

## 1 Introduction

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Linguistics in pursuit of justice – why? In what ways, if any, might linguistic science contribute to the advancement of justice, or, inversely, could linguistics promote the elimination of injustice? This book explores various ways in which alternative forms of linguistic experimentation and evaluation could advance human equality throughout the world. Yes, the goal is ambitious, but it is commensurate with the urgent need to enlist linguistic tools in support of unique and collective efforts to enhance the human condition worldwide.

My personal and professional interest in this topic began in earnest in 1970 when I moved from Los Angeles to North Philadelphia to attend Temple University. At that time I lived in a small apartment near the university, in the same building where my grandmother owned and operated a laundromat and dry cleaning business. She taught at George Washington Carver Elementary School, near the building she had purchased with my grandfather several years previously, and they supplemented their middle-class incomes with the modest profits derived from the laundromat and apartment rentals generated from that same building. I was unfamiliar with Philadelphia or its diverse cultural enclaves. North Philly differed considerably from other parts of the city in many ways, including an extensive network of sophisticated African American gangs that fiercely guarded their “turf,” typically delineated by the primary street intersections where each gang could be found; “Twelfth and Oxford” or “Seventeenth and Venango” would not only identify a gang by name through its location, but highly visible and artistic graffiti would also alert any passersby of which gang was in control of each territory. Despite the passage of several decades since I lived there, North Philadelphia remains one of the most destitute and racially disenfranchised areas of that iconic American city.

I quickly learned which gang controlled my immediate neighborhood at the intersection of “Eighteenth and Diamond,” and I soon began to navigate my way through the community being ever-mindful of local territorial boundaries as well as the need to be able to quickly identify those young men (i.e., gang members) who were my protectors, and others who might do me harm should I stray into their domain. Justice in inner-city North Philadelphia at that time

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was maintained by a curious combination of fairly rigid and well-established gang legacies, members of the Nation of Islam, the local Black Panther party, and – on occasion – officers who were members of the Philadelphia Police Department.<sup>1</sup>

Although I knew very little about linguistics at that point in my life, language usage was crucial to daily survival “in the ‘hood’”; one’s ability to “talk the talk,” or not, was often the means through which an individual was identified as being an “insider” or “outsider.” Strangers who did not live within the local community usually raised suspicion whenever they were present, often to purchase drugs through fleeting transactions conducted rapidly while they were seated in their cars at a curbside and others kept watch for the police, or rival drug dealers. Marijuana, cocaine, and heroin were sold with the greatest frequency; psychedelic drugs – such as LSD or mescaline – were rarely sold by the local Black drug dealers where I lived, but they were available from White students who were among my classmates at Temple University.

It was against this backdrop, where I started my undergraduate studies in pursuit of a career in accounting, that I began to notice a relationship between language, racial inequality, and the quest for justice among the vast majority of my African American neighbors. I had the clear benefit of a supportive family, consisting of middle-class college-educated African Americans who were devoted to supporting my academic pursuits, while many of my neighbors did not have the benefit of family financial assistance or immediate relations who were not incarcerated.

The social climate in North Philadelphia near Temple University in 1970 was somewhat turbulent, due – at least in part – to student protests against the Vietnam War at the behest of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the White Panthers, the latter a much more radical – if not revolutionary – group when compared to those who belonged to the SDS. Then, as now, Temple University made a strong commitment to Black Studies, and many programs were available that explicitly served African American students, both as Black Studies majors or those in pursuit of other academic fields.

While many of my fellow college classmates had grown up in Philadelphia, they often chose to live at home with their parents in different parts of the city, so very few of them shared my experience of living locally in the heart of North Philadelphia, despite its close proximity to the Temple University campus. Then, as now, most Philadelphians considered North Philadelphia to be among the most dangerous of all neighborhoods in the city due to the combination of

<sup>1</sup> The operational definition of “justice” employed throughout this book includes, but also exceeds, unbiased legal proceedings. Justice, as defined herein, includes fair treatment, equal opportunities, and respect for others, especially among people whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds are diverse.

gang activity, drug sales, and other illicit activities that were frequently engaged in to generate income (Goffman 2014).

