

THE NEGOTIATION OF LANGUAGE IN COLLEGE SETTINGS

BY

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THESIS

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Abstract

The study examines the role of language for college students that grew up in African American communities and that are speakers of African American English. The study looked at the participants' everyday talk and how they talked about their language practices and experiences, socially and academically. The purpose of this study is to understand students' practices and experiences with language in college settings. The method that was used to collect data was a focus group. The major themes that emerged from this study were centered on the labeling of languages/and or dialects that the participants spoke, code switching, negotiation of space and racialization of language. The participants showed the complexities of being an AAE speaker in higher education. Throughout the paper, there have been instances of the participants implying that their experiences on campus and, in general, schools go further than their language use. Research that further investigates how AAE speakers navigate college spaces and how they perceive language is needed to get a better understanding of student language needs in school settings. This research supports that language practices, behaviors and attitudes are complex; they are fluid and change as the social context changes.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Pursuit of higher education has always been an uphill battle for African Americans. Predominantly White Universities (PWI) were not meant to include black bodies, so when the various social activist movements sprouted throughout the 20th century black students were re-imagining and expanding the boundaries that were set for them. Black students who integrated into U.S. universities had their “intellectual and linguistic abilities...questioned and negated as part of and parcel of reproducing social inequalities”(Kynard, 2013, p.46). In the last few decades, the enrollment of black students into colleges and universities are at a all time high, the climate of PWIs are becoming more diverse everyday and the “presence of many different languages in our classrooms means that complex, multiple sets of epistemologies and discursive identities are shaping students’ speaking, writing, and all their ways of being in language” (Kynard, 2013, p.18). Have institutions of higher learning embraced the unique culture, language and experiences that students of color bring to their respective campuses?

As graduate student, my assistantship requires me to interact with undergraduate students, who are predominantly students of color. This particular space on campus is one where students can air their academic concerns and have access to resources that can ease the transition into college. While there ere many issues that students expressed, to my surprise language was brought up more than once. Students had varying levels of experiences surrounding language issues. Recently, I was meeting with Patrice, a student who is a speaker of AAE, and we were discussing her progress in her freshman composition class and she exclaims “*I got a D on my assignment!*” When I ask why, Patrice replied “*because I used ‘ain’t’ in my paper*” and then she asks “*isn’t ain’t a word?*” And I told her that “ain’t” was definitely a word, but then I explained that in some spaces, especially in academic spaces, “ain’t” is not always seen as the “right”

word. And she responded, “*then how do I know what’s right?*” This was not the first time that one of my students expressed frustration on the linguistic and writing restraints placed on them in their college classes. Coincidentally, a few weeks later I was chastised for using “ain’t”. One day I was talking to co-workers (other graduate students) and “ain’t” slipped out. Before I could even finish my sentence I was interrupted by another staff member saying, “I can’t believe you just said that. You can’t say ain’t that’s not a word” and I responded that “ain’t” is a word and she tells me that I was wrong and that I was setting a bad example for my students by not speaking properly. I responded as someone who avidly studies linguistic practices, especially AAE that I know that “ain’t” is a word, but it fell on deaf ears.

In these types of encounters I struggle with how to talk about the legitimacy of AAE without getting angry, alienating people or pulling out several books, and exclaiming “*See it’s real. It’s not a figment of my imagination!*” Again, this is not the first time I have been confronted with, but I never get used to it. Insecurities about my language practices resurfaced like I was in elementary school again. I can imagine what the undergraduate students that speak AAE feel in these same spaces. Kynard (2013), argues that spaces such as freshman composition classes serve as a “gatekeeper for success in the white, bourgeois literacy coded of college” and it is also an “important lens into the ongoing racialized and political boundaries of who can and should have a right to higher education” (p.8). My linguistic experience happened in setting outside the classroom and reflecting back on the interactions mentioned above I believe that this idea can apply to a multitude of college settings including the classroom, workspaces and even social spaces.

“Standardized” English is the language that is used and accepted in school environments. The reality is that not all students are speakers of Standard English. Within the context of

educational settings African American English (AAE) is often a dialect that has negative connotations. At the elementary and high school level, misunderstandings of AAE are not uncommon, and some situations speaking AAE can become a language problem. In some cases, this can impact educational achievement. What happens when undergraduate AAE speaking students are navigating through a new educational space like a predominantly white college campus? The research in higher education on minority students' access and retention has focused on structural barriers rather than on how students negotiate these barriers. Furthermore, there is a lack of research about linguistic minority students and their experiences (Oropeza et. al.,2010). The purpose of this study is to understand African American English (AAE) speaking students' language practices and experiences with language in college. I propose the following research questions:

1. What are African American English speakers' meta-pragmatic discourses about their linguistic practices in school settings?
2. What language related experiences become salient or emerge in students' interactions in the following settings: campus, class, social groups and focus group itself?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Language ideologies are conceptualizations about languages, speakers, and discursive practices. More specifically, language ideologies are made up of attitudes, opinions and beliefs that we commonly have about language (Ahearn, 2012). Ideologies are strongly intertwined with political and social interests and are shaped in a cultural context. In the U.S., there is Standard English hegemony and it is valued above every other dialect of English and other languages like Spanish. Most of the time other Englishes are not even formally recognized. Speaking a non-dominant variety of English can create social barriers and limit access to social mobility (Ahearn, 2012). What are the consequences that can arise from these perceptions about language? When the AAE speakers experience negative reactions and consequences from their speech, it shows how devalued AAE is and in turn that the speakers are devalued (Alim & Smitherman, 2012).

The rise of English is a long and complex tale; it has traveled a long way from its origins. Two thousand years ago, English was not in existence when Julius Caesar arrived in Britain. Five hundred years later English was in its beginning stages and was only spoken by a small amount of people, it had no influence (Crystal, 2004). About a thousand years later (in the late 16th century) English was spoken by nearly seven million people. Since the 1600s, English speakers in the form of armies, navies, companies, and expeditions, including Scottish, Irish, Welsh, and American etc. have traveled around the world spreading their language. Currently least a billion people speak English (Crystal, 2004). English has made a quite an impact on the world, but how exactly did that happen?

The English language can be traced back to when German (Anglo, Saxons etc.) groups invaded and displaced the native British (Celtics) in the fifth century (Crystal, 2004 & McCrum

et al., 2002). It was then that a dominant language was becoming established; Old English. The written documents were understood to be in the West Saxon dialect, the language of King Alfred. (Crystal, 2004). During this time King Alfred used the English language to develop a sense of national identity among the English. This was the beginning of the building of the British Empire, which contributes to the rise of English as a linguistic power.

The Normans contributed to the development of English when they invade and rule England. For over 300 years, French was the language that was spoken by the most powerful people who were royalty, aristocrats and high-powered officials. French was used in political documents, administration, and literature. (Crystal, 2004). When the English won back their territory and status of English rose again, but the English language now includes many French words and sounds. This was the period of Middle English. As those in power changed, the language also shifted in a way that benefited the power holder.

By the time modern English developed times had changed, the pen was becoming mightier than the sword. And the printing press was soon to be introduced to the world. Literature started to evolve, due mainly to the work of Chaucer. Some would argue that this time was the beginning of Standard English. Print companies had to make a choice about which words, grammar and spellings to use. The choices they made helped set and spread a standard language. At the time they based their decisions on the dialects of the Southeast because it was the most socially and economically influential region. The linguistic knowledge of the dominant group was being mass-produced and it reinforced the dominant group's power.

English continued to develop and changes occurred in pronunciation and grammar and the vocabulary increased. These changes were largely in part due to the Renaissance period, which was influenced by the Elizabethan literature (mostly Shakespeare) and Bible texts

(Tyndale and King James)(Crystal, 2004). This is an example of how the most powerful people, had an influence on the language development. The rapid growth of language change led to the development the English dictionaries, grammars, and guides of pronunciation. The creation of these books was a way to reinforce the dominant language, so that the dominant group could remain in power and continue to maintain their privileges. As England's empire became more powerful, English became the global lingua franca.

When the Britain expanded their territory into the Americas, English would continue to evolve. (McCrum et al., 2002). As the settlers broke away from Britain, English language strayed from British Standard English and developed into a n American version of Standard English. As Britain's power waned after World War II, the power of English should have faded, but English started another phase when the United States became a world superpower. The United States continued what the British originally started, the development of English as a linguistic superpower.

For the next generation and more, the enormous strategic, economic and cultural interests of the United States- expressed through international English speaking institutions like UNESCO and NATO, and corporations like Exxon, IBM and Ford- ensured that the English language would survive and flourish long after its parent culture could no longer sustain it. (McCrum et al. , 202, p. 23)

Currently, Standard English is considered to be the "textbook" language (Delpit 2002; Wiley & Lukes, 1996). Standard English quickly became a global lingua franca; it is everywhere: press, television, public places, consumer products, businesses and schools.

