

# Race & Language

## Considering Black Linguistic Experiences

Kelly Elizabeth Wright  
Chicago Linguistics Society  
6 May 2021 | Plenary

I live and work on the traditional and unceded territories of  
the Three Fire Peoples: the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Bodewadmi.

Kelly Elizabeth Wright

# Outline

These slides are available at  
<http://bit.ly/WrightCLS>

Background

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Education

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Institutions

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Current Research

# African American Language(s)

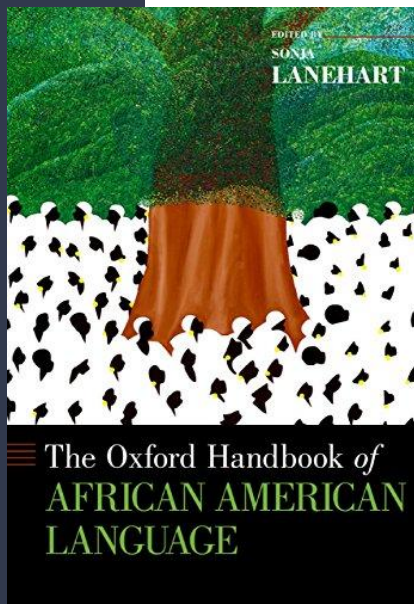
**aka**

African American English  
Black-Accented Standard

African American Vernacular English  
Ebonics

Afro-Caribbean Languages  
African Diasporic Dialects

- ❖ Enslavement and Settler Colonialism (1490-1865)
    - Separation and Erasure
    - Contact
  - ❖ Great Migration (1880-1960)
    - Reanalysis and Recombination
- Farrington, King, Kohn (2021)



# Anti-Literacy Laws

“An educated slave is a dangerous person”

- ❖ 1739 Negro Act made it **illegal** to teach enslaved Blacks how **to read**.
- ❖ Literacy threatened justifications for enslavement

# Foundations of US policing



- ❖ Advertisements often give police **and the public** information about the escaped enslaved person's speech.

# \$100 REWARD.

Ranaway from the subscriber's farm, near Washington, on the 11th of October, negro woman **SOPHIA GORDON**, about 24 years of age, rather small in size, of copper color, is tolerably good looking, has a low and soft manner of speech. She is believed to be among associates formed in Washington where she has been often hired.

I will give the above reward, no matter where taken and secured in jail so that I get her again.

**GEORGE W. YOUNG.**

November 16th, 1856.

H. Polkshorn's Steam Job Printing Office, D street, bet. 6th & 7th sts., Washington, D. C.

**Fifteen Dollars Reward !**

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**I**S hereby given, that my Negro man named **YETT** won't stay at home, but runs at large, to and fro. All persons are therefore forbidden to harbor, trust or employ said run-away, even one hour, on penalty of the law ; and no excuse will be taken of those who transgress this injunction.

**YETT** is pretty large sized ; not of the blackest order ; speaks Low-Dutch and broken English ; and plays upon the fiddle.

The above reward will be paid to any person who will safely return said Negro into the custody of the subscriber, residing about two miles from *Ingham's Mills*.

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## \$10 REWARD.—Absconded



from the subscriber's dwelling, on the 6th instant, the negro girl **FANNY**, aged about 30 ; speaks English and French ; has lost her front teeth ; very dark skin : took with her her daughter, a mulatto, aged about 7. She has a daughter on Girod street, No 188, and may go there at night. She has been seen at the **St. Mary Market**.

**J. A. BRAID**, 18 Bienville st.

# White Supremacy and Meaning

Listen to [Because Language](#) for more on this!

- ❖ White people named the heavens and the body; established units of measure and timezones.
- ❖ Standard-**IZATION**
- ❖ Defined appropriateness, conscientiousness, success, propriety, forthrightness, innocence, justice, engagement, sincerity....



# White Standardized Spoken English

*Race and the Rise of Standard American* Bonfiglio (2002)

- ❖ The variety of the powerful becomes codified.
- ❖ Preferred pronunciation defaults to the “race-neutral and ethnically-unmarked” variety of the Inland North.