For the purpose of introducing the personal and historical context that fostered my interest in the connection between language and inequality, it is useful to know about some of the episodes that I personally observed or encountered during the time I lived in North Philly. One of the most important encounters had nothing to do with the police per se; it was an effort on the part of my uncle to ensure that I would be protected in the event that I ever had any personal encounters with the Philadelphia police.

Those familiar with the history of African American journalists may already know of my uncle, Orin Evans, who was a reporter for the *Philadelphia Bulletin* for most of his illustrious career; he came to be known as the “dean” of Black newspapermen, a title he earned through an extraordinary career that exposed him to a broad spectrum of Philadelphians, including frequent encounters with gangsters and the police. As a result of his reporting my uncle was personally acquainted with Frank Rizzo, who was either vilified or greatly admired depending upon the personal experience and perspective of his various detractors or supporters. He held the position of Philadelphia’s chief of police for many years prior to being elected mayor of the city, and he had developed a well-deserved reputation as a “tough cop” who dealt harshly with any criminal element throughout the city.

Philadelphia then, as now, remains racially segregated for the most part, and policing in different neighborhoods continues to be perceived differently depending upon the racial composition of the immediate neighborhood. My uncle knew well that my local neighborhood in North Philly was among the most dangerous and notorious of any community within the city; he also knew that police officers who were assigned to North Philly – regardless of their race – were likely to be rough with anyone they perceived to be a troublemaker or lawbreaker. As a reporter my uncle had also seen many instances of mistaken identity where miscarriages of justice were visited upon law-abiding inner-city residents, often resulting from overzealous police enforcement that frequently led to excruciating bodily harm, or death.

Shortly after I arrived in Philadelphia, my uncle insisted that he and I meet. In this instance his mission concerned my physical well-being. As soon as he saw me, he said, “Johnny, it’s important that if you are ever stopped by the police that you show them this card immediately. Keep it in your wallet and be sure to take it with you wherever you go.” He then handed me a card that identified me as a financial contributor to the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP). I didn’t fully understand or appreciate the significance of his gift at the time, but I slowly came to realize that encounters between the Philadelphia police and Black men living in North Philadelphia were often confrontational, if not fatal. He wanted to help inoculate me from that possibility, and he knew that if

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I showed any officer my FOP card that I would be treated less harshly than someone who could not immediately confirm a favorable connection to the police.

This book is being written more than forty years after my youthful observations of harsh police treatment of various residents living in North Philly. We now live in an era where digital media have provided several explicit video recordings of police officers who have shot and killed unarmed Black men who posed no threat to them. Many of the African American men who have served as my linguistic consultants would recount woeful encounters with police officers who hurled racist insults along with using excessive force. The legacy of mistrust between many African Americans and their local police force still exists in many communities across America.

During the 2016 celebration of Martin Luther King’s birthday in Washington, DC, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) director James Comey observed, “All of us, law enforcement and non-law enforcement, carry with us an implicit bias. We react differently to a face that looks different from our own. We have to stare at that and own that.” Prior to the events honoring Dr. King, Director Comey addressed the same topic in the aftermath of the death of Michael Brown, who lived in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner, who lived in Staten Island, New York. Both men – who were unarmed – were killed in confrontations with police; in the case of Eric Garner, his death was captured on video where he was overheard pleading with arresting officers, exclaiming, “I can’t breathe.” Grand juries ultimately offered acquittals to all of the police officers who were responsible for these deaths, which only served to heighten the pervading sense of injustice that already existed within and beyond the neighborhoods where Michael Brown and Eric Garner lived. Being mindful of this mistrust, and recognizing the formidable tasks confronting law enforcement officers who are justifiably fearful of the prospect of losing their own lives in deadly confrontations with criminals, Director Comey addressed these concerns directly during a lecture at Georgetown University presented on February 12, 2015:

Unfortunately, in places like Ferguson and New York City, and in some communities across the nation, there is a disconnect between police agencies and many citizens – predominantly in communities of color.