A common misconception about (standard) English is that it is the official national language of the United States it is not. The power of Standard English is not because of any linguistic superiority it has been socially constructed in order to contain and reinforce a power of a particular group, creating a standard language is one of the more subtle ways maintain power.

As the popular saying goes, “a language is a dialect with an army and navy”. Past events have shown that the group that has the best weapons (literal and figurative) has the power to reinforce their power through the language that they speak. This eventually becomes the knowledge that is widely accepted and acknowledged.

While a particular dialect of English was becoming the standard, another dialect of English was being developed; AAE (at least a form of it) began in the 16th century during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade (McCrum et al. 2002). Out of all of the dialects that are spoken in the United States, no other language has been “deplored, debated, and defended” (McCrum et al., 2002) as much as AAE. AAE is a dialect that has a strong and rich history. It was the result of the most infamous event in American history, the African slave trade. AAE is a combination of English and Congo-Niger (this includes Yoruba, Igbo, Fula, Shona, Zulu and Wolof) languages (McCrum et al., 2002). It has its grammar syntax, lexicon, word structure, and phonetics that are distinctly different from Standard English (Rickford, 1999). Black English (AAE) is described as “ is an Africanized form English reflecting Black America’s linguistic-cultural African heritage and the conditions of servitude, oppression and life in America” (Smitherman, 1977, p.2). Smitherman’s definition of Black English is dependent on a strong connection to Africa. Africa and the American slave trade play a major a role in telling the story of AAE. The way that Smitherman intricately weaves the history of black language to Africa establishes a home, community, and a connection to something for African Americans. It is important to acknowledge, where African Americans come from and the cultures left behind that African Americans will never fully know. Even though over time Black English has lost many aspects of its African roots, the language is still prevalent in many Black communities in the United States. Furthermore, “an individual’s language is intricately bound up with his or her sense of

identity and group consciousness. In the history of man's inhumanity to man, it is clearly understandable why the conqueror forces his victim to learn his language" (Smitherman, 1977, p.171).

Today, AAE of a part of a scattered family it includes, but is not limited to: African pidgins, Caribbean Creole and Southern American English (McCrum et al., 2002). AAE can consist of these following characteristics:

- The use of the verb "be" to indicate something recurring or continuous over time.
- The deletion of a form of the verb "to be."
- The use of the third person singular verbs without adding the "s" or "z" sound.
- The use of the "f" sound for the "th" sound at the end or in the middle of a word.
- The use of an extra word to signify plurals rather than adding an "s" to the noun.
- The deletion of "s" that indicate possessives.
- The removal of "l" or "r" sounds in words.
- The use of words with different meanings.
- The lack of emphasis on the use of tense in verbs.
- The deletion of final consonants.
- The use of double negatives
- The use of the "d" sound for the "th" sound at the beginning of a word

(Green, 2012; Smitherman, 1977; Rickford,1999)

African Americans primarily speak AAE and since its origin, the majority of U.S. has not perceived it as a real dialect. It is considered by most to be an "illiterate, illogical code without rules" (Freeman, 1982; Speicher, 1992 & Warhaugh, 1999). When AAE was first described in written form, there were many opinions that were stated as facts. Even though these theories have been disapproved the beliefs are still prevalent in modern times. Some of the general perceptions of AAE when it was first studied in late 19th century, the descriptions were as followed:

The humor and naïveté of the Negro are features which must not be overlooked in gauging his intellectual caliber and timbre; much of his is baby talk ... the slang which is an ingrained part of his being as deep-dyed as his skin... the African, from the absence of books and

teaching, had no principle of an analepsy in his intellectual which word, once become obscure from a real or supposed loss of parts or meaning can be repaired, amended, furnishing by or restored to its original form (Harrison as cited in Smitherman 1999, p.72).

These publications were detrimental to the perceptions of AAE, especially when it came to AAE speakers' education. In contrast, scholars such as William Labov, John Rickford, Geneva Smitherman, John Baugh and many more have done extensive research on AAE, and argue that it is a valid dialect, and it should be accepted as such (Baugh, 2000; Labov, 1972; Rickford, 1999; & Smitherman, 1977) . For the most part, in the world of academia, AAE is recognized as a legitimate dialect. Unfortunately in practice, AAE is still viewed by the general public as not being anything other than bad grammar.

In educational research, teacher and/or school language practices and ideologies are prevalent research topics. I chose to highlight this particular section of research because everyday language practices and interactions are reflexive of the power of language ideologies when paired with influential institutions. It is important to note that classrooms are reflexive of the societies that they are located in; schools do not operate in a vacuum. Many people can assume certain academic abilities based on the way a person speaks. When teachers make these assumptions, they can develop low expectations of the student and may treat them as low achieving students (Delpit 2002; Smitherman, 1977). There are many studies that document teachers' perceptions and opinions of AAE and the affect that these presumptions can have in the classroom. Speicher (1992) records a teacher expressing her reaction to AAE speakers in the following statement: "when I'm in the classroom and I see who can't say 'this', and they say 'dis and dis'. I just want to take them by the jaw and say 'can't you get it right?' " (p.396). This particular teacher is so frustrated with the AAE speakers, she almost has a physical reaction to their speech. This aversion to the students' speech is an indicator of the power of Standard English ideology.

Teachers' perceptions of AAE do not only impact how the teachers perceive the students, it can affect student/teacher relationships and ultimately how the students see themselves. One student commented that, "Mrs. _____ always be interrupting to make you 'talk correct' and stuff. She be butting into our conversations when you not even talking to her! She need to mind her own business" (Delpit, 1995, p.50). Due to her teacher's constant corrections this student reacts negatively to the teacher. This type of teacher-student interaction is not healthy for the student's learning environment. This is also instilling the very narrow (and incorrect) belief that there is one "right" way to speak and that there cannot be multiple discourses. Telling students that the dialect that they speak is wrong is one problem, but teachers are also enforcing the belief that Standard English is more valuable than AAE. In these cases, teachers are telling the students that something is inherently wrong with the way they speak. Language is a part of one's identity and telling the students that something is wrong their language they are also implying that there is something wrong with the students (Delpit, 2002; Smitherman, 1977).

The controversy and debates concerning AAE in schools imply deep racist structural issues not only in schools, but also in American society. These moments have contributed to my commitment to challenging the dominant beliefs and the structural consequences that AAE speakers continually face, but historically this work has not been received well.

A formal shift in the recognition of AAE as a legitimate dialect in education was the *Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School Children v. The Ann Arbor School District* (1977-1979). A group of single African American mothers from low-income housing projects sued the district. They argued that their children were being treated unfairly in the predominantly White and middle class school because of their language.

After a two year trial and many expert witnesses like Geneva Smitherman and William Labov, the court came to a decision. The court found that a language barrier existed between the plaintiff children and the teachers in the school because of the failure of the teachers to take into account the children's home language. The dialect spoken by the children is a version of English called "black English" and is related to race. This language barrier was one of the causes of the children's reading problems, which they all experienced, and it impeded the children's participation in the school's educational program. The statute enacted in 1974 by Congress directed that the school system take appropriate action to overcome the language barrier. As a result of these findings, the school board was mandated to file a plan of "appropriate action." The court order required the school district to submit within Thirty days a proposed plan defining the exact steps to be taken (1) to help the teachers of the plaintiff children at King School to identify children speaking "Black English" and the language spoken as a home or community language and (2) to use that knowledge in teaching such students how to read and write standard English.

The ruling of the case, ended in favor of the students and many people thought that the way AAE was viewed would change once it was publically "proven" that AAE was a legitimate dialect. The court decision was a first step to helping AAE speaking students achieve academically. Problems arose when too much faith was put into the law. The court emphasized "it was not the place to test the validity of educational programs and pedagogical methods. It is not for the courts to harmonize conflicting objectives by making judgments involving issues of pedagogy" (Joiner, 1979, p.5). The statement was an attempt to point out that the Ann Arbor case was an individual one. The court was dealing with legal obligations imposed by the U.S. Congress on the School district, which was to uphold Section 1703 of Title 20, a statute that says

No state shall deny equal educational opportunity to an individual on account of his or her race, color, sex, or national origin, by... the failure by an educational agency to take appropriate action to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by its students in its instructional programs. Equal Education Opportunity Act, 20 U.S.C., 1703 (1974) (Rickford, 1999, pg.89).

The case had significant limitations; the decision only affected one elementary school and was only enforced for one year. The program enacted was deliberately underfunded, and there were no parent, linguist and educator representatives (Smitherman, 2003). Even though it recognized that teacher' perceptions affect AAE speaking students' achievement it did not fully legitimize AAE, which further reinforced the Standard English. In the court Memorandum *Opinion and Order*, it was shown that the court still did not accept that AAE was equal to Standard English when Judge Joiner noted "Black English is not a language used by the mainstream society-black or white. It is not acceptable method of communication in the educational world, in the commercial community, in the community of the arts and sciences or among professionals (Joiner, 1979).

