

## Linguistics in Pursuit of Justice

As a Black child growing up in inner-city neighborhoods in Philadelphia and Los Angeles, John Baugh witnessed racial discrimination at a young age and began to notice correlations between language and race. While attending college he worked at a laundromat serving African Americans who were often subjected to mistreatment by the police. His observations piqued his curiosity about the ways that linguistic diversity might be related to the burgeoning civil rights movement for racial equality in America. Baugh pursued these ideas while traveling internationally only to discover alternative forms of linguistic discrimination in Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia, the Caribbean, and South America. He coined the phrase “linguistic profiling” based on experimental studies of housing discrimination, and he expanded upon those findings to promote equity in education, employment, medicine, and the law. This book is the culmination of these studies, devoted to the advancement of equality and justice globally.

JOHN BAUGH is Margaret Bush Wilson Professor in Arts and Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis. He is best known for advancing studies of linguistic profiling and various forms of linguistic discrimination that were supported variously by the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the National Science Foundation, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the U.S. Department of State.

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John Baugh  
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John Baugh

*Washington University in St. Louis*



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For  
Chenoa, John, and Ariél

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> x
<i>List of Tables</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
1 Introduction	1
2 Linguistics, Life, and Death	21
2.1 The Birth of Forensic Linguistics	21
2.2 A Tale of Two Murders	26
2.3 Case Commonalities	41
3 Linguistics, Injustice, and Inequality	44
3.1 Speech Act Theory	45
3.2 Youthful Linguistic Indiscretion	46
3.3 Nefarious Linguistic Intent	46
3.4 Audience Design	47
3.5 Educational Inequality	51
3.6 Linguistic Human Rights	53
4 Some Linguistic and Legal Consequences of Slavery in the United States	58
4.1 Changing Terms of Reference	59
4.2 Discourse Analysis of the <i>Dred Scott</i> Ruling	60
4.3 Refining Linguistic Labels to Distinguish Diversity among Black People	62
4.4 Voluntary Black Immigration to the United States	64
5 Linguistic Profiling	65
5.1 Inception	65
5.2 Biblical Precursor	66
5.3 Technological Ramification	66
5.4 Foundational Research	68
5.5 Contemporary Considerations	71
5.6 Future Perspectives	78
5.7 Conclusion	80
	vii

## viii Contents

6	Earwitness Testimony and Unbiased Formulation of Auditory Lineups	82
6.1	(Un)reliable Voice Identification	84
6.2	Illustrative Results	87
6.3	Implications for the Creation and Utilization of Auditory Lineups	95
7	Dialect Identification and Discrimination in the United States	97
7.1	Wealth Disparities in the United States	97
7.2	Housing Discrimination without Visual Cues: Experiment 1	100
7.3	Ethnic Identification: Experiment 2	107
7.4	Dialect Perceptions of “Hello”: Experiment 3	109
7.5	Harmonic-to-noise Ratio: Experiment 4	114
7.6	Conclusion	118
8	Formulating Discrimination: Dimensions of a Historical Hardship Index	120
8.1	Heritage Matters	123
8.2	The Historical Hardship Index: Some Alternative Dimensions of Discrimination in the United States	127
8.3	The Anguish of Confirming Accurate Local Calibration in Diverse Communities	131
8.4	Interpreting Your Preliminary Score	132
8.5	Global Adaptation: Reformulating Historical Hardship Indexes beyond the United States	132
9	Linguistic Harassment	134
9.1	Formulating Linguistic Harassment	134
9.2	Some Essential Operational Definitions	135
9.3	Conceptual Integration	139
9.4	Contextual Considerations	139
9.5	An Illustrative Case: Coach Mike Lonergan, Formerly of George Washington University	141
9.6	Diagnostic Speech Act Theory	143
9.7	Conversation Analysis and Discourse Analysis Appraisal	144
9.8	Audience Design Assessment	144
9.9	Linguistic Defiance: The Special Case of Insubordination	146
9.10	Pertinence to <i>Politically Correct</i> Language Usage	147
9.11	Some Additional Legal Considerations	148
9.12	Summation	149
10	Linguistic Contributions to the Advancement of Justice	151
10.1	Orientation	151
10.2	Foundational Contributions	152
10.3	Methodological Grounding	156
10.4	Some Additional Linguistic Contributions to the Advancement of Justice	173
10.5	Summary	182