Serious debates are taking place about how law enforcement personnel relate to the communities they serve, about the appropriate use of force, and about real and perceived biases, both within and outside of law enforcement. These are important debates. Every American should feel free to express an informed opinion – to protest peacefully, to convey frustration and even anger in a constructive way. That’s what makes our democracy great. Those conversations – as bumpy and uncomfortable as they can be – help us understand different perspectives, and better serve our communities.

The problems about which Director Comey spoke in 2015 and 2016 are not new, and the police brutality that I personally observed within North Philly from 1970 to 1972 alerted me to rampant injustice that was rarely if ever mentioned in the press. The fact that the misuse of police authority was not routinely reported should not imply that it did not exist.

Before depicting illustrations of some iconic confrontations between the police and Black residents in Philadelphia, it is important to tell more about life in North Philly at that time; more precisely, how was justice maintained, and by whom? It was common – far too common – to witness illicit drug sales in different parts of North Philly. Outsiders would drive through the neighborhood looking for drugs and routinely flag down dealers who were sitting on stoops or hanging out on street corners. These activities were not only illegal, but the immediate neighborhoods where drug dealers peddled their wares were less safe, and much less desirable places to live.

Like many destitute urban cities suffering from inattention and a decaying infrastructure, many blocks in North Philly were dotted with abandoned homes. Some were boarded up while others were vacant and periodically occupied by addicts who used them as a place to shoot heroin. Despite the expansion of urban blight, it was also fairly common to find a home or apartment building that was reasonably well maintained. These rare gems were typically owned by longtime residents who had purchased these properties long ago, at a time when the neighborhoods were in early transition from a majority of residents who were upper-middle-class Whites to a combination of upper-middle-class and middle-class non-Whites, consisting mostly of African Americans.

Although this trend from once-affluent White neighborhoods to less affluent Black neighborhoods is not unique to Philadelphia, the situation in North Philly when I lived there was such that many local residents were reluctant to call upon the police to help them resolve local conflicts, robberies, or other concerns that might routinely be handled by police officers in more affluent communities. Again, mistrust of police accounts for some of this trend, but reliance on local residents who were known to help resolve conflicts further exacerbated this trend. One such incident is particularly memorable because I was indirectly involved when a local property owner wanted drug dealers to leave her block. She also wanted a return to unfettered access to a local playground that had previously been used by her grandchildren prior to the regular arrival of drug dealers who were always in close proximity.

The woman in question was a regular customer at the laundromat where I worked part-time for my grandmother, and she and I had spoken on several previous occasions, typically related to her usage of our laundromat and dry cleaning business. However, on one day she asked me to accompany her to Broad Street, Philadelphia's main north-to-south thoroughfare, where many stores were located. I agreed to do so believing that I understood her desire and

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concern; if I accompanied her, she was less likely to be harassed by drug dealers or anyone who might consider her to be defenseless. I also assumed that she planned to do some shopping, and that her return trip home might be safer if I accompanied her, particularly if she was carrying groceries or other purchased items.

My speculation was not only presumptuous, it was wrong. She had no intention of going shopping on this occasion; rather, she wanted to find one of the men who regularly sold copies of *Mohammed Speaks*, because the men who did so were also local members of the Nation of Islam. When we arrived on Broad Street, it did not take long for us to locate a man selling the paper, and she told him of her travails – her grandchildren could no longer safely play at the local playground because drug dealers now occupied the area, and they did so constantly. She explained that she had been confronted by some of the dealers, and that she no longer felt safe leaving or entering her home. The man selling the paper asked her where she lived and he wanted to know how long the drug dealers had been there, as well as the locations where they could be found. Once he had the relevant information, he told her he would be speaking with other men affiliated with the Nation of Islam and that they would try to help her.