The ruling also caused indignation and frustration throughout many communities. AAE was called many things during the trial like "Black Bottom," "Black Boogaloo," "Black Out," "Black List," and "Black Balled," (Freeman, 1984). All of these expressions had negative connotations associated with them, which did not help cause. Furthermore, the case did not question the conceptions that we have about Standard English and AAE.

One of biggest examples of this backlash is when the Oakland School board passed a controversial resolution. African American students were not doing well in the district; they had the lowest GPAs, the highest numbers of referrals to special education (because schools had mistaken characteristics of AAE as a sign of delayed speech development) and highest suspension rates. After much research, the board concluded that the language was one of the

reasons why their African American students were not succeeding. This resolution recognized that “Ebonics” (AAE) was the primary language that the most African American students spoke in their school district. The resolution also made resources available for non-AAE speaking teachers. The teachers had an option to participate in the Standard English Proficiency (SEP) program. SEP started in California to educate teachers who work with African American children about the historical and linguistic foundations of AAE (Delpit & Perry, 1998). The program provided teachers with techniques that had been said to help the students code switch into Standard American English (Delpit & Perry, 1998). Code switching allows a person to both understand and convey thoughts in either language (Delpit, 1998). The SEP program emerged after years of debate, political struggle, and frustration over the poor academic performance of a disproportionate number of Black children in the state. Part of the Oakland resolution is as follows:

“Now, therefore, be it resolved that the Board of Education officially recognizes the existence and the cultural and historic bases of West and Niger-Congo African Language Systems, and each language as the predominantly primary language of African American students; and Be it further resolved that the Board of Education hereby adopts the report recommendations and attached Policy Statement of the District's African American Task Force on language stature of African American speech; and Be it further resolved that the Superintendent in conjunction with her staff shall immediately devise and implement the best possible academic program for imparting instruction to African American students in their primary language for the combined purposes of maintaining the legitimacy and richness of such language whether it is known as “Ebonics,” “African Language Systems,” “Pan African Communication Behaviors” or other description, and to facilitate their acquisition and mastery of English language skills....”(Delpit & Perry, 1998, p.146)

Like other similar programs, the Oakland resolution was widely misunderstood as intending to teach AAE and eventually attempt to replace Standard English. The resolution gained national attention and was criticized by many including African Americans who spoke the language. The misunderstanding of the resolution created more problems than solutions. The school took many risks in recognizing AAE as its own language. Many argued that the school

board did not have the power to make that decision. The board realized that chastising and correcting AAE was not working too well. Ultimately, the school wanted to provide their African American students with resources that would help them learn Standard English. The board believed if teachers and textbooks incorporated AAE into classroom that AAE speaking students would learn Standard English. The goal was to honor AAE speaking students' cultural and linguistic heritage while preparing them to live and work in a larger standardized English speaking society. In the end it all comes back to power, James Baldwin noted, "the crisis is not about education at all. It is about power. Power is threatened whenever the victim- the hypothetical victim, the victim being in this case, someone defined by others- decided to describe themselves" (As cited in Smitherman, 1981 p. 57). Baldwin makes an excellent point it is always about power. The victimized group (Oakland) attempted to gain power by defining their language in their own way. That privilege has always been in the hands of socially and economically dominant group. The public did not accept these ideas readily, the public sees language variation as fine as long as standards are maintained and the political order is not challenged (Baron, 2000). Non-standard dialects are valued so long as it stays confined to its assigned space. When a dominant group's power is threatened it is almost instinctual to fight to maintain that power.

The lack of acknowledgment was the cause of many problems for African American students. In response to schools' perception of AAE, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), a section of the National Council of Teachers of English issued a statement that pertained to language. The statement said (1974)

We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language

scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language (As cited in Smitherman, 2003, p.385)

Classrooms as well as societies are becoming increasingly multicultural and multilingual. Students labeled “nontraditional” on account of race, language, cultural traditions, and histories of struggle constitute a large number of people entering public institutions (e.g., classrooms, universities, service organizations). Even in the face of this reality, a recurring challenge for many educators involves locating actual practices by which to affirm the rights of linguistically diverse students in classrooms.

In higher education, there has not been much research that focuses on the language experiences of students, especially AAE speaking students. A majority of the higher education language/literacy research comes from the field of Writing Studies (see Kynard, 2013; Prendergast, 2003). But Speicher (1992) does examine perceptions of AAE in college settings. 71% of AAE speaking college students that Speicher surveyed said that they had a negative view of AAE. This study gives insight on the powerful influence that language ideologies can have on the AAE speakers’ perceptions of AAE. Speakers of AAE have negative perceptions of the dialect because of mainstream misconception about AAE from people that do not recognize AAE is a legitimate dialect. This can cause major conflicts among AAE speakers. Even among AAE speakers Standard English ideology is prevalent in practice.

Haddix’s work focuses on the experiences about the racial and linguistic experiences of black female pre-service teachers and how they see themselves in and out of the context of traditional teacher education programs. Research shows that racially and linguistic minority

groups have often been silenced, ignored and marginalized in educational spaces. Language, specifically African American Language (AAL), is important because AAL is not simply a language it is representative of the historical, political and social experiences of African Americans. Participants in the study often experienced racism and often felt uncomfortable and alienated in the classroom with their white peers. The participants used AAL in different ways to cope with the negative experiences that they had in the classroom. It was a way that affirmed the realities of their experiences. Also, it was used as a counter-language to talk about their experiences in a way that challenged the dominant stories. AAL can be used a powerful tool to counteract the monolingual dominant story.

On a different note, Oropeza et. al. (2010) work looks at the perspectives of English Language Learners (ELL) in college settings. Many linguistic minority students are not accurately labeled and the labels that are attributed to them have typically failed to capture the complexity of their identities. These labels are problematic because they carry negative connotations about the students that can affect their educational opportunities. Oropeza et. al. uses Yosso's theory of community cultural wealth to understand the ways that the linguistic minority students navigate the labels and statuses that educational institutions assign to them. By bringing linguistic minority students into the front of the discourse, the authors show how ELL college students used their community cultural wealth and different forms of capital to access and navigate college while experiencing differing advantages and disadvantages based on institutional labeling.

By employing critical race theory and its conceptualization of capital, the authors ultimately show how students use, resist, and negotiate labels in attempts to access resources and services at a four-year institution. Institutions need to implement practices and policies that

reflect the richness of linguistic minority student identities. While not having the “benefits” of being native English speakers, linguistic capital can be used to challenge that labels that the university gave them and it also helped the students successfully navigate through a space that had several barriers for the students. It is important acknowledge that linguistic minorities do not have deficits; they have capital.

When one language is accepted as the being the best, what place do other languages and dialects have? The negative perceptions of AAE speakers have influenced the type of education that these particular students receive. One central concern that the literature reflects is that AAE speaking students are not receiving the same educational opportunities as Standard English speaking students. It is important to understand how language plays in a role in the academic “successes” or “failures” in higher education.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

The Ethnography of Communication

Over the last few decades, research has shown how instrumental social context is to understanding how humans use language. Sociolinguists have made the effort to go beyond the limits of their research institutions to real social settings in order to gather data on language as people use it in everyday life (Labov, 1970).

Hymes proposed that we should study the knowledge that people have when they communicate. According to Chomsky, linguistic theory is primarily about the language of an ideal speaker-hearer, in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by grammatically irrelevant conditions, such as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention, interest, and errors. This brought up many questions like: does an ideal speaker-hearer exist? Is there a homogeneous speech community? To counter this theory, Hymes proposes a theory of language performance. This theory pursues the social knowledge that underlies people's linguistic performance, which Hymes calls communicative competence (Hymes, 1971). Linguistic competence tells you whether a sentence is grammatical or not, communicative competence tells you whether an utterance is appropriate or not within a situation (Hymes, 1971). People are socialized in the ways of using language in different contexts. The social constructs inform the language practices of the participants.

From the linguistic perspective, no language or dialect is of higher or lower value, so using terms like “proper English,” “good grammar” or even “Standard English” is socially constructed (Baugh, 2000; Delpit, 2002; Rickford, 1999).

Language varies not only according to social characteristics such as class, age and gender, but also according to the social context that people are in at the time. A social situation

can be the deciding factor of what linguistic registers people use. To effectively communicate with one another, there has to be a shared a set of meanings. If two people who come from different cultural backgrounds have different interpretations of meaning then that can cause misunderstandings (Gee, 2008). In a setting where Standard English is the “norm” AAE speakers are required to navigate through these linguistic waters, in ways that Standard English speakers do not.

The context also influences how AAE speakers are perceived. If a student is in a college classroom or talking with a professor, their use of language can contribute to the perceived notion academic ability that the student possesses. If the speech is not recognized as being legitimate or is rejected, does the AAE speaker internalize that? If social context is not considered when thinking about language, how can we begin to gain an understanding how language is used and the impact that it can have on students. Who gets to determine one’s competence?

