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LANGUAGES AND SPEAKERS: AN INTRODUCTION TO AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH AND NATIVE AMERICAN LANGUAGES

The many connections between Native Americans and African Americans throughout US history provide a reason for discussing these peoples and their languages together. The similarities in their experiences in North America are primarily the product of US white supremacist racism, which, to take one example, has created black ghettos and Native American reservations. One language, with many regional and social varieties, unites African Americans, while Native American languages number in the hundreds, divided into dozens of language families. As they struggle for social justice, Native Americans face urgent issues of language endangerment and revitalization. As African Americans continue the struggle for full equality, they will probably continue to speak the very robust African American Vernacular English, which in its current form has significantly been shaped by residential segregation but also by ethnic pride. There is every indication that the African American Vernacular will have to play an important role in the teaching of African American schoolchildren if the cycle of low educational achievement, as measured by test scores, is to be ended.

KEYWORDS: *African American English, Native American languages, language endangerment, inequality*

BACKGROUND

The papers collected here result from a Presidential Session chaired by Spears at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meetings of 2007, titled “Languages and Speakers: Confronting Endangerment, Seeking Equality.”¹ Our session’s theme was a linguistic anthropological take on the meeting theme, Difference, (In)Equality, and Justice, as elaborated by the annual program chair, Faye Harrison, with input from the annual program committee. The lead presentations were on African American Vernacular English (AAVE), presented by Labov, and on Native American languages, presented by Hinton. John Rickford presented a response to Labov’s paper, and Hill responded to both Hinton’s and Labov’s papers.

Our group’s goal was to emphasize the reality of languages as properties of speakers, the welfare of both subject to the influences of issues of endangerment, inequality, revitalization, literacy, educational opportunity, justice, and empowerment. The languages of Native Americans have been looked at sociopolitically mainly in terms of their endangerment, perhaps too often to the neglect of considering how the overall cultural and ethnic integrity of these groups has been endangered in too many instances. AAVE speakers present an interesting counterpoint in that AAVE has never been considered endangered; but, the speakers themselves have clearly, as Native Americans, continued to be assaulted by damaging social forces, not least among them inadequate access to basic education.

Including within the same covers discussions of the languages of Native Americans and the principal one of African Americans can serve to remind us of the many interconnections between the two groups. In speaking of African American–Native American interconnections, we reference not only shared genealogies but also intertwined sociocultural, political, and economic histories (Brooks 2002; Katz 1997; Perdue 2005). For example, Native Americans and the precursors of African Americans (before there was an African American ethnicity as such) have been to different extents subject to ethnocide. White Americans erased the important ethnic divisions that were once vital to each population. Africans and Native Americans, despite significant divisions and differences in their original ancestry, became in many contexts simply “Black” or “Indian.” This new, artificially constructed affiliation imposed by White oppression shaped both groups profoundly, the psychological impact of which should not be overlooked.²

A look at shared histories reveals that some “African Americans” have been born and raised on reservations, having receptive and sometimes productive knowledge of Native American languages. These histories reveal also agency by both groups, differentially, in resistance and accommodation to the ills of American empire—for example, slavery, warfare, and

genocide. As illustration of accommodation to US empire, which is sometimes overlooked in discussions of oppressed groups, Native Americans were involved in the capture of runaway slaves, and some held African American slaves. African Americans, notably Buffalo Soldiers, were involved in the warfare genocide against Native Americans. Notwithstanding, Native Americans gave shelter to and integrated into their societies African Americans who escaped from slavery. African Americans accepted Native American students, some passing as Black to make exit from reservations easier, into Black schools and colleges. The Trail of Tears, for example, affected both African and Native Americans. The former have been ghettoized, the latter confined to reservations. Both groups have been channeled into resource-poor educational institutions more suitable for the production of internalized oppression than education for intellectual and social empowerment. In what follows, we present some background information useful in reading this special issue's contributions.

While the endangerment of most American Indian languages is relatively well known, the type of endangerment facing varieties of African American English (AAE) is not. This endangerment confronts primarily those varieties of AAE that are furthest from the standard and those AAE standard varieties closest to other American standards. The former are spoken in areas that were long isolated from the main currents of economic development and modernization, many of them in the Deep South. These varieties are important for AAE study because they, more than others, carry grammatical features shared with West African and creole languages. These grammatical features offer valuable clues to the history of AAE and its speakers. The latter are spoken in the most economically fortunate sector of the African American community, the young people in which spend most or nearly all of their time in non-African American cultural and social environments and thus lose or never gain the ability to speak the African American standard.

The standard AAE varieties are collectively called African American Standard English (AASE) and are spoken primarily by higher income African Americans with more formal education. As explained below, this kind of AAE has grammatical features that are distinctive to African American varieties of English, but none that are considered nonstandard. As more children of this sector of the African American community attend integrated schools and lead integrated work and social lives, this variety is dying out. Among upper-middle-class African Americans, for example, very few under 30

speak it, so this variety will most probably not be transmitted to coming generations. This variety also provides clues to the history and evolution of AAE.