Contents	ix
11 Shall We Overcome?	183
11.1 Foundation	183
11.2 Pursuing Just Justice	184
11.3 Overcoming Injustice	185
11.4 Obtaining Justice	186
11.5 Achieving Justice	190
11.6 Sustaining Justice	198
11.7 A Cautionary Coda	199
<i>References</i>	201
<i>Index</i>	212

Figures

2.1	Spectrogram of the word “I” (/ay/)	<i>page</i> 31
2.2	Spectrogram of the words “I ain” (/aÿen/)	32
2.3	Spectrogram of “I know I committed”	32
2.4	Spectrogram of “I know I ain’ committed”	33
4.1	Diversity among people of African descent	63
6.1	Graphic illustration of evaluations of Speaker #1	89
6.2	Graphic illustration of evaluations of Speaker #2	91
6.3	Graphic illustration of evaluations of Speaker #3	92
6.4	Graphic illustration of evaluations of Speaker #4	94
7.1	Comparison of White population and householder data to percentage positive SAE appointments	105
7.2	Comparison of African American population and householder data to percentage positive AAVE appointments	105
7.3	Comparison of Hispanic population and householder data to percentage positive ChE appointments	106
8.1	Historical Hardship Index Self-Test	128
9.1	An integrated model of different types of linguistic harassment	138
9.2	Bell’s model of audience design	145
10.1	Diverse levels of human communicative-to-linguistic competence	158
10.2	Diverse situational speech events in African American communities	168



Tables

4.1	Diversity among prominent Black political figures	<i>page</i> 62
6.1	Values associated with evaluations of Speaker #1	89
6.2	Values associated with evaluations of Speaker #2	91
6.3	Values associated with evaluations of Speaker #3	92
6.4	Values associated with evaluations of Speaker #4	94
7.1	Confirmed appointments to view apartments advertised for rent in different Greater San Francisco geographic areas (in percentages)	103
7.2	Population in different Greater San Francisco geographic areas by race and ethnicity (in percentages)	103
7.3	Householders in different Greater San Francisco geographic areas by race and ethnicity (in percentages)	104
7.4	Population in different Greater San Francisco in 2010: Geographic areas by race and ethnicity (in percentages)	104
7.5	Dialect and racial identification	109
7.6	General confusion matrices	112
7.7	Confusion matrix and summary statistics by dialect	112
7.8	Stimulus and response misidentifications	113
7.9	Row-adjusted confusion matrix	113
7.10	Confusion matrix and summary statistics for standard and nonstandard dialects	114
7.11	Acoustic measures differentiating dialects	115
7.12	ANOVA for F2 in /e/	115
7.13	ANOVA for pitch peak	116
7.14	ANOVA for duration of first syllable, /he/	117
7.15	ANOVA for harmonic-to-noise ratio (HNR)	117
9.1	Distinguishing between public and private offensive language	140
9.2	An ethnographic categorization of Lonergan’s speech	142

## Preface

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This book is fundamentally about fairness. It also explores some of the ways that linguistics can be employed to promote fairness. The origin of this work owes much to the vision of my mentor, William Labov, who first came to my attention when I had an opportunity to read his tremendously important and influential article, “The Logic of Nonstandard English.” That publication debunked many prevailing myths and misconceptions about the speech of US slave descendants of African origin; as a descendant of African slaves, I was inspired by the ways in which he deployed social science for the benefit of people who are greatly in need of help.

All of you who read these words will have experienced a unique linguistic journey, one that is representative of your personal exposure and usage of one or more languages, as well as your impressions of how fairly you have been treated by others, and your observations of the ways that others have been treated in the communities you know well. Your linguistic journey also includes your impressions of the spectrum of injustice to justice regarding diverse populations throughout the world, through incidents that may have come to your attention.

Linguists are rarely called upon to help balance the scales of justice; yet nearly every illustration of human-to-human injustice that history has witnessed or that one can imagine is likely – strongly likely – to have one or more linguistic dimensions worthy of analytic scrutiny. Indeed, linguistic behavior is such an integral part of daily life that it can easily be taken for granted – or worse, dismissed – as inconsequential when compared with many of the other criteria that inevitably intersect with conditions pertaining to the impartial treatment of people.