The assistance she sought was not immediately forthcoming; however, a few days after she met with the man who offered her reassurance that he and others would help her, several male members of the Nation of Islam came to the neighborhood and cleared out the drug dealers. I did not witness the incident personally, but I did see the aftermath – a few blocks surrounding her home that were subsequently free of any drug sales, and children who had returned to use the local playground. During her next visit to the laundromat I told her that I had seen the children playing in the playground, and I asked her what had happened. She then informed me that nearly twenty-five men, all impeccably dressed in business suits and sporting bow ties, came to her neighborhood; moreover, she indicated that they did so in two groups. The first group, consisting of nearly fifteen men by her estimation, came directly down her block, and each one carried a baseball bat. The other ten men were divided into two smaller groups of five, and they had already positioned themselves in locations that were likely to be used as escape routes by drug dealers fleeing from the larger group. She said that as the larger group of men approached, they began yelling at the drug dealers to leave, and that they did so aggressively. Although some of the drug dealers possessed weapons, they did not use them on this occasion, because they knew that if they shot or stabbed a member of the Nation of Islam they would surely be targeted for retaliation. When the assault began, those drug dealers who began to flee found themselves trapped by other members of the Nation of Islam who had been waiting for them. She told me that the confrontation was fairly brief, lasting long enough for her avengers to

inflict enough harm to send a clear message. While some of the dealers were able to escape without harm, a few others suffered broken bones and other injuries.

As she was recounting the events, she infused the narrative with a combination of gratitude and relief, exclaiming that she had no fear of retaliation for two reasons: first, the drug dealers had no knowledge that she or others living in that neighborhood had requested help to have them removed; and second, even if they did suspect her, the dealers knew well that any form of retaliation would result in future confrontations with the men who had warned them to leave the area and not return.

Those living in North Philly at that time knew well that members of the Nation of Islam were not only devout, they also did not tolerate drug usage or bad language, and they always dressed well to bolster a consistent image of respectability. It was a tenet of their faith to affirm their role as good neighbors.

Another group that many local North Philadelphia residents came to rely upon for various social services was the Black Panthers. The Black Panthers were located in a storefront building on another main thoroughfare, Columbia Avenue. From that location they provided several programs that were free to local residents, including a breakfast program and a clothing exchange. It was not uncommon to see children or families sharing meals hosted by the Black Panthers; neither was it odd to see racks of clothing in front of their offices, weather permitting, with local residents examining items that they might want for themselves or other members of their family.

Those of us who lived in North Philly at that time tended to value the local contributions that were sponsored by either the members of the Nation of Islam or the Black Panthers who resided in the community. They were not feared; rather, they were often considered to be among the most reliable and beneficial residents in the area. Entrepreneurs like my grandmother had no objection to their presence, because whenever they were around criminal activity subsided.

Philadelphians who did not live in North Philly may have had different impressions of these groups, especially so in the case of the Black Panthers because of the national publication of their newspaper, *The Black Panther*, and negative portrayals of the group through various media outlets. Confrontations between members of the Black Panther Party and the police were well known and well documented across the nation from their inception in Oakland, California, in 1967.

My first exposure to the beneficial work being done by the Black Panthers in North Philly occurred in 1970. Some members of the group visited our laundromat seeking clothing donations, which we were able to provide because various items that had been left previously for dry cleaning had been abandoned and had been in storage for more than two years. They explained their intention, to distribute the clothing to those in need at no cost, and because the abandoned garments were still wrapped in cellophane, they were easy to gather.

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My grandmother's business benefited from a reduction in the clutter of clothing items that were not going to be retrieved, and the Black Panthers were able to obtain additional items for distribution at no cost to them.

Despite having established a great deal of goodwill in our local neighborhood, the Black Panthers were constantly under police surveillance, and many people assumed that they harbored firearms, although no guns were ever on display at their North Philly headquarters. From time to time the police would stop at their offices and make inquiries, occasionally from the seat of a patrol car or sometimes on the sidewalk on Columbia Avenue, which always had a significant amount of pedestrian traffic due to the many stores that were located on that street.

The Black Panther Party had grown exponentially in Philadelphia, expanding beyond its headquarters at 2935 Columbia Avenue to two other satellite locations in West Philadelphia and Germantown, also predominantly African American communities. My personal experience and exposure were limited to North Philly, that is, where I lived, worked, and attended Temple University; however, the growth of the Black Panthers in Philadelphia gained national attention to the point that they planned to hold a "Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention" across the street from our laundromat at Philadelphia's magnificent Church of the Advocate.<sup>2</sup>

The anticipated convention was intended to accentuate a "Ten Point Program" that had been described in *The Black Panther* newspaper, extolling the virtues of bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace for poor Black residents in America's inner cities. However, on the Saturday preceding the opening of the conference, a Philadelphia police officer was shot and killed in a guardhouse in Fairmont Park, and his death was followed by more attacks on police in other parts of the city.