Critical Race Theory

While context is important, we must acknowledge that the United States has a history of racism and discrimination towards African Americans, especially in education (Hudley & Mallinson, 2010). The racism that African Americans face also applies to the language that they speak. James Baldwin once said, “It is not the black child’s language which is despised, it is his experience and his body” (As cited in Hill, 2000, p.451). The conception of Standard English and AAE is deeper than just the spoken word; it is also about who speaks the words. Because racism is institutionalized through language, AAE is stigmatized because black people have created and used it (Lanehart, 1994 & Hill, 2000).

In the documentary, *American Tongues*, a participant mentioned

It's easy to figure out which dialects is more desirable and which dialects are less desirable- just look at which groups are more desirable and which groups are less desirable. We tend to think of urban as better than rural. We tend to think of middle class as better than working class. We tend to think of white as better than black. So if you are member of one of those stigmatized groups, then the way you talk will also be stigmatized. This goes all over the United States-in every community (Ball & Alim, 2006, p.114).

How we conceive language in the United States is not just about words, it has racial, economic and social implications too. Urciuoli's work (1996) is a prime example of the racialization of language. She notes "racialized people are considered out place, they are dirty, they are dangerous and unwilling or unable to participate constructively in the nation" (Urciuoli, 1996, p.50). Language differences are often racialized by inability to speak English or with an accent, a different dialect, marks someone as disorderly and unlikely to experience social mobility (Ahearn, 2012). They are not seen as fully belonging in the United States.

Race implies differential access to power; language comes to represent a battle over resources. When we have discourse about AAE, we must also consider the complex racial relations that are involved. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a way of looking at race relations, particularly within the United States (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). The theory recognizes that racism is permanent and is engrained into the fabric and system of American society (Bell, 1992). The theory began 1970s when scholars, such as Derrick Bell, in the legal profession began to worry about the slow rate at which laws were changing to promote racial equality. These legal professionals also worried that many of the early victories of the civil right movement were already declining. Examining everyday interactions, and finding the racial components in them, can help propel the racial equality movement forward (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). When using CRT it is important to acknowledge that race, history, and voice are key

components to understanding racism in the United States (Zamudio et al., 2011). The four main subparts to CRT are as follows: interest convergence, counter-storytelling, permanence of racism and whiteness as property.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) introduced CRT to the education field because race was under-utilized as a theoretical framework for understanding educational inequality among racially and ethnically under-represented groups (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT is useful as a theoretical framework for examining school settings for many reasons. It provides a lens for looking critically at the practices that marginalize students based on race, culture, gender, class, or sexuality. For the context of this study language will also be added to that list. CRT can be used to challenge educational linguistic policies and practices that contribute to inequality in education among AAE speakers. Traditionally AAE speakers have been silenced in educational settings, in order give those voices back this study will use counter-stories. They provide insights into the everyday realities and lived experiences of the silenced (Yosso, 2006).

When talking about issues of access, the tenant, Whiteness as Property is useful to draw on in order to think about the larger structural linguistic and racial ideologies. Harris (1993) argues that due to the history of race and racism in the United States and the role that U.S. jurisprudence has played in reifying conceptions of race, the notion of Whiteness can be considered a property interest” (p. 280). According to Harris, property functions on three levels: the right of possession, the right to use, and the right to disposition. Furthermore, the right to transfer, the right of use and enjoyment, and the right of exclusion are essential attributes associated with property rights (Harris, 1993). Harris suggests that these functions and attributes of property historically have been deployed in the service of establishing Whiteness as a form of

property.

Prendergast draws on a combination of insights from Harris, legal studies and literacy studies to question contemporary multicultural literacy initiatives. This provides a historical basis that informs current debates over affirmative action, school vouchers, reparations, and high-stakes standardized testing. As a result of *Brown* and the following crucial civil rights court cases, literacy and racial justice have become so intertwined that it is difficult to discuss one without referencing the other. Prendergast challenges accepted the mainstream discourse that the *Brown* decision was a definite victory for improving race relations. Traditional conceptions of literacy are understood as white property to be controlled and disseminated by an empowered majority. Prendergast critiqued historical Supreme Court rulings and immigration cases of racial injustice to challenge the myth of assimilation through literacy. Prendergast argues that there is a shared understanding of literacy as white property, which continues to impact classroom dynamics and education practices.

Prendergast does not explicitly identify as a CRT scholar, but she uses many CRT scholars (Bell, Crenshaw, Harris & Lawrence) and many tenants of CRT (racial realism and whiteness as property), to analyze the racialization of literacy. Prendergast's work is especially useful because it challenges the dominant discourses about language and literacy. It is emphasized that we must recognize that U. S. history is not fairy tale of justice and equality and we must have a present that is based on acknowledgement and accountability to work towards racial equity in terms in literacy and language. Prendergast uses CRT to understand the deeper implications of race in literacy practices. In addition to communicative competence, drawing from CRT may be a useful framework for understanding race and language in education.

Chapter 4: Method

My research questions are based on the how the students understand their own language experiences , I chose the method of the focus groups .Focus groups are defined as “an informal discussion among selected individuals about specific topics”(Beck *et al*, 1986, p.73).

Rather than giving the voice to the other, or knowing the other, focus groups open the possibilities of listening to the plural voices of other as constructors and agents of knowledge “and agents social change (Madriz, 2000). The group situation ensures that the “precedence is given to the participants’ hierarchies of importance, their words and own language, and the frameworks that they use to describe their experiences. Language is of particular importance because a sensitive understanding of people’s lives requires shared symbols, meanings and vocabularies (Madriz, 2000, p. 840).

The participants are seen as coming to the focus group with their own truths that may be better elaborated through interaction with others, but that may also be suppressed by group dynamics that can encourage conformity or silencing of particular viewpoints. It is important acknowledge that “beliefs, ideas, opinions and understandings as generated by individuals in splendid isolation, but rather as built in interaction with others, in specific social contexts” (Wilkinson, 1998, p.193). The knowledge that will be collected in this focus group are personal opinions and experiences that relate linguistic and race. I would also like to explore these opinions and experiences in a way that builds a collective meaning. Participants will have the opportunity to tell their stories and provide rich description about their perspectives.

While I aimed to create this kind of space, you cannot predict the ways the participants will interact, so it is important to explore the relationship between focus group participants. Many scholars (Silverstein, Jakobson, Brown & Gilman, Wortham) have argued that deictic such

as “you” are not simply referential; they can help “organize the interaction going on in the narrating event” (Wortham, 1996, p.6) and “from an interactional viewpoint, more may depend on acts that somehow identify persons, especially speech partners, than on any other aspect of linguistic style, and such acts are performed with personal pronouns, titles, proper names, kin terms and combinations” (Errington as cited in Wortham, 1996, p.7). Speakers can use pronouns to establish their relationships with other speakers in that particular speech event and the participants in the speech event can become objects of reference (Wortham, 1996). Throughout the transcript, the participants frequently use deictics when talking and specifically an indirect “you” is said. For example, when A says *it’s like, (.2) it’s different kind of language like **you** have the language where **you** with your friends and then **you** got the language where you- you know, you’re in a professional setting*. A seems to be using “you” as a way to refer to everyone in the room and includes everyone in the conversation. This “you” is not only being used referentially, it has meaning for the interaction that is taking place within the focus group. A’s use of “you” creates a context and a shared object with the other participants. If the A was interacting with non-AAE speakers the use of “you” could have a different meaning.

The use “you” may have symbolized a shared context, there were moments in the group when participant separated themselves from the other speakers in the Group. DJ, the only male in the group, consistently used pronouns that separated him from the rest of the participants. For example, Asia and Jasmine are performing how they would talk to each other on a daily basis and Jasmine ends with “*see that’s how we talk*” and DJ responds, “*That’s how they talk (heh)*”. DJ’s clarification that he does not speak in the same ways that Asia and Jasmine do is significant in many ways. Jasmine and Asia’s example utilized AAE and DJ was clear that his speech was different from the participants. This was something that DJ felt he did not share with the group.

By including segments of the transcripts from the focus groups, not only individual quotes that are taken out of context, allow us to see the shared meaning making.

The focus group was semi-structured and this allowed the moderators to ask probing and follow-up questions when necessary. The moderator embodied an empathic role, which built rapport. The moderator's role was to set the rules of conduct (e.g. be respectful, turn-taking, no interruptions, and no side conversations) (Morgan, 1997). Before the focus group started, rules were established and hopefully these rules prevented situations of tension and upheaval in the group.

Site

The research was conducted at a large predominantly white university in the located in the Midwest of the United States. The university has a total of 42,605 total students: 31,932 undergraduate and 10,673 graduate and professional students, 54% men, 46% women, 5.0% African-American, 6.0% Latino/a, 11.0% Asian-American, 0.13% Native American, 2% Multiracial and 19% International (University, 2013).

Participants

A focus group was the method that was used to collect the data. The participants were university students. I recruited the participants through a program, which I work for, that serves underrepresented populations. With the permission of supervisor, I asked other advisors to help recruit participants. The advisors sent an recruitment email to their students asking if they would be interested in participating in the focus group.