Every reader of this book will also come to this text with some predisposed linguistic opinions, which, again, will reflect your personal experience with the languages and dialects you employ, as well as your impressions of other languages and dialects that are less familiar, if not foreign, to you individually. Linguistic loyalties abound everywhere on earth, typically reflecting allegiance to the mother tongue of each speaker. However, there are significant and noteworthy exceptions to this trend, where a combination of historical,

political, and social circumstances is such that people may develop a sense of linguistic inferiority, perhaps through no fault of their own other than mere accident of birth into less-than-ideal linguistic circumstances, where their native language or dialect is devalued, or perhaps reviled, by others who often live in close proximity.

Many of the examples of linguistic injustice that are described in this book have occurred in my home country of the United States of America, which represents one of the most complex multilingual nations found anywhere in the world. The relative youth of the United States and the tremendous wealth that has been amassed in this nation have made it a magnet to immigrants since its colonial inception. The earliest introduction of European languages to the nations that now comprise North America and South America gradually displaced the hundreds of indigenous languages of the primordial peoples that thrived from coast to coast, prior to colonization and the conquest of populations incapable of defending their homes against more powerful invaders bent upon imperial expansion.

These migratory trends still thrive in different parts of the world as people who speak different languages choose to leave the places where they once lived in search of new homelands and end up in places where they may be unwelcome, if not vilified. The linguistic dimensions of these changing population trends are inescapable, yet they are routinely overlooked. Often this linguistic disregard is benign, where the lack of linguistic awareness is not the result of any nefarious intent. By contrast there are far too many instances where the language or dialect spoken by new immigrants or refugees arriving in communities where they are unwelcome becomes an expedient political indicator used to accentuate their differences from the detractors who seek to rebuff them.

It would be naïve to assume that linguistics or linguists can thwart these xenophobic tendencies completely; however, the absence of strategic linguistic inquiry has frequently perpetuated injustice unabated. This book recounts many instances where objective linguistic evidence, had it been present, might have helped to overcome some glaring gaps in noble attempts to alleviate injustice, in America and elsewhere.

The singular contributions of this author toward that end are modest and owe their very existence to important insights by other linguists, anthropologists, sociologists, social psychologists, educators, and legal scholars – as well as serendipity. Although many of the issues that brought the connection between linguistic behavior and (in)justice to my attention as a college student living in the destitute slums of North Philadelphia are depicted in the opening chapter, they may inadvertently conceal many of the extraordinary benefits that I experienced as a child of well-educated African American parents who were understated civil rights pioneers living in the suburbs of the western San Fernando Valley, where I spent most of my developmental youth.

Prior to 1960 my parents had always lived among fellow African Americans, primarily in their native Philadelphia where I spent my early childhood with fond memories of loving relatives who guarded my safety. In 1958 we moved to central Los Angeles into a multiracial community where many of my neighbors routinely spoke Spanish, Chinese, or Japanese in their homes. It was in 1960 that my parents were among the first African Americans to move to the predominantly White and reasonably affluent suburbs of the western San Fernando Valley; it was in that environment where I first observed occasional linguistic manifestations of racism, as some of our new neighbors would refer to me and other members of my family as “niggers.”

It would be misleading to suggest that my parents ignored these insults; rather, they conveyed their disagreement through courageous acts of dignity that I was simply too young to fully comprehend at the time. Martin Luther King Jr. had already begun his quest to promote racial equality through non-violence; without explicit reference to Dr. King, my parents would never overtly acknowledge verbal affronts, but they would always respond to these episodes by treating all of our new neighbors with considerable respect, and always with dignity.

Returning, momentarily, to the influence that William Labov had on my life: a great deal of his research resulted from interviews that he conducted, primarily across the United States, including Hawaii. Nearly all of his sociolinguistic interviews began with questions pertaining to childhood games, such as, “What kinds of games did you play when you were growing up as a child?” This is a fantastic question to begin any personal interview: it is nearly universal because most children have played games of one form or another. His interviews would gradually include more personal questions, culminating with the interviewees’ experiences regarding “the danger of death.” Typically, this final question would take a form such as, “Were you ever in a situation where you thought to yourself, ‘this is it, I’m about to lose my life?’”

The rationale for concluding interviews with this specific and deeply personal question is that when people describe near-death encounters, they tend to relive the event and therefore are not explicitly attending to their manner of speaking, as often occurs early in the interview process. During interviews with young men who lived in Harlem, famously depicted in “The Logic of Nonstandard English,” Labov would often ask questions regarding fights that may have occurred, and questions pertaining to fights were always asked prior to questions regarding the danger of death.