# White Standardized Spoken English

*Race and the Rise of Standard American* Bonfiglio (2002)

- ❖ Use of the Standard variety becomes synonymous with good breeding, positive character traits, and citizenship.
- ❖ **Assimilation** is expected.

“The way Black language is devalued in schools reflects how Black lives are devalued in the world.”  
(Baker–Bell 2020)

# Education

1971 San Francisco segregates 3000 Chinese students

- ❖ The [Lau v Nichols](#) decision
  - the Equal Educational Opportunities Act
  - “To take appropriate action to **overcome language barriers** that impede equal participation by students”

# Education

Anti-Black Linguistic Racism

## ❖ Black English Cases

➤ Ann Arbor

➤ Oakland

# Ann Arbor Black English Case

1974

[Watch This!](#)

[Language Policy Archives](#)

(see also Smitherman & Baugh 2010)

- ❖ Seeking to **extend** the [Lau v Nichols](#) decision **to dialects**
- ❖ AAL as a medium of instruction
  - “Children need to learn how to speak and understand”

# Ann Arbor Black English Case

Read every page of *Linguistic Racism*  
by April Baker-Bell (2020)

- ❖ Plan to make White instructors aware of the structure and function of Black English
- ❖ Prepare students to codeswitch

# Oakland

See Rickford on the [Oakland Ebonics Controversy](#)

- ❖ Claim *Lau v Nichols* should cover Ebonics as a language **in its own right**
- ❖ This legal argument fails as well



# Black English Cases

## Black English project starts under spotlight

THURSDAY OCT 1 & 1979

By Katherine Green  
STAFF REPORTER

National attention was focused Wednesday on 28 teachers at Martin Luther King Elementary School, who began an intensive in-service workshop program.



HOWARD

Reporters and cameramen from television stations, newspapers and news services dominated the attention of the teachers, administrators and board members present for the session. The program is part of a school system plan to help the teachers identify children speaking black English and to use that knowledge to teach those children to read standard English.

The order to implement such a plan was given by Judge Charles W. Joiner in a July decision which found that the King School teachers do their best to help the children. The judge ordered, though, that the school board take steps to provide more leadership to help teachers learn about the existence of a black dialect, its use at home and in the black community. Further, they must suggest to those teachers ways of using their knowledge to teach black children

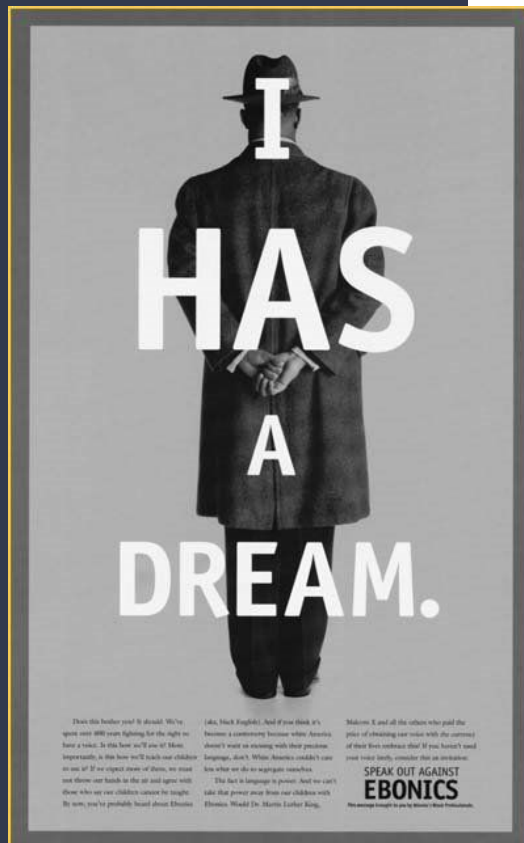
to switch from the home language to reading standard English.

THE WORKSHOP will consist of three sessions of 3½ hours in October, November and December, and two full day sessions in January, a total of 20 hours. The first three sessions will be conducted by Dr. Thomas Pietras, language arts director for the school system.