AFRICAN AMERICANS

Languages and Speakers

Any discussion of AAE requires a clarification of terms. AAE, now usually written without a hyphen between *African* and *American*, is also called Ebonics, Black English, and African American Language. The great bulk of studies of AAE have focused on a particular type, the nonstandard type, usually spoken by those of lower incomes, whose use is typically frowned upon in educational settings.

Ebonics is probably the term that most people recognize, due to the Ebonics Controversy, which broke out in 1996. The Oakland, California, School Board had passed a resolution that many people misinterpreted as calling for the teaching of Ebonics. The basic intention of the resolution was in reality to have teachers who teach pupils speaking the nonstandard variety of AAE, AAVE, acquire a basic knowledge of the grammar and use of AAVE in order that they might be better equipped to teach their students some variety of standard English. (There are many different varieties of American standard English and, of course, many more standard varieties if we consider English speakers worldwide. See the discussion below.)

Following dissemination of the resolution, there was a stunning outpouring of disparagement and ridicule of AAVE, characterizing it as speech reflecting sloth, ignorance, and degradation stemming from slavery. Many African Americans—and other Black commentators (not all blacks in the United States are African American, as discussed below)—joined in heaping abuse on Ebonics. (Few people are aware of the standard type of AAE.) Some of the widely disseminated, negative, and false ideas about African American language and culture are accepted by Blacks too, because, as anthropologists understand, they, as members of other groups, sometimes fall victim to internalized oppression: they believe negative stereotypes circulated about them, their language, and their culture generally.

Linguists were horrified by the reaction, as we believed that enough correct information on Ebonics—indeed all language varieties—had been communicated to make most people aware that all language varieties are legitimate, systematic, governed by grammatical rules, expressively adequate, and fully worthy of respect. Much of the invective hurled at Ebonics was actually anti-Black sentiment couched in terms of language. In other words, atti-

tudes about African Americans (and blacks in general) were being expressed via remarks about language. The Ebonics Controversy was a prime example of attitudes toward a group of people channeled through remarks about their language.

Normally, linguists use the term *AAE* for all varieties and *AAVE* specifically for the nonstandard kind. Some language scholars use the term *African American Language*, but our view is that this term should refer to African American language as a whole, which includes many non-English varieties. Widespread lack of awareness of this fact points to how poorly understood African Americans and their history are, even though African Americans constituted the largest non-White ethnic group in the United States throughout much of American history.

African Americans and Their Languages

African American typically refers to all Americans of known African descent, that is, recent African descent: humans originated in Africa. However, many people in using this term have in mind long-term residents, those who have been in the United States roughly one hundred and fifty years or more, not more recent immigrants of African descent, for example, those from the Caribbean or Africa itself. There is no chronological cutoff point, though, as immigration has been constant, waxing and waning, since the new settlement of the Americas began in the late 15th century. Indeed, many people consider as African Americans all U.S. residents who “look black” and were born here or arrived in early childhood.

The long-term resident population of African descent includes not only those speaking English varieties but also those speaking other languages:

- Gullah (also called Geechee, pronounced with a hard “g” [g], as in *geese*), an English-lexifier creole language, spoken largely in the coastal areas and offshore islands of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. By *English-lexifier*, we mean that the majority of its vocabulary comes from English historically. The rest of its grammar (vocabulary is part of grammar) is distinct. Gullah merges into AAE as one leaves the coastal areas, much as one language merges into another in border areas around the world.
- Afro-Seminole, grammatically distinguishable from Gullah, though the two language varieties are certainly very close; Afro-Seminole is spoken in south Texas (and also in northern Mexico).
- Cajun French, a variety of French, and Louisiana French Creole, a different language but related to

French varieties by the French source of most of its vocabulary.

- Cape Verdean Creole (now concentrated in Rhode Island and the Boston area; Cape Verdean African Americans began their first large wave of immigration to the United States in the early 1800s, mostly to work in the whaling industry).
- A significant number of Native American languages.

As noted, most people do not realize that African Americans and Native Americans have had close relations throughout American history. This is an artifact of the generally poor teaching of American history. Some African Americans have Native American ancestry, which even many of them are unaware of. Spears, personally, for example, has known a significant number of African Americans (or Black Indians, as they are sometimes called) who grew up on reservations. Sometimes, there are tensions, as reported in the press, between the “Black Indians” and “White Indians” of the same tribe (e.g., the Pequots, in upstate New York and the Oklahoma Cherokees), affected by their own version of racism/colorism derived from U.S. White-supremacist racism.

Sometimes, not only Black Indians, but also other subgroups of African Americans, for example, Cape Verdean African Americans prefer to claim their non-black—non-African—lineage to the exclusion of their black one, even though they show a range of looks included among other African Americans (who, indeed, look like most of the world’s populations, though some looks are more common than others). This is due no doubt to the stigma that has been attached in the United States and the Western world to blackness and the desire of those “fleeing” blackness to use self-labels omitting explicit reference to blackness.