The police commissioner, then Frank Rizzo, reacted to these atrocities by conducting simultaneous predawn assault raids on all three Black Panther Party offices. These raids had differential consequences in Philadelphia and beyond, because the Black Panthers had been vilified by many law enforcement agencies, particularly the FBI. J. Edgar Hoover had targeted not only the Black Panthers for subversive surveillance, but also Malcolm X and Dr. King. Perceived threats to authorities, if not the government itself, by various "Black agitators" were a source of concern and consternation among federal and local law enforcement agencies across the country.

For those who either feared or felt threatened by the growing influence of the Black Panthers, Frank Rizzo's raids were most welcome. With a single police

<sup>2</sup> The Church of the Advocate in North Philadelphia was designed by Charles Burns during the nineteenth century at a time when Diamond Street (where it is located) was considered to be one of the most prosperous and desirable places to live in the entire city. It is a massive and impressive edifice that rivals many of the world's premiere churches from the standpoint of its design and embellishments.

action, he sent a vivid message that resonated strongly throughout Philadelphia; namely, his officers were the ultimate authority on the streets of that city. The message to citizens living in predominantly Black neighborhoods was even clearer: those who admired the Black Panthers witnessed their public humiliation through an armed insurrection that destroyed their Philadelphia offices at the same time that it reasserted police control of the communities where the Black Panthers had taken up residence.

Detractors of the Black Panthers, in Philadelphia and other parts of the country, praised Chief Rizzo for his courage, strength, and tenacity in the face of a potentially armed group of revolutionary advocates. Few who disliked the Black Panthers, Black or White, decried their treatment or the fact that their civil rights might have been violated during these raids. Public strip searches, while ostensibly conducted in search of weapons or contraband, had a more chilling effect upon the immediate residents in the neighborhoods where once-proud Black men, the Panthers, previously held considerable sway. The dissemination of photos such as the following diminished the Black Panthers in Philadelphia, while reminding all Philadelphians that their police department was among the most forceful of any urban police department anywhere in the nation.

By remarkable coincidence of timing and circumstance, these incidents occurred when I first became aware of linguistics and the highly influential studies of Black language usage by Labov (1969a, 1969b). I had not yet given much thought to the relationship between language, (in)justice, and race; however, I witnessed different forms of discrimination while living in North Philly that seemed to have unmistakable linguistic relevance. That is to say, these police raids and the ways in which they were described by the mainstream press employed a combination of vulgar and/or descriptive language, frequently with explicit – if not insulting – racial epithets or attribution. Related articles that subsequently appeared in *The Black Panther* surrounding these events were also vitriolic, depicting the police as “pigs” and “fascists.” The incendiary speech that was employed during and after these raids alerted me to an important linguistic fact: language matters.

The preceding incidents, where a local resident sought justice without engaging the police, and the raids on the Black Panthers during the summer of 1970, exposed strong differences of opinion regarding the effectiveness or reliability of the Philadelphia police to provide protection against crime and criminals in different Black communities. Then, as now, distrust of the police in many Black neighborhoods across America prevails despite new efforts to modify policing, or to convince Black residents to be more trusting and supportive of their local police officers.

The encounters that I observed as an undergraduate college student residing in North Philadelphia in the early 1970s are relevant due largely to a set of historical circumstances that are unique to that time period. The assassination of President



Philadelphia Police Officers Conduct Strip Searches of Black Panthers

John F. Kennedy triggered a host of events that raised awareness of the dismal plight of many African Americans who remained mired in abject poverty. The simultaneous efforts of President Lyndon B. Johnson to promote a new “War on Poverty” while escalating the Vietnam War had huge consequences, particularly so in Black communities where disproportionately high numbers of young men were being drafted into military service and sent to fight in Vietnam.