In those sessions, according to Lee Hansen, associate superintendent for curriculum and instruction, the teachers will discuss the concepts of language and dialects; how to come to grips with attitudes toward language and whether it is used as a "social marker;" and the features of black English and how to recognize them.

The January sessions will be conducted by Dr. William Hall, professor of psychology and co-director of the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois, and Dr. Roger Shuy, professor at Georgetown University and Director of the Center for Applied Linguistics. Shuy researched the features of black vernacular English in the Detroit area, and his work was often referred to during the black English trial. Hall, a black educator, has authored numerous articles and books concerning linguistics.

See Black, Page A-2



- ❖ Even misguided and inequitable approaches weren't nationally adopted
- ❖ US Dialect speakers **still do not** enjoy Equal Educational Opportunities, like English Language Learners do.

# Education

## Black Linguistic Experiences

- ❖ Categorically different from those of other learners
- ❖ Reticence of administrators to recognize Black language as valid
- ❖ Outsized impact on how Black people are treated in the world
- ❖ Creates a deficit model.

# Lexical Racialization

Read more on [The Undefeated Wright \(2017\)](#)

- ❖ Happens when a word with **no preexisting racial connotation** comes to describe people of color asymmetrically.
  - *Thug* or *articulate*
- ❖ Doesn't mean they are \*never\* applied to White people, significantly less often.

# Racialization in Sports Journalism

Give it up for corpus linguistics!  
(ask me about next steps)

- ❖ Racialized **SE**mantics in **A**thletics **C**orpus
  - 120 Athletes
    - 60 White; 60 Black
      - 30 Male; 30 Female
  - 15,500 lexemes
  - 8.5 million total words
- ❖ 108 year time depth

# Machine Learning

- ❖ A Support Vector Machine is a learning algorithm
  - SVM predicts athlete race with **lexical token counts** for each athlete as input.
- ❖ Separate this corpus into two meaningful groups
  - Categorization task

	Athlete	Race Probability
Black Athletes	Eric Berry	3%
	Chamique Holdsclaw	3%
	Brittney Griner	3%
	Anthony Davis	3%
	Jackie Joyner Kersee	3%
White Athletes	Alia Atkinson	3%
	Hope Solo	96%
	Phil Mickelson	96%
	Andrew Luck	96%
	Ronda Rousey	96%
	Drew Brees	96%
	Katie Ledecky	96%

- ❖ The SVM sorted athletes into two racial groups by **probability of membership**
  - Based on **sheer lexical frequency**
- ❖ The most impressive result here is **a lack of gradience** in the probabilities of category membership.
  - The algorithm was sure. Like, super sure.

Lexical Type	Importance	Black Sum	White Sum
BLOCKS	0.2092	520	102
NIKE	0.1515	660	217
COAST	0.1511	132	214
EFFORTS	0.1451	310	205
AVERAGED	0.1421	573	109
ATHLETIC	0.1130	1029	662
WONDERFUL	0.1075	204	379
UNDEFEATED	0.1064	241	74
WHOM	0.1052	363	227
APPEARED	0.0958	545	333
SOCIAL	0.0904	872	560
LLC	0.0871	104	222

- ❖ RandomForest model lets us crack into **Lexical Importance** to Categorization
- ❖ Model outputs predict which **words were most useful** in the **racial categorization** task.