Of course, there are many Americans who are black (racial term) in the U.S. sense of the word, but not African American, in the sense explained above, who speak natively a great array of languages: Arabic, Spanish, Danish, Japanese (usually the “biracial” offspring of American servicemen), Portuguese, Garífuna (a Native American language of Central America and the Caribbean), and a wealth of African languages. (Keep in mind that the meanings of racial terms vary according to society; so, for example, someone who is black in the United States may be White in, say, the Dominican Republic and Brazil.)

All long-term resident African Americans are “mixed race,” that is, they have black, white, and (less often) Native American lineages (to use the inadequate, unscientific, and misleading racial terms we have available). As a result, African Americans look like most of the world’s populations, although

most non-African Americans appear strangely unaware of this fact. Also, television and film seem to favor presenting African Americans who look a certain way, usually darker skinned, perhaps in an effort to “police” the boundaries of blackness. Any student assembly at the all-Black schools in the all-Black neighborhood that Spears grew up in before the end of racial segregation looked like a mini-United Nations. There were blond, blue-eyed students along with those who looked like most people’s idea of a southern Italian, Native American, Turk, Chinese—what have you—mixed in with those looking more like many people’s idea of an African American. Those who looked white sometimes passed for White, sometimes raising offspring who were told nothing of their ancestry.

Recall that black (i.e., darker-skinned) Africans have been immigrating to Europe since recorded history began—and before. Often these migrations occurred in significant waves, as during the Moorish invasions (beginning in the late first millennium, present era). The Age of European Discovery, beginning in the 15th century also spurred population exchanges between black Africa and Europe. The result was black African/European unions producing “mixed” lineages, like that which produced Pushkin, the great Russian writer. Consequently, some white Europeans are of recent African descent, as are many more white Americans. This is just one reason why race classification in the United States especially (less so in other societies with different racial systems) is and always has been logically absurd. It, like the racial classification systems of other societies, is not based on science; but, it is socioculturally very real.

African Americans have white ancestors due usually to the sexual violence in American history but also in a tiny minority of cases due to voluntary cohabitation. When tracing ancestors back to the mid-19th century, African Americans will almost always by then find whites. (As an example, Spears is dark skinned; but, both of his grandfathers, born in the late mid-19th century, had white fathers. His maternal grandmother’s grandfather was Native American, as were, no doubt, closer ancestors.) Recently, a great many more biracial unions producing children are the result of marriage. Some children of such marriages nowadays prefer to call themselves “biracial” or “multiracial”; others stick to a traditional term that explicitly links them to the African American community.

THE STANDARD AND THE VERNACULAR

In some writings, AAE is referred to as AAVE or Black Vernacular English, without clarifying the

distinction between two basic types of AAE: AASE and AAVE. (The term *vernacular* means “nonstandard” but is considered by some linguists to be less judgmental. *Vernacular* is also used in other senses. In one other sense, it refers to a person’s most relaxed style of speech, one in which there is practically no self-monitoring.) The first term, AAVE, which refers in reality to a cluster of regional and social varieties, includes nonstandard forms of this variety. The second term, AASE, refers to standard varieties. Standard varieties of English are defined negatively, that is, by a list of grammatical traits that they do not have. These traits include, for example,

the use of *ain’t*

the use of multiple negation, as in *They ain’t got none* and *He don’t never go nowhere*

the use of double modals, as in *I might could do that*

the use of certain verb forms such as habitual, invariant *be*, as in *She be studyin all the time* ‘She studies all the time—habitually’

Standard varieties are those that do not have any of the grammatical traits figuring in lists of nonstandard grammatical traits appearing in prescriptive grammars.

Consequently, AASE (which I will refer to as one variety though it also actually includes many regional and social varieties) does not have any grammatical features figuring in the lists of nonstandard grammatical features that we find in prescriptive grammars. This variety does have features that are distinctive to African American varieties, but none from the nonstandard feature list. This statement surprises many people because they assume that any grammatical feature that occurs in only AAE varieties must be nonstandard. But this is not so. There are some distinctive AAE grammatical features that have escaped traditional, prescriptive grammarians’ attention and thus have never appeared on any such lists. One might conjecture that, if these grammarians knew about such features, they would put them on the nonstandard list, owing to the stigma that U.S. society has historically attached to most things Black. This stigmatizing, however, is nowadays changing noticeably. Features of African American language and African American culture generally are now more often accepted without stigma. Examples of this come from AAE vocabulary associated with, for example, hip hop, jazz, rhythm and blues, and fashion.

Distinctive Grammatical Features and Camouflage

The distinctive AAE grammatical traits that appear in AASE are camouflaged (Spears 1982). It is practically impossible for anyone not a specialist in AAE grammar to detect them. As most AASE speakers are sensitive to the stigma still attached to things Black, they would probably try to rid their speech of these features if they knew what they were. AAE specialists, for their part, are sometimes reluctant to discuss camouflaged, distinctively Black grammatical features (DBGF) for fear that speakers' knowledge of them might inadvertently promote the attrition and perhaps eventual disappearance of these features and AASE itself. Linguists often act to preserve language varieties, trying not to do anything that might hasten their demise. Every language variety is precious in that it carries the history and culture of a people.