Labov’s interview procedures are relevant at this juncture because I was occasionally forced to fight during my childhood and adolescence, and those conflicts had a major impact on me and my desire to promote justice during my youth. When my family lived in inner-city communities in Philadelphia and Los Angeles, the majority of the fights in which I engaged were one-on-one

battles with adversaries for personal reasons that had nothing whatsoever to do with race. Occasional fights occurred during schoolyard games, and disputes over who was right or wrong about the ways to play a game; other fights resulted from conflicts about girls who were admired by more than one boy. My first experience with fights that occurred due to racism did not take place until we moved to the San Fernando Valley, and “nigger” was – at least to me – literally a *fighting word*. My classmates knew well that I would not tolerate anyone calling me a nigger, and I was sometimes injured when a group of boys thought it would be amusing to see how I would react when taunted, with the “N . . . word.”

My fledgling sense of justice versus injustice began with conflicts regarding racial epithets directed toward me or members of my family; again, I would fight in response to these insults on nearly every occasion. Two noteworthy exceptions are relevant. When I joined the Cub Scouts, as the only African American member of my den, one of my den mother’s sons referred to my father as a nigger; rather than fight with him, I simply told his mother. Because she knew her son and knew me, she believed me, apologized, and punished him severely. I never had any more racial problems with that boy.

A few years later when I was a member of the Boy Scouts, our troop would regularly attend large camping events with other Boy Scout troops from some of the other Western states. I was initially perplexed by the unexpected frequency with which boys from unknown troops would single me out and call me a nigger. These episodes typically happened while I was with members of my own troop, and they knew well that I would fight anyone who would insult me with the N . . . word. Eventually, after one of these episodes, which frequently resulted in injury to me or my combatants, a boy from one of the other troops told me that it was a member of my own troop who had dared others to insult me in this way. I knew the boy who had been accused of this quite well, and also knew that he thought he was clever; he was usually a spectator during the fights that ensued after the taunts that triggered them.

Armed with this new information I was able to confront the accused, and I did so in front of witnesses who I knew would not defend him if they were aware of his guilt. He vehemently denied ever daring others to taunt me, but as I watched the other boys react to his denial I believed he was lying and told him so. He continued to deny his guilt; because I was slightly older than he was, and substantially bigger, I did not fear him, and it was immediately obvious that he now feared me. This highly personal reflection is relevant in the context of these remarks because it represents one of the most important moments in my life, where I had an opportunity to challenge what I considered to be unjust treatment, and my growing belief that others should be treated more fairly in the future, ideally without the threat of racial insults or other fighting words that might trigger combat.

Beyond these personal episodes, I was blessed to be the son of well-educated parents who were advocates on my behalf; when they observed teachers who they believed were treating me unfairly, they would make appointments with the teachers and/or school administrators to inquire about their concerns and, more important to me, to demand actions that would eliminate any future prospect of mistreatment or miseducation that could be detrimental to my academic well-being.

My first acknowledgment is therefore reserved for my parents, Dr. Barbara Goore Baugh and Dr. Jack Baugh, both of whom were early models of fair and equal treatment who embodied individual and collective behavior that promoted liberty and justice for all. I am the oldest of three siblings; the love, respect, and admiration shared throughout my life with my younger brother, Kevin, and my sister, Cheryl, has been an enduring hallmark of our family as we each have attempted to conduct ourselves personally and professionally in ways that resemble the exceptional models our parents displayed throughout our lives.

The love and support that I have known and cherished, derived from my childhood nuclear family, are traits that I have tried to share with my children, Chenoa, John, and Ariél, to whom this book is dedicated. Readers who have known the cumulative blessings accrued from loving family members will know well that their support is often inspirational, and in this instance a further amplification of the importance of the global pursuit of justice for all humanity.

The actual work that has been invested in completing this book owes a great deal to a combination of people and agencies that have devoted themselves or their resources to my efforts to enlist linguistic science for the benefit of humanity. William Labov, whose influence I have already mentioned, is most responsible for my scholarly contributions; he took an interest in my linguistic ambitions in a manner that opened intellectual doors that had previously been closed to me, including exceptional efforts to help me procure funding for graduate school from the Ford Foundation before I had achieved any professional accomplishments.

Professors Ralph Fasold, Ben Crane, Murray Halfond, and Marylyn Merritt were instrumental to my professional journey, each encouraging me to reach out to William Labov as my linguistic interests began to mature. Upon admission to graduate school, I was part of an exceptional cohort of graduate students who have become superb scholars in their own right, including John Rickford and Gregory Guy, both of whom remain among my most trusted advisors, and for whom I have the greatest personal and professional respect.

