

## Chapter 4

# Linguistic Liberation: The Experiences of Black Higher Education Professionals

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter will explore, question, and critique linguistic diversity, in general, and English, specifically, concerning lived Black experiences. The authors recognize linguistic diversity as acknowledging and accepting the many language varieties people hold and bring with them in the spaces they enter. By understanding this concept, they aim to provide a deeper perspective into how Black male educators in higher education face challenges regarding linguistic diversity. The experiences are often overshadowed by linguistic hegemony that is rooted in white supremacy, so they aim to provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of Black male educators to promote linguistic liberation. This chapter will explore the experiences of both Black male professionals and illuminate the challenges and opportunities faced in relation to linguistic diversity from their personal narratives. They aim to share the importance and value of creating Black space within whiteness to share linguistic backgrounds and stories.*

### **LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR LINGUISTIC AGENCY**

As higher education professionals, we, Dr. Antione Tomlin (Professor) and Mr. Lavon Davis (Student Affairs Practitioner) often struggle with when it is appropriate to flex our autonomy related to linguistic agency. Higher education is still a majority white space that values white culture. As Black men, we recognize this way of being and strategically and intentionally push back on linguistic hegemony rooted in white supremacy. Banks (2007) emphasized that we must talk about culture in every way to avoid “cultural misunderstandings, conflicts, and institutionalized discrimination” that can occur when linguistic differences are misinterpreted (p. 7). This chapter seeks to explore some of the elements of what Banks

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(2007) suggested. We will talk about culture, as it is directly connected to our African American English and the ways we have learned to use it. In that, we hope to shed light on issues that we have experienced or have seen happen that perpetuate a culture of institutionalized discrimination.

This chapter explores our experiences as two Black male higher education professionals and illuminates the challenges and opportunities that are faced in relation to linguistic diversity from our personal narratives. Our aim is to share the importance and value of creating Black space within whiteness to share our linguistic backgrounds and stories. First, we open the chapter by sharing our individual narratives and experiences with denying and reclaiming our linguistic agency. Then we offer major takeaways and recommendations for practice/supporting linguistic freedom and valuing all English varieties. Finally, we conclude with standing in our Blackness unapologetically.

### **LAVON DAVIS, M.ED., SCHOLAR-PRACTITIONER AND NATIVE AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH SPEAKER**

#### **The Making of My Linguistic Repertoire**

I always knew I had a passion for language and how people interpreted differing communication styles and language varieties. Because of my past experiences, I grew an even fonder interest in how my own communication patterns were received by others. My experiences trace back since my Pre-K-12 education. However, my most defining and reflective experience that rooted the unearthing of my curiosity around language was in the fourth grade.

For context, I grew up in a predominantly Black community. My family was lower middle-class; I had everything I needed and would usually get everything I wanted. I had no idea, at the time, the sacrifices that were made behind the scenes to provide for me, nevertheless, the fact that my family were afforded such opportunities to financially support me and my siblings, I had a sense of privilege that other children and families in my community didn't necessarily have. I grew up in a very religious, 2 parent household to start. My dad was a pastor, and church talk and biblical references within the Black experience were my landscape and foundation. My mom was a correctional officer, so conversations around the prison system and statistics of incarcerated Black bodies was also an awareness I grew up with. My parents later separated and then divorced, which left my mom as a single parent for quite some time—this left me and my siblings at a crossroads to determine how we would continue our own journeys living in a disjointed, complex household. Still yet, my mom provided and worked tirelessly to ensure we continued our same level of privilege.

I always went to schools where predominantly white teachers and students were placed. I was always one of few Black children in my class, and I was one of few Black students who spoke a different language variety than the other children in my class, which caused communication difficulties for me. Ladson-Billing (2006) testifies, “The story of the achievement gap is a familiar one. The numbers speak for themselves. In the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress results, the gap between Black and Latina/o fourth graders and their White counterparts in reading scaled scores was more than 26 points... Even when we compare African Americans and Latina/os with incomes comparable to those of Whites, there is still an achievement gap as measured by standardized testing” (p. 3-4). Given these staggering statistics, as a—then Black 4<sup>th</sup> grader who had been struggling academically and socially, there were certain standards of language and communication I grasped in the classroom that, arguably,

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