One example of an already rather well-known camouflaged grammatical feature occurring in both AASE and AAVE is what linguists call "stressed *been*," usually written "BIN." BIN is pronounced with more emphasis (stress), and in most varieties always with high pitch. Consider the following sentences, which most hearers would assume to be the same sentence:

1. She's BIN married. (AASE)
"She's been married a long time and still is married."
2. She's been married. (other non-African American dialects, henceforth OAD)

Example 2, the OAD sentence, can have two meanings:

- "She's been married before"
"She's been married (no length of time implied—and still is) (Cp. *She's been married ever since she graduated from college.*)

The two sentences are grammatically different, however. BIN is a type of auxiliary that occurs only in AAE. It is distinct from the past participle of *be*, which occurs in all English dialects and has a different meaning, as indicated by the glosses. (This, as other AAE features, has spread outside Black communities and outside of AAE into some other communities and language varieties, for example, Puerto Rican and Dominican English in many parts of New York City.) This feature has never been classified as nonstandard by prescriptivist grammarians, as noted above, probably because they did not know of its existence.

Note the following AAVE sentence:

3. She BIN married. (AAVE)

You probably noticed that this sentence has a nonstandard grammatical feature: the absence of any form, contracted ('s) or not, of the auxiliary verb *have*. These examples are useful because they offer a good example of how AAVE, AASE, and OAD differ.

Some nonstandard grammatical features that occur in AAVE also occur in vernacular OAD, for example, Appalachian English, Ozark English, and indeed in varieties spoken by the great majority of the English-speaking American population. (Many Americans erroneously believe that the great majority of English speakers speak standard varieties.) For example,

4. She done ate all of it. VERNACULAR (NONSTANDARD)
"She has eaten all of it" = "She's eaten all of it" STANDARD.

This example has the nonstandard auxiliary verb *done* and a nonstandard past participle of *eat*. The standard past participle is *eaten*.

Defining AAE

As already noted, BIN is an example of a DBGF. There is an entire list of such features, and linguists expect to discover more. Some are well known, such as BIN and habitual, invariant *be* (as in *He be at work when I get home* 'Habitually, it is the case that he is at work when I get home'). Others are known only to AAE specialists. They are somewhat difficult to discover because most are deeply camouflaged. Other things being equal, linguists who are native speakers of AAE are in a better position to ferret out camouflaged grammatical features. DBGF, ones found in AAE varieties only (except in cases where they have spread to other varieties), permit a definition of *AAE*: any variety of American English having a core of DBGFs. Some DBGFs are found in virtually all AAE varieties, others in only a few. An example of the former is BIN. An example of the latter is the conjunction (or complementizer) *say* (sometimes occurring more camouflaged as *said*):

5. Joe told me *say* they left = Joe told me *said* they left. AAVE
'Joe told me *that* they left' = 'Joe told me they left.'

The conjunction *say* is particularly interesting because it is a *creolism*: a grammatical trait found in at least some creole languages in addition to AAE. As such, it provides a clue to the origin and history of AAE. Another creolism is associative and plural *them*. It occurs in sentences such as the following one. In AAVE, the full form is *and them*, usually pronounced *an* 'em, while in creoles it is *dem*.

6. John an' "em left this morning.
'John and his friends/family/associates/colleagues left this morning.'

Sometimes lay persons consider someone as speaking AAE even though linguists would not consider the same person a speaker. In other words, social definitions of AAE may differ from that of linguists. At times, for example, even AAE speakers will hear, but not see, someone speaking and claim that they are talking Black (i.e., speaking AAE). A linguist, however, listening to the same person would not agree, because that speaker does not use the core group of DBGF linguists utilize to define this variety. Typically, such speakers who sound Black to AAE speakers imitate convincingly the pronunciation and intonational patterns of AAE speech and employ vocabulary associated with it. The linguistic definition of AAE is in line with the goals of linguistic research, which involve differentiating among language varieties on a primarily grammatical basis, although communicative practices are increasingly being investigated as we come to understand this aspect of language better.

Other Varieties

There are regional varieties of AAE, in addition to those that are classified with respect to standardness. The regional varieties have been little discussed (see, however, Butters 1989; Wolfram & Thomas 2002). In addition, there are African American diaspora varieties in Liberia, Nova Scotia, and the Samaná peninsula of the Dominican Republic (see Spears 2008 and the references therein). The diaspora varieties have been studied, primarily over the last 20 years, in order to gain insight into the history of AAE. Since African American populations left the U.S. for other countries in the 19th century, there is a possibility that they have preserved grammatical features no longer present in AAE. This is so because diaspora varieties are usually more conservative, preserving features that are lost in the parent variety through language change. Diaspora variety research has been done principally with the goal of finding evidence for or against the claim that AAE was once a creole language, quite similar to the creole languages of the Caribbean such as Jamaican Creole (Patwa) and Trinidadian Creole English.