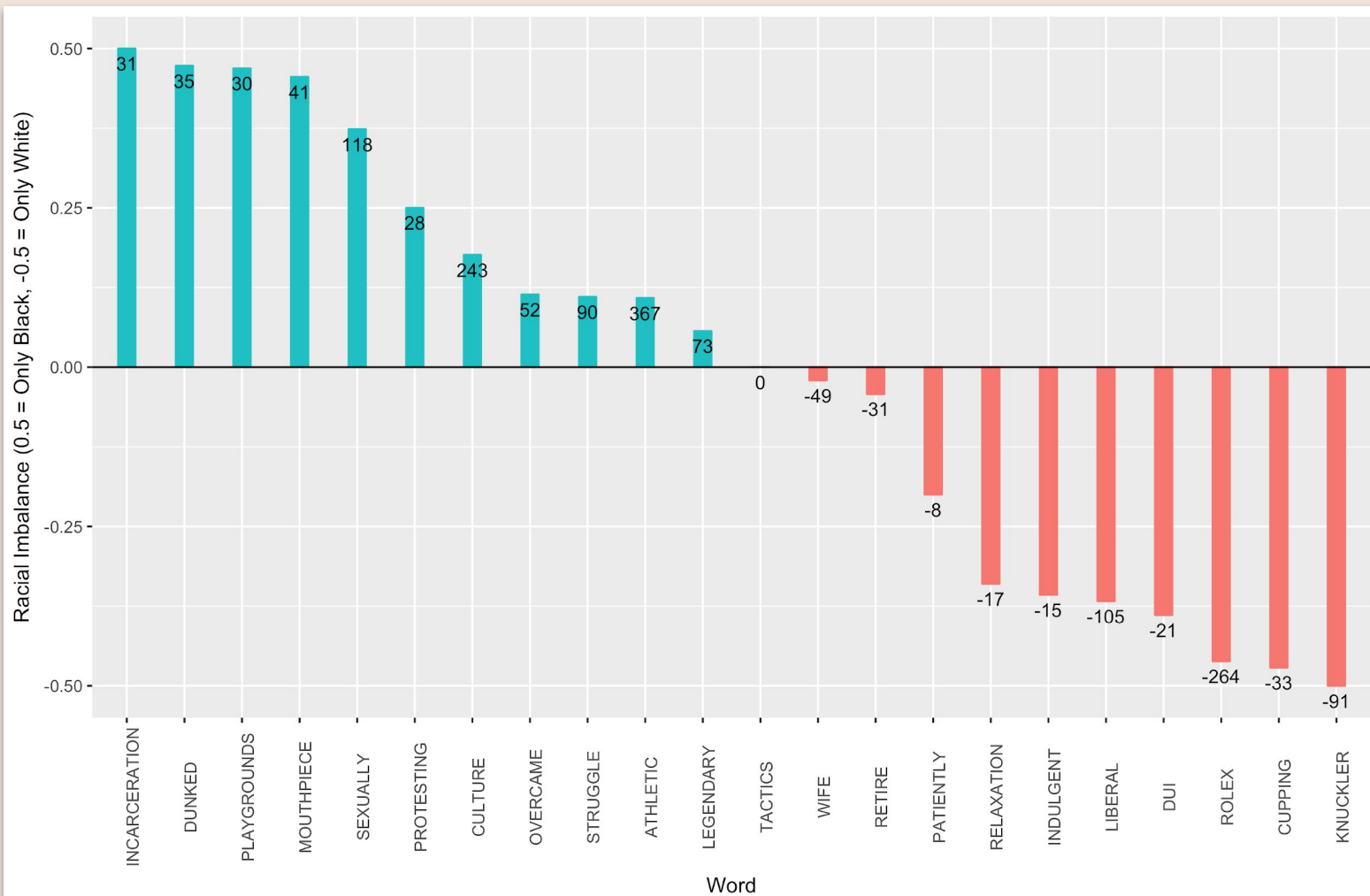
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Black  
Subcorpus →

