguistic forms and social categories are not simply based on observed linguistic practice – after all, given that some white students at Bay City High School used the term *blood*, it was clearly not an exclusively black form. Instead, indexicality relies on language ideologies, or cultural beliefs about language and its users. Language ideologies involve metalinguistics – language about language – and they may be either explicitly articulated or implicitly enacted (Agha 2007). Language ideologies are central to the construction of identity because they are not in fact primarily about language. Rather, they are in the service of other, more basic, ideologies about social groups, which they cloak in linguistic terms (Woolard 1998). Beliefs that certain linguistic forms are the property of specific racialized groups, for example, are used to reinforce social divisions by means of linguistic divisions.

In order to discover the social meanings of linguistic forms, it is necessary to know how these forms are interpreted by participants in the cultural and interactional context in which they are used. One method for arriving at this insider viewpoint is interactional analysis, which analyzes speakers' perspectives from the evidence of their talk, but the detailed analysis of discourse is greatly enriched when it is accompanied by attention to the often unspoken social and cultural knowledge that participants bring to interaction. Such information can be obtained through the use of ethnography, the study of a culture from the perspective of its members. In order to investigate the variously lexical, discursive, and semiotic resources that white teenagers use to construct their identities, then, it is not enough to draw on a single theory or method. Rather, this question requires an interdisciplinary, multilayered approach to language as a sociocultural phenomenon.

Language and identity

Sociocultural linguistics encompasses a wide variety of perspectives on the study of language, culture, and society. Despite its name, it does not belong to a single discipline but is a broad and loose coalition that includes sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, the sociology of language, language and social psychology, and various approaches to language within communication studies, education, and other fields. What unifies work in these areas is not a shared theory or method but a commitment to the systematic investigation of language in social life (Bucholtz and Hall 2008). In recent years, an especially important line of scholarship in many branches of sociocultural linguistics has been the study of identity (e.g., Bucholtz and Hall 2005; Joseph 2004; Llamas and Watt 2010; Mendoza-Denton 2002; Omoniyi and White 2007; Riley 2007). Numerous classic and recent studies within sociocultural linguistics take the sort of integrative approach to the question of identity that I advocate in this book, demonstrating how linguistic forms at multiple levels may be put to use in discourse to produce a wide range of identities and social relations (Agha 2007; Alim 2004a; Coupland 2007; Gumperz 1982; Kiesling 2005; Mendoza-Denton 2008; Rampton 1995, 2006; Reyes 2007; Schilling-Estes 2004).

In early sociolinguistic research, the concept of identity was primarily used as an explanation for observed linguistic differences across social groups. Such work did not view identity as a social phenomenon requiring study and explanation in its own right. By contrast, in much current scholarship, the workings of identity are unpacked and analyzed in detail; identity is no longer the answer but the question itself. In keeping with this reformulation, most recent sociocultural linguistic research views identity as a social and relational construct rather than an inherent, essential quality of individual psychology or demographic background.

Many contemporary scholars in sociocultural linguistics and other fields examine identity as outwardly directed social action, through which individuals interactionally negotiate their own and others' location within the social order. According to this approach, identity is jointly produced rather than individual, locally situated rather than universal, and agentively constructed rather than passively inhabited. In short, identities are inherently relational, so that acts of self-definition are also acts of other-definition and vice versa. Crucially, this social accomplishment is carried out primarily – but not exclusively – through language. Much of current sociocultural linguistics examines how linguistic resources, often in conjunction with other semiotic tools, are mobilized within social situations to perform such "acts of identity" (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985). By viewing identities as originating in social action rather than in states of being, researchers have increasingly turned their attention to style, or socially meaningful ways of doing things, including ways of using language.