Writing has recently begun to appear on a gender-based variety, African American Women's Language (Lanchar 2002; Troutman 2001). Actually, we might say most of the earliest studies on AAE were gender based also, but not self-consciously so, as they repeatedly focused on speakers in all male groups.

Speakers

Not all African Americans speak AAE, but probably around 95 percent speak some kind of AAE at least some of the time (we have no reliable figures), even though they may use only a few DBGFs. There are some non-African Americans who speak it, usually those who have grown up in close proximity to African American communities. Take the example of Puerto Ricans in New York City, whose neighborhoods abut and overlap with African American ones. They often have AAE in their linguistic repertoire, and some use it as their only truly native variety. African Americans who do not grow up in African American communities or who, for whatever reason, have had minimal contact with African Americans, normally speak no variety of AAE. This is what we would expect because children grow up learning to speak the language that they have the most contact with. After all, the specific language(s) one speaks is not genetically determined but socially determined.

Contexts of Use

Many, if not most, AAE speakers code-shift, depending on social context, from their informal AAE to another variety, usually a variety felt to be more appropriate in a particular setting. They may code-shift to AAVE, in situations where they want to stress their Black identification. The sociolinguist H. Samy Alim has noted in a number of academic conference presentations that a good number of rap artists normally use AASE but shift to AAVE in their recordings and public interviews. Or, they normally use an AAVE rather close to AASE and shift to a more vernacular AAVE on such occasions.

Note that *code-shift* is here used instead of the term *code-switch* to indicate that the distance between codes is relatively small, unlike that, say, between Spanish and English. Important to stress is that many speakers do shift between some type of AAVE and a standard variety, often AASE. It has often been claimed in sociolinguistics literature that there is no subordinate shifting, that is, speakers are unable to shift from a vernacular variety and to a standard. The truth, however, is that many AAE speakers do: they shift from AAVE to a standard variety and vice versa. However, when there is shifting across the vernacular-standard line, so to speak, it typically involves a few grammatical features that have special social significance, and the speakers can consciously control their shifting. They can do it on command, to put it another way.

For example, many AAE speakers who normally use AASE often shift to AAVE by incorporating more typically AAVE pronunciations,

the use of *ain't*, and double or multiple negatives into their speech. Some, in shifting to AAVE, drop the 3sg-*s* inflection on *do*, saying *he don't* and *she don't*, for example.

It must be noted that, unlike some vernaculars, AAVE has both informal and formal styles. The communicative rules governing formal AAVE, as we would imagine in view of American social history, differ significantly from those of formal non-African American standard varieties (Rickford & Rickford 2000; Smitherman 1977). Formal AAVE is frequently used in Black churches, alternating with informal AAVE.

History

There have been several hypotheses on the origin and historical evolution of AAE. (*Evolution* here does not imply change for the better or worse. It refers merely to changes in form over time.) Practically all scholars recognize that AAE (especially AAVE) is more different from OAD as a group than OAD are from one another. The issue is why. Currently, two groups of hypotheses are discussed most: the Anglicist and the creole substrate hypotheses.

The first group of hypotheses suggests that the distinctiveness of AAE is due overwhelmingly to the retention in AAE of grammatical features that have receded or disappeared in OAD, some of them still present in the British Isles. These hypotheses also assign a significant role to divergence in accounting for AAE's distinctiveness: over the last century and a half or so, AAE has diverged from OAD, developing new features not found in OAD or making central to its overall grammar features that in OAD have remained less robust or nonexistent. Habitual *be* has been offered as an example of the latter possibility (e.g., *He be doing his homework every night after dinner* 'He does his homework every night after dinner').

Creole substrate hypotheses assign an important influence on AAE historically stemming from creole languages once spoken more widely in the United States by slaves imported from other areas, notably the Caribbean. These hypotheses are unlike the creolist hypotheses that were advanced formerly. The creolist hypotheses claimed that AAE evolved out of a creole language, once widely spoken in the United States, particularly the plantation South. They claimed in addition that today's AAE is the outgrowth of the decreolization of that former creole: due to increasing education and contact with English, African Americans linguistically accommodated, making their language more and more like English, until it actually became a dialect of English.

The creole substrate hypotheses propose that the influence of creole languages spoken here and

there in various areas of the United States left traces in AAE, and that in creating the new language that was AAE, incorporated creole features. In other words, in shifting from creole languages to a new one (AAE), speakers retained a few features from their creole first languages. Also, there were speakers of various West African languages who, in contact with English, created in the emerging AAE some elements similar to those created in creole language genesis. (Keep in mind that West African languages and English, or some other colonial language, interacted in the formation process that gave birth to creole languages.) This kind of substratum effect has been noted repeatedly around the world in cases where a population speaking one or more languages has shifted to a new primary language. Substratum effects (from Spanish), for example, can be seen in the Hispanic Englishes of monolingual, English-speaking Hispanic Americans. In this case, however, the substratum involves one language (Spanish) instead of several closely related creoles in addition to some West African languages. Linguists supporting some form of creole substrate hypothesis also believe that there were substratum effects from creole languages in the formation of AAE.

