

Chapter 14

Construction of Dialogue: The Language of an American Black Man Working in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The ways dialogue is constructed is influenced by a myriad of factors—institution, context, the multiple identities people hold. Based on these factors, people bring with them varied experiences that inform the way they communicate with one another, both consciously and subconsciously. This chapter takes an in-depth look at how dialogue is constructed in the higher education setting. Utilizing a discourse analysis lens, the author conducted a 45-minute-long interview to obtain information about the experience of one Black male professional in higher education. During this interview, the author sought to investigate his usage of multiple varieties of English that showcased how a professional in higher education employed racial linguistic practices as a bridge between faculty/staff norms and student dynamics and interactions. Through this process, the author takes a look at how language shifts and switches play a role to develop the legitimacy, connection, and sharing that takes place in a higher education environment for students and staff.

INTRODUCTION

Language is more than a construct. It shapes our understanding of the world around us, it gives us a means to communicate with others, and it aids in defining cultural significance that is distinct to who we are and our lived experiences. Language is a part of our being, which allows us to express ourselves, to challenge others, and to engage in learning environments. Unfortunately, power dynamics are also related to language, where, depending on a certain community's language variety, some speakers are viewed as unintelligent and illegitimate, a discriminatory view which poses harmful risks to those communities (Baugh 2005).

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More specifically, Black English, which is also known as African American English (AAE) or African American Vernacular English (AAVE), has long been a stigmatized language. For the purpose of this paper, I will be using AAE and Black English throughout to denote the language of Black people in America. Baugh (2005) writes:

Unlike most white immigrants to urban centers, who eventually adopted local dialects, blacks generally remained isolated in impoverished ghettos and as a result, retained their dialect. This physical isolation contributed to linguistic isolation and the maintenance of AAE. The retention of unique misconceptions of this dialect, all of which amount to the opinion that speakers of this dialect lack intelligence. (p. 4)

Given this explanation, we find that the Black community has largely retained its language due to the environments in which they live. Because of this language retention of Black English, there continues to be a lack of understanding and meaningful interactions between those who employ this language variety and those who are not members of Black communities. While there is still growth needed in recognizing this language variety outside of the Black community, within the Black community, there tends to be a sense of togetherness that is built, along with culture and traditions revolving around language that are maintained. While others may view African American English/Black English as a deficit, most in the Black community have found value in it. Therefore, there must be a deeper conversation on how to raise awareness concerning this variety in order to prevent opportunities being denied based on language.

Baugh (2005) continues to say that the “personal and cultural identities [of AAVE speakers] are closely linked to the language of their friends, family, and forebears. And AAVE symbolizes racial solidarity” (p. 5). Because the network is built among the Black community based on the connection to culture and language, it helps to push against dominant narratives projected on language varieties like standard English, or — as I like to refer to it — White mainstream English, which perpetuates linguistic hegemony in both theory and practice.

The purpose of this chapter is to gain insight into the ways language is flexed in the higher education environment, specifically by a Black man in the United States of America. We recognize that the many linguistic repertoires a person may utilize, especially in higher education, is nuanced. More specifically, as it relates to race, the ways in which one communicates in higher education matters and could be a determining factor to grant or deny access based on what language variety is spoken and to whom it is spoken. Therefore, it is important to recognize that language is deeply connected to culture and should be valued in any given space, regardless of variety. This next section will help provide background into how race, culture, and language are intertwined.

Race, Culture, and Language

When we talk about language and how it links with the concept of linguistic hegemony, we must also consider race as a key element of discussion, recognizing a raciolinguistic approach. Rosa and Flores (2017) profess, “A raciolinguistic perspective seeks to understand the interplay of language and race within the historical production of nation-state/colonial governmentality, and the ways that colonial distinctions within and between nation-state borders continue to shape contemporary linguistic and racial formations” (p. 623). Through this understanding, we recognize that there is a longstanding, systemic issue at play that directly impacts societal views of how language is perceived. When we look at historically marginalized populations whose language varieties are often dismissed, there is a deeper need for

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