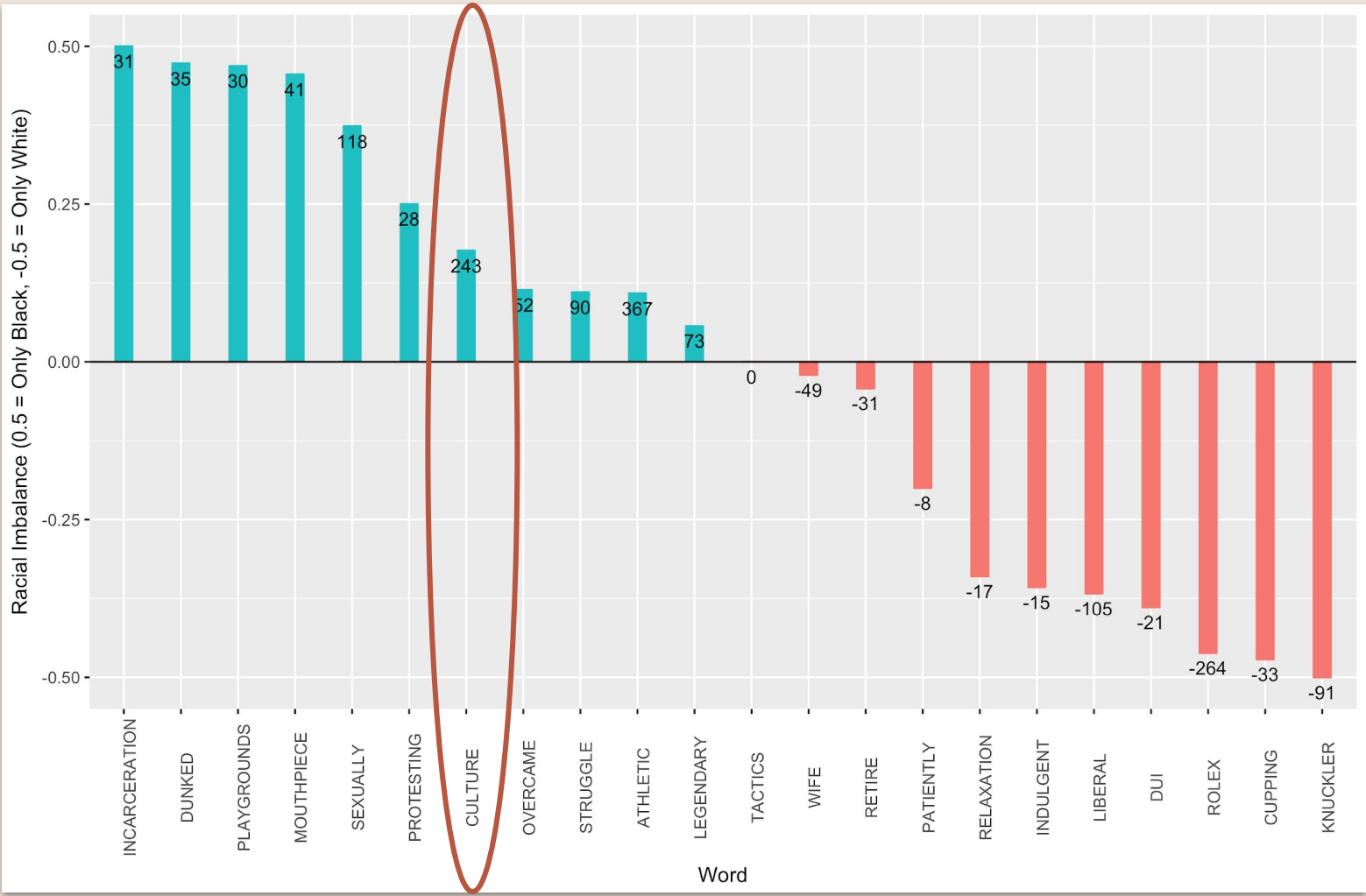
White  
Subcorpus →



Culture  
2:1 ratio

Black  
Subcorpus →

White  
Subcorpus →



# Lexical Usage Asymmetries

## *Culture*

Learn more here [End of Sport](#); [The Economist](#)

- ❖ Black athletes are discussed as
  - **Infusing** their own culture into the sport
  - **Altering** the sport's culture with their ethnic presence
- ❖ *Culture* occurrences in the White subcorpus
  - The **culture of the sport** itself, not White culture as such
  - **Not** in reference to **the athlete**

# The Myth of Unbeatable Black Athleticism

Hill (2008)

Mastro et al. (2011)

- ❖ Folk ideology, mistakenly applied throughout US history
- ❖ Black people are *mistakenly believed to be* naturally suited for physical activity, due to primitive aggression and physicality, and are thus prone to violent displays. This leads to prowess in sport.