The West African languages believed to have been spoken by Africans in the United States during the formative period of AAE belong to the Niger-Congo language family, which includes, for example, Kikongo, Twi, Ibo, Mende, Yoruba, Hausa, Bambara, and Ewe-Fon (the last a cluster of highly similar language varieties). Among the words in AAE that are considered to have originated in African languages are *yam*, *tote*, *banjo*, *gumbo* ('okra,' 'a seafood stew with okra'), *cooter* ('turtle'), *goober* ('peanut'), and many personal names such as *Cuffy* or *Coffy*, *Cudjo* or *Cudjoe*, *Zola*, and *Phoebe*. There is also a number of expressions that are translations of ones in West African languages, for example, *sweet-mouth* (verb 'to flatter').

NATIVE AMERICANS

While African Americans tend to be identified with, and sometimes use, a particular variety of English, the situation is wholly different for Native Americans, who have hundreds of heritage languages, representing dozens of language families. Mithun (2001) posits as many as 55 different language families and isolates in North America, although she writes that some of these families could be proven to be related with advances in scholarship in historical linguistics.³ Expanding the diversity even more, there are trade languages, and mixed languages that have developed since contact with European lan-

guages—most notably the fascinating Mitchif language, with Cree verbs and verbal morphology, and French nouns and noun morphology. African Americans, too, descend from people who spoke a multitude of languages (of Africa), but the languages involved were lost to most African Americans so long ago, and the heritage of African Americans so mixed between different language groups, that African American linguistic identity is usually linked to a form of English or English-based creole rather than to the original languages spoken by their ancestors. Native Americans, on the other hand, continue to grapple directly with their heritage languages, either deciding to abandon them (as in the case of many elders today) or seeking to reclaim them (the growing trend of the 21st century).

This difference in linguistic identification is partly the result of a history of different types of living conditions and different types of discrimination from the White majority. Except for recent immigrants, most African Americans began their American history as slaves, so that to a vastly greater extent they lived near to and had a defined relationship with English-speaking people (often slave owners). Furthermore, the early commingling of peoples from different African language backgrounds quickly resulted in the shift to English or an English-based creole. Historical records are so poor that it is difficult for African Americans even to find out which specific languages their ancestors spoke. During the same historical era, Native Americans went through periods of forced removal from their homelands and segregation on reservations. Until the establishment of government boarding schools and the policy of forcible residential education, most Native Americans tended to be removed from the influence of English in their everyday environment and retained their own languages as the main languages of communication. This was not, of course, true of every Native American group—many languages of the East Coast and the central United States were lost to their speech communities during the long period of contact; and, some languages of the Southwest and particularly California were lost when populations were decimated during the Mexican mission era and the subsequent gold rush and U.S. takeover. Nevertheless, a very large number of Native Americans today either still speak their heritage languages or at least remember hearing them spoken by their grandparents or great grandparents.

The postslavery era for African Americans became the era of Jim Crow (also called the Reign of Terror), during which social segregation between the races was emphasized, a situation that must have

encouraged maintenance or enhancement of dialect differentiation between Blacks and Whites. In contrast, during this same time, Native Americans were undergoing forced linguistic assimilation in the government boarding schools. While Native American “Pidgin English” is recorded in journals and newspapers of the preboarding school era, and there are certain kinds of accents that can be identified today as Native American forms of English, there are no current wide-spread features of a nation-wide “Indian English,” unlike in the case of AAE. Native Americans are unified linguistically not by a common language variety, but rather by a very widespread desire to reclaim their own languages.

The history of White attitudes toward Native American languages was one of disdain all the way from early contact extending well into the 20th century. The languages have been called “primitive,” “simple,” and “barbarous,” along with many other negative epithets. These opinions have often been expressed by people writing what are supposed to pass for scholarly works. For example, M. U. McClurg wrote in 1961 that Miami speakers⁴ “possibly used no more than one hundred [words] in common conversation” and that the language was “very imperfect,” the noun, the verb, and the adjective being about the only parts of speech used (McClurg, 1961:159, quoted in Leonard 2007). This opinion of Native American languages, widely expressed in the boarding school era by teachers and administrators, had a major depressive effect on Native Americans, many of whom still have internalized shame about their languages. This history has been a major factor in language death. The U.S. government saw the eradication of Native American languages as a necessary step toward their goal of assimilating Native American peoples into the general population and therefore encouraged and supported the view of the languages being primitive and inadequate. Thus, when the boarding schools were set up in the second half of the 19th century, one of the major objectives of the schools was to make sure not only that English would be learned, but that the native tongues would disappear. Children were punished for speaking their native languages, whether in the classroom, the playground, or the dormitories. Many elders today who went to the boarding schools made the conscious decision not to pass the language on to their children, so that they would not suffer in school the way the parents did. Others simply became so habituated to and dominant in English that they automatically used it all the time with each other and subsequently with their children.