The focus group consisted of four participants, represented in the chart below. All of the participants spoke some variety of African American English. The speakers were identified through their advisors, who reported that the students spoke a variation of AAE in their

interactions. The focus group was conducted in March of 2014 and lasted approximately one hour. I also conducted two follow-up interviews with focal participants and each interview lasted approximately one hour. The location of the focus group was in a small classroom on the university campus and the interviews took place in the student union.

Participants

Name	Race	Age	Gender	College year	Hometown
Jasmine	African - American	19	Female	Freshman	Chicago
Dominique (Moderator)	African - American	23	Female	Graduate student	Chicago
Asia	African - American	18	Female	Freshman	Chicago
DJ	African - American	19	Male	Freshman	Chicago
Mariah	African - American	18	Female	Freshman	Chicago

Data Analysis

In order to answer my research questions, I read over the field notes (from the focus group and the interviews) and transcripts separately and looked for data that stood out. Then I reviewed both of them again and looked for common themes. I coded my field notes and transcriptions of audiotaped data (focus group and interviews) for recurring themes posited by the participants. These themes are mostly derived from both the interviews and focus group.

While focus group provided copious amounts of information that contributed to an initial understanding of how AAE speakers negotiate language interactions in college spaces. For the purpose of this paper, I will highlight a few broad themes and contradictions within those themes.

Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

Labeling of AAE

At the beginning of this study, I identified all of the participants as speaking some variation of AAE. For example, before the focus group started Jasmine and the other participants were talking and Jasmine said “I be feeling some type of way”. The use of “be” represents aspects of AAE and these aspects were present throughout the focus group. It is important to know how do the participants perceive their language variations? When I asked, how would you describe your everyday language use? Asia responded:

“When I’m around them or my friends, you know how we talk like slang or whatever, but if I’m at work at or I’m talking to a boss or like teacher- some teachers I try to change it.” ((M, J and D nod in agreement))

Additionally, throughout the focus group AAE was commonly referred to as slang or whatever.

But what does slang mean? Wolfram et al. (2007) describe the term slang historically and it has been used in the following ways:

- (a) Those people don’t speak Standard English. They use slang.
- (b) Young people use a lot of slang words , like *way scary* for *very scary* and *chill* for *calm down*
- (c) Basketball players have their slang, *rebo*, *jumper* and *chucker* (p.57)

In some cases, slang has been used to often refer to a non-standard dialect in a pejorative manner. Slang is also most commonly associated young adults and is considered informal speech (Wolfram et. al, 2007).

From an analyst’s perspective, the word slang does not encompass all that AAE is; it has its own syntax, grammar, is spoken by a variety of ages and cannot be solely categorized as informal. When speakers minimalize the aspects of AAE to slang they further delegitimize AAE. I struggle with defining AAE, because there is no consensus on what it should be called

and what it entails. Over the last few decades what to call AAE has become a public debate. Should AAE be merely a dialect or it is a distinct language? The general public views languages as having high status, dialects (similar to the status of slang) do not. A language has the privilege of being legitimately different from another language and dialects can be viewed as corruptions of a language. Ralph Fasold argues that the impact viewing AAE as a language can disrupt the discourses about Standard English ideologies.

Given the yawning chasm between language and folk ideas, “standard” and “dialect” for linguists to attempt to convey what we have learned about Ebonics while using the terms like Standard English and African American English dialect starts us off immediately with a double handicap. On the other hand if Ebonics were a language and presented as such, much of the mismatch in presuppositions can be avoided. The Ebonics language would not be a dialect and therefore not be assumed to be a corruption of anything but real in its own right. As a language, the question of its “rising up” to the standard of English would not even come up. A language has its own standards, and the standards of some other language would simply be irrelevant. I do not know that I have been able to get across the linguistic perception of the nature of Ebonics much more efficiently by framing its relation to English as one of language to language. This newer discourse just seems to work better (As cited in Smitherman, 2004, p.277).

We cannot begin to change our perception of AAE if the very vocabulary we use to describe it has implications of inferiority. It is important to remember that the construction of language has socio-political implications (Baron, 2000 & Smitherman, 2004).

Where did the term slang come from in this instance? It was not clear where they learned to refer to their own speech as slang. But that is not uncommon, Labov explains, “there is a very small vocabulary available to most people for talking about language: the same terms recur over and over as we hear that the other people’s pronunciation has a ‘nasal twang’, is ‘sing-song’, is ‘harsh or ‘guttural’, ‘lazy’ or ‘sloppy’. Grammar is said to be mixed-up or illogical’.” (Labov, 1970, p.292). Generally, people lack the discourse to talk about language variation. Furthermore,

when speakers of a non-standard English are being categorized slang or bad grammar, these speakers can have even less access to the discourse related to AAE.

Can you Code Switch?

All of the participants seem to have certain awareness about their language that is meta-pragmatic. A term that Silverstein (1993) coined to explain this self-awareness is called meta-pragmatics, which is a speakers' awareness of the intentions and effects of one's speech. For example, Asia talks about her different language shifts in the following way: *"it's like, (.2) it's different kind of language like you have the language where you with your friends and then you got the language where you- you know, you're in a professional setting"*

As the conversation continues, Jasmine and Asia discuss it further:

Jasmine: *So like if you have a job interview or something you don't wanna talking to them like you would talk to your friends. You wanna go in there like you got sense, like you know how to talk properly- not necessarily properly because I guess everybody talk proper, but just more I don't know- I don't know how to explain it. It's a different way I think*

Asia: *It's like code-switchin*

Jasmine: *Yeah, it's kinda like code-switching because you be talking to your friend you just be 'girl whatever' like not caring not caring how you talkin like slang, but if you talking to someone trying to- on a professional level, it's different, like I'm talking now.*

Gumperz defined conversational code-switching as the "juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems of subsystems." (Gumperz, 1982, p. 59). Several times throughout the focus group, the term code-switching was used to describe the participants language shifts between Standard English (J refers to it as proper) and AAE. Furthermore, Gumperz argues that,

"What distinguishes bilinguals from their monolingual neighbors is the juxtaposition of cultural forms: the awareness that their own mode of behavior is only one of several possible modes, that style of communication affects the interpretation of what a speaker intends to communicate and that there are others with different communicative conventions and standards of evaluation that

must not only be taken into account but that can also be imitated or mimicked for special communicative effect” (Gumperz, 1982, p. 65).

Bilingual speakers or in this case, bi-dialectal may not be native speakers in the majority language of a particular setting. They become more aware of the linguistic and social contexts that they are in. The risk of misinterpretation can be great and in certain settings, like schools, these misinterpretations can have serious consequences. The participants are very aware the consequences that comes to with knowing how to switch codes. Even though the participants define their language shifts as code-switching within the interaction of the focus group the participants showed that in some cases they spoke a mixed variety of Englishes that would not necessarily be considered just Standard English or AAE.

Then I asked where did the participants learn to code-switch?

***Moderator:** so several of you mentioned like proper English and the other English, ((Asia and DJ laughs)), but how did you learn this? to learn what's the proper way to speak?*

***Jasmine:** Yeah, I think as you grow up your parents always teach you like how to talk when you in different settings like if you're around adults you know you're not supposed to curse so you know (mumbles), but I don't know its hard to explain, but you get what I'm sayin'*

***Moderator:** Yeah*

***Asia:** I learn by watching like when I see my momma on the phone or she was like talking to her boss- like trying to get another job – you know changes the way you talk so instead of being like ‘ aaw yeah, my name Shakeisha’ (changes intonation) ‘hi like my name is Keisha’. You know just talk proper like the she did two minutes ago (referring to Jasmine)*

Code-switching was something that they learned to do from their families. Asia was never explicitly taught that she needed to code-switch, but she studied other people's reactions to how she spoke and learned to code-switch based on the response of the people around her. As Asia talks about the language shifts, she changes into a language that she perceives as “talking proper”. This shows through her change of intonation and change of the name that she uses when mimicking her mother. Jasmine spoke about her parents teaching her, but it is not clear whether

it was explicit or not. Jasmine's use of "I don't know how to explain" alludes to her struggle with recalling events of her language socialization. They were not given a guide on how to formally code-switch, but they were taught in subtle ways that they cannot necessarily identify. Furthermore, the snippet above when Jasmine says "I don't know, it's hard to explain" is further evidence that the participants are aware of some of their linguistic practices, but there are limits to the participants' meta-pragmatic awareness.

As the conversation continues, the students start to connect learning how code-switch to some of their high school experiences.

Moderator: *How did you know what code switching was? Did someone tell you to code-switch?*

DJ: *No, you know how you see something, but you never know what it is called and then one day somebody names it?*

Asia: *[yeah]*

Moderator: *Do know when you heard it? (3) Was it talked about in high school?*

DJ: *Kinda, they talked about it when applying for jobs*

Asia: *Yeah, when you first start filling out college applications, they sorta touched on it, but it wasn't a big thing and you have those writer's workshops and they touch on it too*

Mariah: *The first time I heard it, I was really young . In high school we would always discuss things like that and it was more like social reasons why that happens and then being put in a situation where I have to switch over.*

In this segment, DJ, Asia and Mariah discuss when they were told that they needed code-switch.