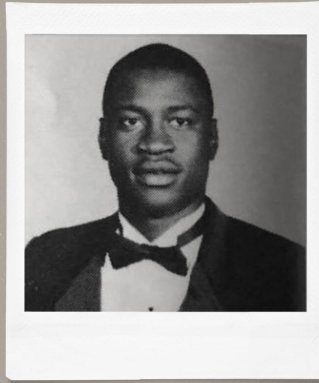
# Health Care

See [Craft, Wright, Weissler, Queen \(2020\)](#)



- ❖ Black patients who reported pain were 22% less likely to receive medication ([Meghani et al. 2012](#))
- ❖ Semantic Intensity
  - Expectations of elevated descriptions of pain
- ❖ [Serena Williams' pulmonary embolism](#) after the birth of her daughter, Olympia.

# Policing



Baker-Bell (2020) Slobe (2016)  
Gillion (2015) [Holliday, Burdin, Tyler \(2015\)](#)



- ❖ **Life-threatening** consequences
  - George Floyd “I ain’t do no drugs”
  - Trayvon Martin “Creepy-Ass Cracker”
  - Sandra Bland, the Angry Black Woman who copped **an attitude**



# Housing



Learn more [here!](#)  
Purnell et al. (1999)  
Massey & Lundy (2001)

- ❖ Purnell, Idsardi, & Baugh (1999) showed that **discrimination on the basis of voice** is possible.
- ❖ Wright (2019) shows that this is still present in the contemporary market.
  - Black speakers experience explicit discrimination



# Housing

Learn more [here!](#)  
Scharinger et al. (2016)  
Wright (2019)

- ❖ Not only race identification, but also **linguistic profiling** happens rapidly.
  - Black speech stereotyped for **both** race and non-Standardness
- ❖ Across 10 categories (e.g. *trustworthy, confident, difficult*) **AAL** voice **rated lowest** among Southern American and Mainstream US English.



# Black Linguistic Experiences

# Raciolinguistic Ideologies

Rosa & Flores (2015)

*Conflate certain racialized  
bodies with linguistic  
deficiency unrelated to any  
objective linguistic practices*

# Black Professionalism



- ❖ Under **pressure**, if not requirement, **to assimilate** to White Standardized Spoken English
- ❖ Equity is still a goal, not a reality.



# Audience Design

Bell (1984)

Rickford & McNair Knox (1994)

“If the secondary, stylistic dimension is derived from the primary, social dimension, we should also correlate the style dimension with a person's attributes. But in this case, they will be **the attributes**, not of the speaker, but **of the hearers**” (Bell 1984, p.159).

- ❖ Bell's model illustrates that **style shifting** (intraspeaker variation, including bilingual and bidialectal codeswitching) is **derived from social** (interspeaker) **variation**.
- ❖ Shifting is conditioned by the identities of the listener

# Audience Design Expanded

- ❖ Many racialized users command **multiple varieties** that are separately and intersectionally **indexed to aspects of their individual identities.**

# Sociolinguistic Labor

Holliday & Squires (2020)

- ❖ Sociolinguistic labor is defined as: The physical, emotional, and psychological effort put into deploying sociolinguistic resources in a way that is meant **to satisfy others**.
- ❖ Bicultural Competence

# Sociolinguistic Interviews

Discussions with Black Professionals  
from Detroit



- ❖ Seeking to capture **Metalinguistic Awareness**, to expand audience design by taking into account raciolinguistic ideologies and sociolinguistic labor.

# Sociolinguistic Interviews

Metalinguistic Awareness

- ❖ US Black language variation
  - Dialectology Questions
  - Defining and discussing AAL lexical items

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# Sociolinguistic Interviews

Discussions with Black Professionals  
from Detroit

- ❖ Language Use
  - Formative Years
  - Family History
  - Advice or Sayings

# Childhood identity experiences

Lonnie: a 50 year old, cisgender male,  
music teacher at Detroit Public  
Schools



“Always leave a place better than what you found it.

Anything I do, if I wanna to be involved with it, it should be better because I was there.

I have heard this **the majority of my life**: you have to be better.