Nowadays, while most White Americans have had a good deal of opportunity to hear AAVE,

whether on the streets, in the media, or elsewhere, most White Americans probably have not thought much at all about Native American languages, have probably not heard anyone speaking a Native American language, and have few opinions formed about the characteristics of those languages. More than a few Native Americans report that upon being overheard speaking their language in a public place, they have been approached by someone saying, “You are in America now; speak English!” People tend to react differently to dialect differences than to different languages. A standard English speaker’s reaction to a nonstandard form of English (such as AAVE) may be visceral, immediate, and negative. In contrast, we see that Native American languages are reacted to as “foreign.” So both AAVE and Native American languages are often greeted negatively, but in different ways. Both Native Americans and African Americans also display ambivalence toward their own languages and language varieties, with many having to battle their own internalized negative attitudes resulting from generations of discrimination by the majority White society.

At the same time, both AAE and Native American languages are touted as important markers of identity. The Ebonics controversy began in the first place because of a theory that teaching Black children standard English beginning from a starting point of respect for AAVE as a different but equally valid form of speaking would be more successful than merely disparaging AAVE. AAVE is also relatively well known through the entertainment industry, and features of AAVE are frequently adopted by rap fans and purveyors of popular music from all races. Still, there is nothing relating to AAE that corresponds to huge language revitalization movement of Native American languages.

AAVE is much more denigrated at this point in time than Native American languages are. It is one thing to be accused of being “foreign,” which can be viewed by Native Americans as a laughable and uninformed judgment of those who make it; it is another to be the victim of the much more widespread misconception that AAVE is itself an inferior, uneducated, and crass form of speech.

The current attitude of the U.S. government toward Native American languages is now much more positive than toward AAE. There is no official policy toward AAE, but the unofficial stance is clear from the fact that the 1996 Ebonics declaration of the Oakland School Board created outrage in Congress and resulted in the school board being called to congressional hearings to explain themselves and receive rebukes. In contrast, in 1990 Congress passed the Native American Languages Act,⁵ signed into

law by President George H. W. Bush. This act contains the following statements:

It is the policy of the United States to –

- (1) preserve, protect, and promote the rights and freedom of Native Americans to use, practice, and develop Native American languages;
- (2) allow exceptions to teacher certification requirements for Federal programs and programs funded in whole or in part by the Federal Government, for instruction in Native American languages when such teacher certification requirements hinder the employment of qualified teachers who teach in Native American languages, and to encourage State and territorial governments to make similar exceptions;
- (3) encourage and support the use of Native American languages as a medium of instruction in order to encourage and support—
 - (a) Native American language survival,
 - (b) equal educational opportunity,
 - (c) increased student success and performance,
 - (d) increased student awareness and knowledge of their culture and history, and
 - (e) increased student and community pride;
- (4) encourage State and local education programs to work with Native American parents, educators, Indian tribes, and other Native American governing bodies in the implementation of programs to put this policy into effect;
- (5) recognize the right of Indian tribes and other Native American governing bodies to use the Native American languages as a medium of instruction in all schools funded by the Secretary of the Interior;
- (6) fully recognize the inherent right of Indian tribes and other Native American governing bodies, States, territories, and possessions of the United States to take action on, and give official status to, their Native American languages for the purpose of conducting their own business;
- (7) support the granting of comparable proficiency achieved through course work in a Native American language the same academic credit as comparable proficiency achieved through course work in a foreign language, with recognition of such Native American language proficiency by institutions of higher education as fulfilling foreign language entrance or degree requirements; and
- (8) encourage all institutions of elementary, secondary, and higher education, where appropriate, to include Native American languages in the curriculum in the same manner as foreign languages and

to grant proficiency in Native American languages the same full academic credit as proficiency in foreign languages.

This recognition of the right of Native Americans to maintain and promote their languages, and encouragement of the use of Native American languages in the schools, is a complete reversal of the government philosophy during the boarding school era, and is of course completely opposite to the attitude toward the presence of AAE in the schools.

CONFRONTING ENDANGERMENT, SEEKING EQUALITY

The papers are presented herein in the order in which they were presented at the AAA Annual Meetings in 2007: Labov, on AAE; Rickford's response; Hinton, on Native American languages; and Hill's response to all of the papers.

Labov and Rickford focus on AAVE. Labov makes the crucial point that AAVE is not an endangered language variety (although, as indicated above, some types of AAVE are). Like all living language varieties, AAVE continues to evolve and, in important ways, diverge from other U.S. English varieties. This divergence stems mainly from racial segregation in residence patterns as well as poverty, both of which are intimately linked in too many areas to a "developing transgenerational cycle that includes also crime, shorter life spans, and low educational achievement." We can also assume that this divergence is to some extent due to the pride many AAVE speakers take in their language and their refusal, even when they can, to adopt grammatical features prevalent in the varieties spoken by Whites that they come in contact with. This pride in language is highly evident in popular culture forms originating in AAVE-speaking communities—notably rap music.