Further along in the conversation, I attempted to draw out the process of learning how to code-switch because the term code-switching does not appear out of thin air and becoming communicatively competent is part of one's language socialization:

Moderator: *So the language you use at school and the language you use at home doesn't conflict at all?*

Asia: *You just got to learn how to code-switch. You just got to know at the right moment when to switch to the slang, when to switch to the professional so it's just within yourself to know.*

Moderator: *Do you all know what code switching means? (All nod)*

Jasmine: I don't think it's necessarily code-switching because-

DJ: It's just know you say it-

Jasmine: Yeah, I don't know- I don't think- (.1) code-switching sound kinda like tryin' to be someone you not to me. I wouldn't use code switching because I mean at school and at home I use the same language so it's just I don't know its weird. I don't talk a different way at school and home, only if I'm like- if it's something important like an interview, something like that- that's the only time I think that I would talk a different way, just because it's something I need- I need to do it to get a job

Asia strongly emphasizes that you just need to learn how to code-switch. Asia places the responsibility on the individual to just learn how to code-switch. Placing this burden on AAE speakers and other language minorities can take toil. It reminds me of the case of Florence Kyomugisha, a Ugandan woman who was fired from her job for speaking accented English. Since this was violation of the Civil Rights Act, Kyomugisha decided to sue the university that she worked at. I bring this case up because in the deposition between Kyomugisha's attorney and her former supervisor, Clowney, interesting ideas arise about communication in the following intercept:

Attorney: And you would agree that the process of communication between two individuals involves a degree of burden sharing between the two individuals for purposes of making each other understood, correct?

Clowney: Sometimes. It depends on the nature of two individuals. I would agree that the burden is more on an investigator to be understood in a university ...

Attorney: One of the factors in that relationship that could make the communication difficult is when one individual refuses to accept the a burden...

Clowney: How about the burden on the other person to go and take courses and study and be understood as well. What about – why should the burden- I also understand diversity, but why should the burden be on the recipient (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 161).

Does the speaker, especially one who is a linguistically minority, have more a burden in the conversation? Why is it always on the person of color to shoulder more of the responsibility in conversation? Asia's comments about learning how to code-switch echo Clowney's ideology of communication. From Asia's perspective, the burden of communicative competence is contingent upon the AAE speaker, not the recipients. While the burden of communication should

be shared, Standard English ideology interrupts the ideal communication relationship. Asia's response to code-switching also reveals the meritocratic way that Asia views learning how to code switch. All one has to do is work hard and they will be successful. If they fail the individuals are at fault. When the speakers are racial minorities, what race and language ideologies are we reinforcing?

While Jasmine opposes the act of code-switching in some ways because she sees it as pretending to be someone else, and not as a honest representation of self. Even though, Jasmine does not believe in code-switching, she still feels the same pressures as the other participants to shift into Standard English under special circumstances like a job interview. Standard English is commonly associated with academic and economic success (Hudley & Mallison, 2009). The value of Standard English is present in Speicher's interview with a university staff member

But my opinion always has been that you have to learn to survive in the real world, and if you speak Black English, there is no way you're going to survive. There's no way you're going to get the job you really want. There's no way that you're going to make an income that's going to make you live right" (As cited in Lippi-Green, 2012, p.197).

Over the years, there has a push for students to become bi-dialectal, but when we make these arguments for bidialectism, what language are we privileging? Jasmine is resisting linguistic assimilation, but still feels ambivalence about speaking AAE in certain contexts. These experiences are not uncommon we must acknowledge that the "day-to-day pressure to give up the home language is something that non-AAVE [AAE] speakers cannot imagine" (p. 197). The "push-pull" dynamic can create psychological distress for black communities, especially ones that speak AAE (Smitherman, 1977).

The language practices of Black children is an issue that creates contention in black communities and it would difficult to find an African American that "regardless of profession, politics or personal beliefs, who would deny the necessity of bi-dialectism and selective

assimilation to SAE norms” (Lippi-Green, 2012, p.196). The discourse around code-switching is often connected to social mobility. De Bose, an activist for full AAE recognition, challenges Standard English Hegemony and characterizes African American Language (AAL), also known as AAE, as a language in its own right. The acceptance of AAL as a modern, functional language of instruction raises some fundamental questions, like what degree of mastery of Standard English should be expected of students for special purposes such as grade promotion, graduation, and admission to college? De Bose argues “in the area of language planning, we need to reconsider the idea of pushing ‘bidialectalism’ as a palliative for the education of Black students. We are sending mixed messages by saying that there is nothing wrong with AAL, while at the same time implying that it is not good enough for the academy or the world of work.” (Alim & Baugh, 2007, p. 42).

De Bose uses Smitherman in this case to argue why he uses the term African American Language. Smitherman started using the term, language over dialect in the 1970s and notes that dialect is a perfectly acceptable word in linguistics, but has pejorative connotations in public spaces. De Bose adds that “the concepts dialect and languages are social constructs themselves; they are the product of politics, education, socialization, advertising and public relations. So, one could add, are the concepts of standard and nonstandard English” (Alim & Baugh, 2007, p.36). Again, code switching is described when applying to college and jobs, but the politics behind language use is complex. There are layers of complexity that surrounds race and when education is involved, Smitherman (1977), states that “teachers should be about the serious business of educating young black minds to deal with (and if necessary, on) a society of power politics and incredible (p.234). But receiving a diploma does not mean justice and racial equity. And as

Smitherman would say: nor does talking “right”.

At this time, the participants were only in college for about six months and I was curious to know if they noticed a change in their own language patterns.

Moderator: *Have you noticed a change in you the way you talk since you started college?*

Jasmine: *I don't, but when I talk to my cousins they be like why you talk like that? I called my cousin the other day for his birthday and he was like why you talking like that, you talking weird, and I'm like what you talkin about? I'm talkin normal. I don't realize it, but I guess they do.*

To Jasmine 's family, her language has shifted and is perceived as unusual. Unfortunately, this is not a unique occurrence; many AAE speaking college students experience these types of reactions when they pursue higher education. AAE speaking communities acknowledge that Standard English must be utilized to an extent, but often become weary when AAE speakers start to shift into Standard English in situations when it was not previously used. Smitherman (2004) points out that:

Suspicion and skepticism are common black reactions to Black users of LWC [Standard English] rhetorical styles. These perceptions exist simultaneously with the belief that needs to master LWC in order to “get ahead” I call it “linguistic push-pull”, Du Boise call it “double consciousness”. The farther removed one is from mainstream “success” the greater degree of cynicism about this ethnolinguistic, cultural ambivalence. Jesse Jackson knows about this; so did Malcolm X and Martin Luther King; so does Louis Farrakhan. The oratory of each is LWC in its grammar, but AVT in its rhetorical style” (p.239).

In this case, linguistic pressures stem from the Jasmine's cultural community and its interesting that Jasmine admits that she did not realize that she was speaking differently until is was explicitly pointed out her. Has Jasmine's experience in college changed her more than she thought? This is further evidence that the concept of bi-dialectism is still complicated and unresolved, even if one is fluent in both Standard English and AAE.

Bending the Rules

The participants seem to have well-established ideas about when to code-switch, but I was interested in who they chose speak in AAE with and how they determined who to speak it with. The following conversation shows the complexity of whom they choose to share their language with:

Moderator: *So we kinda established different ways of talking in this conversation. You have the way you talk at school, you have the way you talk with your parents or at home or with family or elders and then you have your friend zone language so how is the way you talk with your parents different than the way you talk at school? Is that different?*

DJ: *I think it can be*

Jasmine: *No, I don't think- I don't think it's different - I think I talk the same with my parents the same way I talk with my friends. I don't be like 'girl' or I don't curse but I stay the same I just (.) only if I'm at school when I'm talking to a teacher, that's the time I would change into talking properly. I just talk, yeah.*

DJ: *I think it depends on who it is, sometimes you can kind of bend the rules with your parents, you can bend the rules with teachers you real comfortable with.*

Moderator: *So who would not bend the rules with?*

Jasmine: *Well I know I wouldn't bend the rules with someone I just met (.) a teacher or someone I just met, I would have to get to know you and become more comfortable with you before I would be able to step out of that zone-*

DJ: *Right*

Jasmine: *To be myself*

DJ: *[safety zone]*

Moderator: *so it's a language safety zone, so stay kind of prescriptive, standard in-*

DJ: *[Yeah]*

Asia: *[Yeah]*

Jasmine: *[Yeah]*

Moderator: *in certain zones until you get more comfortable, but how do you gage when you get more comfortable? So yeah, you get to know someone, but how do gage that they're gonna (.) interact with you in the same way or understand you?*

Asia : *That's why you get to know them first, then you'll know their reaction so if you, like, know a teacher for a certain amount of years then they know how you talk or they know how to interact with you. If you just met somebody there's certain line and I know not to cross it with any professional person.*