A great deal of my own work on linguistic discrimination and linguistic profiling would not have been possible were it not for other exceptional scholarly ventures by Dennis Preston, Rosina Lippi-Green, Lisa Green,

xviii Preface

H. Samy Alim, Thomas Purnell, William Idsardi, Arthur Spears, Geneva Smitherman, Ana Celia Zentella, Sonja Lanehart, Otto Santa Ana, Marcyliena Morgan, Lawrence Bobo, Katie Crowder, John Gordon Baugh VI, Django Paris, Sali Tagliamonte, Mary Bucholtz, Jeff MacSwan, Douglass Massey, and Susan Fiske, among other social scientists who have been supportive of my scholarship for many years.

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I am also very thankful to Helen Barton of Cambridge University Press. Helen offered advice and encouragement at an early stage in the development of this project that gave it life and a clear sense of direction, including some exceptionally insightful and helpful observations from anonymous reviewers of a book prospectus that I prepared at her request. Those reviewers were clearly well acquainted with me and my work prior to their evaluations, and they helped me to avoid potential pitfalls and encouraged me to pursue directions that appear herein that I would have neglected but for their helpful advice. I also owe special thanks to an anonymous reviewer of the penultimate draft of this book; several additional insights that were provided have greatly enhanced this work, while helping me clarify details that could have been overstated or otherwise overlooked.

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The editors with whom I have worked on this book and related projects include Aaron Welborn, Stephanie Biermann, and Catherine Shreve. Aaron and Stephanie helped with early stages of this project, contributing substantially to corrections of errors that had escaped my attention, or inadvertent instances where I was unaware of self-contradiction. Catherine Shreve is, without question, the person to whom I owe the greatest thanks and appreciation for her



close and careful reading of every word of every chapter contained in this book. It has been my honor to work closely with many outstanding editors in the past, but none surpasses the combination of grace, professionalism, and good humor that Catherine shared with me throughout revisions of previous drafts as she advised and encouraged me to find ways to best express many of the complex ideas that are conveyed throughout the book.

Because this book spans more than twenty years of work that has been either directly or indirectly devoted to the ways in which linguistics can promote justice, I have had the benefit and good fortune to receive grants and fellowships from different institutions and agencies to support this mission. The Ford Foundation is deserving of special recognition because it has funded a great deal of my education and research at different stages in my career, beginning with my entry into graduate school, and culminating with generous support that allowed me to study linguistic profiling related to education, employment, fair housing, and legal entanglements in the Caribbean, Brazil, South Africa, France, and the United Kingdom. Prior to that international support, the Ford Foundation provided the initial funding that allowed me to evaluate various manifestations of linguistic profiling throughout the United States.

Other agencies and foundations enhanced their support, including the National Science Foundation during the aftermath of the Ebonics controversy in Oakland, California in 1996; and the Department of Housing and Urban Development, which honored me with an award as a Civil Rights Pioneer of Fair Housing. In addition, the U.S. Department of Education, the U.S. Department of State, the Eugene Lang Foundation, and the Center for Applied Linguistics have all contributed substantially to my research devoted to the advancement of justice.

I would especially like to thank the Rockefeller Foundation and Pilar Palicia, director of the Rockefeller Foundation Research Center in Bellagio, Italy, where I was a fellow in residence during the spring of 2016, giving me an uninterrupted opportunity to complete the first draft of this book. By wonderful coincidence, Douglass Massey and Susan Fiske were in residence at the Rockefeller Foundation Research Center in Bellagio at the very same time that I was there, and their wealth of knowledge regarding housing discrimination, racial stereotypes, and much more proved to be timely and tremendously beneficial in ways that I could not have anticipated as I tried to complete this work. Others who were in residence as fellows, and partners of fellows, during my tenure in Bellagio offered additional insights that were extremely helpful, even though they were not social scientists; however, they clearly shared my desire to find new ways to promote justice globally.

My final thanks are reserved for you, the reader. The gift of your time and willingness to consider the ideas espoused herein is of utmost importance to this venture, because without your effort and willingness to ponder matters of



xx Preface

(in)justice, and how they intersect with potential linguistic resolution, this enterprise would be doomed from the outset. I have no doubt whatsoever that this book contains various mistakes, and I know well that it cannot possibly be comprehensive. All limitations contained herein are entirely my own; no one other than me shares any blame for the shortcomings that inevitably exist within this text.