**...to be seen, acknowledged, heard,** whatever to advance, be better than your competitors, be better than other people around you, especially those that don't look like - you know, **excel way beyond.”**

# Sociolinguistic Interviews

Discussions with Black Professionals  
from Detroit

- ❖ Educational Experiences
  - Awareness of own production
  - Perceptions by different communities

# Bicultural Competence

Lillian: a 45 year old, cisgender female,  
director of a neighborhood non-profit,  
running for Detroit city council



“Unfortunately, what tends to happen in our communities is people start to **stereotype you one way or the other**. Four years ago, when I campaigned, there were people in the grassroots community who looked at me and I guess they didn't like the way that I spoke

But, deep down inside **i'm still the same person**. And so they wanted to stereotype me just because of the way that I speak. I don't feel differently when i'm around my family, I still talk the same way that I talk”

# Sociolinguistic Interviews

Discussions with Black Professionals  
from Detroit

- ❖ Professional Experiences
  - What is professionalism?
  - Trajectories
  - Current and Future Goals

# Professional Trajectory/Goals

Alisha: 32 year old, cisgender female,  
asexual, development manager at  
Atlantic Impact



“Top choice right now is Yale.

I know that that’s going to be **a battlefield** ... in the same way that like working in a corporate place, right, for me would be

So when I write books, later on, people will be like: Oh, she knows what she's talking about **let's actually listen to her**

Then, for some reason right, that means oh you're indoctrinated in a way that I believe, and **you're not dangerous**, so i'll listen to you.”

# Sociolinguistic Interviews

Metalinguistic Awareness

- ❖ Racialized Stylistic Choices
  - “Taking White” vs “Authentically Black” voices

# Talking Black

Solomon: a 25 year old, cisgender male, works for a Detroit public policy non-profit



“I feel like the way black people talk it's like very like descriptive it's like it's like stories, I always like storytelling almost and so I like try to like pick up on that, and you know, I mean everybody does it so I guess it kind of just feels natural.

It's different.

Profanity can be like can be like a punctuation mark, or it can be like a descriptor, it could be an inanimate object, it could be a feeling ”



# Sociolinguistic Interviews

Metalinguistic Awareness

## ❖ Analysis of Black Language Use

- Authentic or Appropriative?
- Hear a Black, Female motivational speaker
- Watch Nina Simone
- Watch an Influencer Video
- Watch a TikTok
- Read a Tweet

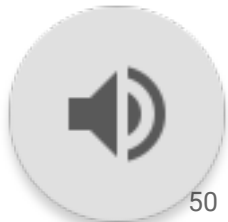
# Cultural Appropriation

Journey: 25 year old, cisgendered female, works in finance for Quicken loans in Detroit

“...not necessarily natural, but like there's no there's **no connectedness** to like what she's saying it just feels like she's saying it just to be like kind of cool or be like in the culture.

White people are like: Oh, that seems cool. And then they try to like adopt it and it's just you can just see that it's **so forced**

Just be yourself like no one's looking for you to be like, you know.”



# Sociolinguistic Interviews

Metalinguistic Awareness

- ❖ Motivations for Style Shifting
  - Avoiding tone policing
  - Professional Experiences
  - When under threat  
because of their  
Blackness

## Sociolinguistic Interviews

Black speakers use  
Whiter varieties in  
professional spaces to  
seem intelligent, to be  
taken seriously, to  
make White people  
comfortable.

## Perceptual Experiments (coming soon!)

Are they  
successful?

# Sociolinguistic Monitor Task

Labov et al. (2011)

- ❖ Assess on a scale of “Job Suitability”
- ❖ Testing a **cline of professionalism** with three contexts:
  - Doctor
  - National Nightly News Anchor
  - City Council Member
- ❖ **Legible** performances of professionalism for Black language users.

# Takeaways

## Race & Language

- ❖ Race & Language
- ❖ Theorists, Data, and Laypeople
- ❖ Black people have a right to uncompromised self expression!
- ❖ Linguists of all disciplines--and all races--ought to be aware of these realities so they can inform and protect their students and communities.

# Thanks!

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[Her Website](#)

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