Moderator: *So it seems like there are different periods where each of you guys- where you feel that comfort so could one meeting is enough or not necessarily? So if you had a professor at this school. Imagine one of your professors, you've known them for eight weeks now? Would you bend the rules with them? Can you imagine a professor that you would bend the rules with?*

Asia: *[Yeah]*

Jasmine: *[No]*

DJ: [no]

Asia: *This RHET (rhetoric) teacher I had last year, I mean last semester. I mean he's a cool teacher. It seemed that right off the bat I thought he was going to be a mean grumpy old man but the second day it's just like we start (.) you know, clicking*

Asia: *He know I'm a goof ball, he just know it, he already know what to expect so I would bend the whatever – the rules*

DJ: *The RULES*

Jasmine: *I don't bend the rules with any of my professors because I just don't feel comfortable enough to do that with them. Even with my RHET teacher I see her once a week like a meeting, I just really don't feel that connection it's not a vibe I just go because I have to go, not because I want to go, (pt) so no (5)*

Moderator: *What about you (directed at M)*

Mariah : *Oh, he's not a professor, but he's a TA (teaching assistant). He as a teacher, he is not the greatest, he talks a lot but after class he's relatable and there's a lot of ideas that we share. In terms of language, you can do whatever in that class, you can curse and he just watches , but I think because he's a TA*

DJ: *Well the only person that I can think of, I still would bend the rules with her, is my math teacher last semester and I still got her this semester and I find her very funny because she's very sarcastic, but very serious at the same time and she'll make a joke and we'll make jokes- well they'll make jokes, I ain't go there yet, and she'll just go along with it.*

The hesitation of the speaking AAE is strong in this interaction. The participants are vividly aware of the potential consequences that can occur when talking to a non-AAE speaker or a person that does not acknowledge the legitimacy of AAE. The participants have to be more aware of their social and linguistic interactions because of the negative connotations associated with AAE. For the participants, there has to be a level of trust before language shifts will occur.

In a separate interview with Jasmine, admits that she only really feels comfortable on campus talking to other AAE speakers:

Jasmine: *You know I feel more comfortable around people that look like me. You know? This school full of white people and they just don't get you and they feel like you not good enough- I don't know what I'm sayin'.*

Dominique: *I get you*

Jasmine: *When I'm with my friends we can talk and act like we want without judgment*

It makes sense that on a predominantly white campus, Jasmine would feel isolated. Jasmine and her friends created a space on campus where they would be free to be themselves. Across the United States, Black students in predominantly White campuses are creating cultural safe spaces,

“ they need safe spaces to retreat to and regroup in the process of dealing with the daily stress of campus racism” (Tatum, 1997, p. 77). And there are instances when the participants take the linguistic leap with others outside their core group. There are a few instructors, who are of color, that they feel comfortable enough to let their linguistic guard down.

Negotiating the space

In the following conversation the participants start to directly address their experiences on campus:

Jasmine: Everything's different when you're with different people, so there's this thing in the back of your head. So like I know students who are in engineering, so it's programmed in your head to speak a certain way so you can present yourself a certain way as opposed to your friends or whoever else.

Asia: You know when people say you got to put yourself out there? Like you ((referring to Jasmine)) just mentioned when you in a group of kids that are trying to be engineers and they come from a prestigious back ground, so like in the back of your mind you're like I'm somewhat different from them so- I don't know what I'm saying

Jasmine and Asia are attempting to express their self-awareness of knowing that they have to speak a specific way around certain students. The example that Jasmine presents is the engineering student. On this campus, engineering is perceived as a prestigious and difficult major. Only the best and brightest, students that perform well on standardized tests, are accepted into the College of Engineering. Aside from the vast number international students, it is not a popular major among students of color, especially African Americans. Why did Jasmine choose engineers as an example? Why did Jasmine feel that she had to present herself a different way when interacting with engineers? In the next segment, engineering students become white students:

Asia: Okay so if you in a group full of white kids- sorry, Caucasian kids that come from prestigious backgrounds and you're the only Black kid there. In their mind, they just be like aw that black boy (talking to DJ) right?

DJ: Right

Asia: So I'm sayin like in order for them to distinguish you from just another black boy you-

DJ: Okay, I get you

Asia: Have to like- I don't know what the word –

DJ: You gotta make yourself look good so they don't just think you are just any other black boy

Asia: Yeah, kinda

Mariah: After while I'm just myself, but the first impression is important

DJ: I agree

Moderator: Why do you automatically assume that they're just going to see you as a black person?

Asia: I mean- I – that's how people are, we go to a school where the blacks are a minority is so I mean just imagine having a class where it's-

Mariah: You're going to stand out

Asia: majority Caucasian and you're the only black person in there; I can bet the first thing in their mind is what is this black person doing here? Is he/she supposed to be in here –

DJ: They automatically cut you down from you earning your spot

Asia: Yeah, that just the way it is

Moderator: How did you find out that it's just the way it is?

Asia: I've been in predominantly white programs before and you're the only black person there so automatically there's going to be questioning because it calls attention to itself, um, it's definitely a question

Jasmine: Yeah, cause that happened to me before, I attended this medically terminology class at Devry my junior year ((in high school)) and I was the only black girl there and we had to do this group project thing and everyone else was picked and I was the last one picked and that made me feel some type of way cause I'm like why would ya'll pick me last? It was because I was black and I mean I could be wrong, but I was the only black girl and the last one picked.

Black communities have been traditionally seen as monolithic communities. Race has always been at the center for most of these communities and often other salient social identities become invisible. The problem that lies within the constant essentialization of black people is that our experiences are seen as being the same. If their experiences are perceived as stigmatic, black students carry that image with them in ways that whites students do not. When one white person commits crimes or acts in a way that is deemed as inappropriate, they do not worry that society will essentialize them in same the ways.

The participants realize that society's constructions of black students are not always positive; they are filled with stereotypical images of the "lazy, ignorant and unintelligent" black body. When Asia talks about the typical black male and having to disassociate from that image, what ideologies are we reinforcing? The participants seem to agree that you must work harder to prove to the other non-black students that you belong in the college space and that you are not "one of those blacks". Mariah evens states that she can go back to acting like herself after the initial impression, so for Mariah, you have to become someone else until they accept that you are good enough to be in that space. Even though the participants are talking about how others will see them and how they have to rise above negative perceptions of black students, by accepting that there is a "typical" black person, we are normalizing false pathologies of blacks and reinforcing white supremacy. Furthermore, it does not acknowledge that identities are fluid and are constantly being reshaped.

On the other hand, when you experience Jasmine's story about how no one wanted be in a group with her, even if the reason had nothing to do with race, Jasmine will still wonder in the back of her mind, is it my race? White privilege is the right of whites to be seen as individuals, to be treated as a unique self. They do not carry the burden of the racial stereotypes and stigmas. They are not a race, they are unmarked, normalized bodies. McIntosh's, who reflects on her white privilege, says,

In proportion as my racial group was being made confident, comfortable, and oblivious, other groups were likely being made unconfident, uncomfortable, and alienated. Whiteness protected me from many kinds of hostility, distress, and violence, which I was being subtly trained to visit, in turn, upon people of color (McIntosh, 1990, p.32).

While white students may never have to think about their race as a factor in their academic achievement what psychological implications can this have for students who have similar experiences to Jasmine?

The conversation continues on the same topic and the participants further discuss how they are represented on campus:

Asia: Black people are already downgraded you out here being ignorant and it's just makes people looks at us even more, but-

Jasmine: That's what I was trying to say

DJ: And they gon think what they gon think but we still try and it's basically more acceptable for white kids to be ignorant

Moderator: Do you think that you be seen differently if you "acting ignorant" you would be seen differently from white kids ?

All: Yeah ((at the same time))

Mariah : Weren't we talking about language (heh) we escalated to matters of race- that's a good observation to make

Asia: This is language (.) we talking

Moderator: Do you think any of these things are connected to each other?

Mariah: Highly, we have to learn how to speak a certain way to survive in this world

Asia: Mhmm

Moderator: Would you say the same for white people? Would they have the same commitment to learning how to do things the proper way?

Jasmine: I don't think so

DJ: [NO]

Moderator: When did you learn that white people don't have to do the things as black people?

Jasmine: I learned by observation

Mariah: No, my dad told that everyday

DJ: That white people don't go by the same standards

Moderator: So if a white person was talking in a way that you thought was inappropriate, what do you think the consequences would be for them?

Asia: NOTHING

DJ: A little slap on the wrist and we'd get a big talking to.

Asia: Like high five buddy

Jasmine: Yeah

Notions of property account for the power relations and inequities that are present when we think about what whiteness allows students to do in campus spaces. It involves both the right to exclude and the right not to be excluded. Whiteness is a:

Resource deployable at the social, political, and institutional level to maintain control. Thus, a white person "used and enjoyed" whiteness whenever she took advantage of the privileges

accorded white people simply by virtue of their whiteness - when she exercised any number of rights reserved for the holders of whiteness. Whiteness as the embodiment of white privilege transcended mere belief or preference; it became usable property, the subject of the law's regard and protection. In this respect whiteness, as an active property, has been used and enjoyed (Harris, 1993, p.1734).