Among the most critical challenges for those seeking to uplift the African American community is the creation of more and larger scale programs for increasing educational success. Ironically, if in the future racial segregation is reduced, leading to greater contact between AAVE speakers and other dialect speakers, the most probable result will be the danger of AAVE on the whole losing its grammatical distinctiveness and its ability to serve as a linguistic resource. Informal observation indicates that those African Americans who have already spent a great deal of time in racially integrated contexts have lost—or never acquired—many DBGF.

We point out, in connection with Labov's article that linguists in anthropological traditions have made clear that languages must be seen as more than

mere tools for communication. Languages are inseparably linked to discourse practices and are repositories, so to speak, of the collective knowledge of speaker communities. This notwithstanding, Labov cautions that, even though many linguists and others would lament a decrease in or the disappearance of the rich array of syntactic and semantic features unique to AAVE, they also realize that in the final analysis the loss of a language variety is less disastrous than the physical and intellectual endangerment AAVE speakers now face. We stress, in line with Rickford's comments, that academic success (or improvement) alone does not imply the loss of AAVE; rather, given what we know about U.S. society, significant gains in academic achievement will likely involve the community's loss of many AAVE-specific features or of the variety itself.

In his response, Rickford agrees that Labov makes a strong argument that there is an inverse relationship between the continued segregation and endangerment of African Americans, on the one hand, and the survival of AAVE on the other. Nevertheless, he believes some details of the argument merit questioning. For example, though AAVE is not uniform throughout the country, where it is uniform, it is important to ask how such uniformity was developed and maintained. He makes several observations relating to how ethnic differences may well be maintained along linguistic lines. One pertains to interesting cases in which lone Whites and Blacks live surrounded by members of the other community but yet do not change their speech fully to that of the surrounding community. The speech of these isolated individuals leads us to believe that there are cultural factors, including community expectations that aid in maintaining race-linked dialect differences.

Assuming a direct connection between the use of AAVE and low scholastic achievement among African American students may be overly simplistic. It is essential to consider the ways in which teachers can influence this relationship. For example, several studies show that a crucial factor is how teachers react to AAVE. Where teachers show respect for Black language and culture, even students with more AAVE grammatical features in their speech post higher reading scores.

Rickford also sounds a note of caution about equating integration with assimilation, specifically as indexed by the disappearance of Black speech. There are indications, since the Civil Rights Movement's integrationist push, that many African Americans are now interested in integration mainly as a provider of access to opportunities—jobs, education, et cetera. Many reject full-scale assimilation, seeing

value in the maintenance of some distinctive cultural traditions.

Hinton's focus is on endangered Native American languages. Central to her article is the observation that the self-empowerment of Native Americans continually changes linguists' relationships with them. Recent decades have witnessed a major change in linguistic—and anthropological—ethics. Thus, it is now taken for granted that language research must serve the interests of the peoples whose languages are studied. A major outgrowth of this change is that linguists have become increasingly involved in language maintenance, codification, and revitalization. Sometimes, however, the linguists' interest in language preservation conflicts with those of now empowered speakers, who may be willing to allow their languages to die and be replaced by English.

No matter what the desires of Native American language speakers, the number of these languages serving as first languages has plummeted. Symptomatic of this trend is that today <1 percent of Navajo children are now arriving in kindergarten fluent in Navajo. All of the efforts at revitalization taken together have done nothing to stop the decline in the use of Native American languages.

While economic needs have pushed Native Americans away from their languages, identity, grouphood, and spiritual needs have pushed them toward language revitalization. So it is not surprising to hear speakers make statements such as, "I want to sing and pray in my language" and "Language carries our traditional values."

Hinton pays significant attention to interrogating the notion itself of language revitalization. Revitalization success can be interpreted in several ways: (1) preserving the language through documentation, (2) literacy, (3) new speakers, (4) use of the language, and (5) community control of the language. However, most important is that Native American groups launching revitalization programs have realistic ideas about what they can actually accomplish.

Hill reemphasizes key points made by Labov, Rickford, and Hinton: AAVE is not at all endangered, while all of the indigenous languages of North America are. However, she takes the great step of providing an entirely fitting and essential end piece to our discussions by fully confronting racism and ideology. White supremacist racism, the only kind of racism of consequence in our nation and globalized world, is analyzed by Hill as involving four projects. The first is setting up racial categories, the second is hierarchizing them, and the third is assigning individuals to the categories created. The fourth project is all important, as it involves the massive transfer of

material and symbolic resources from lower levels of the racial hierarchy upward to the top. Racism is the thread that links our discussions to historical and present macrorealities, assisting us in understanding the etiology of language and speaker endangerment.

NOTES

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2. We thank an anonymous reviewer for emphasizing this point.

3. Greenberg (1987) made the claim that there are but three major stocks of New World languages, but this is widely disputed (see Campbell 1988).

4. Miami is an Algonquian language originally spoken in Indiana and nearby states; since several removals, the Miami tribal center is now Oklahoma.

5. P.L. 101-477 (October 30, 1990).

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