Institutions of higher learning are often constructed with the purpose of giving White students access to education while reinforcing white supremacy values. The access to higher education is normalized and understood as a predominantly white possession (Kynard, 2013). When students of color enter these spaces, they have to carefully navigate or they would risk failure. Students of color that attend PWIs have been monitored and policed in ways that white students are not. DJ expresses this when he makes the claim that white students are allowed to be ignorant in ways that black students cannot. DJ is referring to the politics of respectability, which are considered to be cultural rules for racially marginalized groups to follow in the effort to be viewed as an “individual human” in a White supremacist society and by individual Whites. Some of the most noticeable manifestations of the politics of respectability (i.e. Bill Cosby) occur among African Americans because of the historical dehumanization and devaluing of black bodies. The participants argue that Whiteness gives certain students access and rights to the space that Black students do not have. In this case, whiteness working as an inherited form of property and like the law, institutions

draws boundaries and enforces or reorders existing regimes of power. The inequalities that are produced and reproduced are not givens or inevitabilities, but rather are conscious selections regarding the structuring of social relations. In this sense, it is contended that property rights and interests are not "natural," but are “creation[s] of law (Harris, 1993, p. 1707).

If white students speak a way that is deemed incompetent they do not face the same repercussions that the black students would. If the participants did not learn the language and customs of the mainstream, they believe that they would succeed in college, but white students can be oblivious to linguistic and cultural practices of students of color and there would not be

extreme consequences. For decades institutions of higher education have attempted regulate and control black bodies, even historically black institutions,

Much of the student protest in the 1920s was initially launched at the way many black colleges held on to strict dress and behavior codes in the 1920s. Students questioned these politics as ones that rested more on racist thinking than with concern for their education. They were, however, attacking more than dress code. They were attacking the underlying belief that blacks could not control their sexual appetites and needed rules for demureness because, if allowed to exercise full liberty, they would be too savage (Kynard, 2013, p.27).

Black bodies were branded as uncivilized and wild and the only ways that black students were accepted in post-secondary institutions were to become “respectable”. Black students have been actively resisting the regulations of their bodies and language for decades. In this case the students are highly aware of their precarious status in college spaces, but what are the ways that these participants resist these rules? Though the students did not explicitly state this, I believe that the ways that they reimagine the space and resist the boundaries placed upon them in part is by utilizing AAE on campus settings. The action of using a language in a space that has been categorized as improper is resistance in itself.

It is essential to recognize that no one is actually speaking standard English all of the time, even in classroom spaces. The white students are code switching, even in educational settings. The problem is that when white students do not speak in the socially accepted way for that context, they are not penalized in the same ways that black students are. DJ, Asia and Jasmine all agree that whites students would not punished to the same degree that they would be if they did not speak a particular way. Why do they believe that white students would get away with it? The conceptualization of property includes exclusive rights of use, disposition and possession, which can become a tactic to exclude others.

Harris (1993) would argue:

Whiteness has been characterized, not by an inherent unifying characteristic, but by the exclusion of others deemed to be “not white.” The possessors of whiteness were granted the legal right to exclude others from the privileges inhering in whiteness; whiteness became an exclusive club whose membership was closely and grudgingly guarded. The courts played an active role in enforcing this right to exclude - determining who was or was not white enough to enjoy the privileges accompanying whiteness. In that sense, the courts protected whiteness as any other form of property (p.1728).

Ownership of whiteness is working as a form of protection for the white students; it is an asset that black students will never have access to. The participants’ experiences have taught them that their identities are always being constituted and reconstituted through social interactions. How they are perceived is tied to their socially mobility. The ascribed political, economic, and social subordination of Blacks, including the language spoken by them are constantly being shaped by Whiteness (Harris, 1993).

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Throughout the paper, there have been instances of the participants implying that their experiences on campus and, in general, schools go further than their language use. As I previously mentioned, racism plays a large role in how AAE speakers are perceived. Alim and Smitherman (2012) argue that “we need to language race – in order to move the national conversation forward” (p. 169), language and race do not operate separately and there is a need to think critically about the racialization of language and the structural racism behind it. Every finding discussed in the paper somehow comes back to race. Many of the descriptions and insights that the participants had speak to larger societal and institutional implications that reinforce the racialization of language. Situating CRT, and communicative competence allows us to look deeper into the participants’ language experiences and its place on college campuses.

How do AAE speakers negotiate college spaces? That answer is complex. All of the participants use Standard English and AAE in different ways that allows them to navigate college in ways that help them. On one hand, they feel that they have to limit their AAE use in classroom settings in order to perform well in school and it can be a very complicated negotiation because they still actively style shift throughout various spaces on campus. Even though they refer to AAE as improper or slang it still is of value to them. If AAE were not useful to them they would not continue to use it. The power of AAE is often underrated. In educational spaces, communities of color’s knowledges are disregarded (Yosso, 2006). The capital that is valued is white, middle/ upper class knowledge. Yosso takes traditional Bourdieu explanations of cultural capital and expands it by using critical race theory (CRT) she calls it

community cultural wealth. Similar to Woolard's critique of Bourdieu, which argues "such linguistic domination does not stand unopposed" (Gal, 1987, p. 638).

Bourdieu's original theory of cultural capital is criticized because his work had been traditionally used to place white, middle class culture as the standard and all other cultures are judged in relation to the standard and considered inferior. Yosso posits that there are forms of cultural capital that marginalized students hold and CRT's cultural common wealth acknowledges that. By rethinking cultural capital, it allows for the focus to shift from white middle class to the stories of communities of color. There are six forms of capital (aspirational, familial, social, navigational, resistant, linguistic) that are mainly discussed and they can all intersect in some way (Yosso, 2006). The relevance of this theory to this case is that it provides a specific CRT lens to look at language, linguistic capital. Linguistic capital reflects the idea that students of color come to school with multiple language and communication skills that provide intellectual and social skills. Acknowledging that students have linguistic cultural capital can ultimately be powerful for the students that speak AAE.

Throughout this paper it has been shown that there is a lack of discourse about language, specifically when it comes to AAE. The lack of knowledge surrounding language varieties is problematic because it reinforces false language ideologies. The participants speak a language that they do not know much about, how does that affect how they view themselves and their language, especially in the context of school? Would their negotiation of college space change if they had the opportunity to learn more about AAE?

The study has shown that understanding language relies heavily on the social context of the situation. All of the participants' language varied depending on the context. Hymes' notion of communicative competence can be applied to this case. The participants were socialized to use

different language varieties in different contexts. The social constructs inform the language practices of the participants. The conflict of AAE and Standard English is deeper than just the spoken word; it is also about who speaks the words. Because racism is institutionalized through language, AAE is stigmatized because black people have created and used it (Hill, 1998). It is difficult to be bi-dialectal because one dialect is seen as superior to the other. AAE has so many negative connotations in society, and many AAE speakers can internalize these beliefs (Delpit, 2008). The language that is predominantly spoken within a speech community has significant power within that community and it seems as if institutions of schooling try to reduce that power.

DJ makes an interesting point by saying “*They gon think what they gon think, but we still try*”. The racism and linguistic prejudice that black students experience on campus and in other spaces are deeply embedded in our lives and experiences. And while the value of an education has a practical outcome of preparing someone for employment, PWI’s can contribute to students’ linguistic and racial identity problems (Smitherman, 1977). To an extent the participants are aware that changing your behavior and linguistic practices will only allow them to achieve a certain level of mobility. They will not have access to campus in the ways that white students do. PWI’s can be oppressive and psychologically damaging to black students. So why do we still try?

Chapter 7: Limitations and Further Research

In every language, it is possible to speak about speech, that is, to use language to communicate about the activity of using language. Language is fundamentally reflexive (Lucy, 1993). The study of reflexive language is important because it can play a role in how language functions. Lucy argues that understanding “reflexive language is essential to the methodological rigor in the human disciplines, and indeed scholarly activity” (p.22)

In recent years, there has been a concern with the limits of natives’ awareness of their own language and its valued in language research “ Silverstein argues that it is difficult if not impossible for native speakers of a language to take account of those aspects of speech as social action that they have ability to describe for use in their own meta language, that is, which they do not have ready terms on expression for ” (p.25). This project’s goal was to explore the participants’ linguistic experiences and awareness from their perspective. It brings to question, what do we really know about the language that we speak? And is it important to know? In this case we can see that the participants have different kinds of linguistic awareness, but are not always fully aware of their meta-pragmatic practices. Focusing solely on the reflective language has its limits. In order to get a more comprehensive understanding of language, what the participants say about their linguistic experiences is important, but observing them in various settings would have provided a more holistic perspective to my analysis.

Generally, focus groups range from about 5-8 participants and the focus group that I conducted only consisted of four. This study served as a pilot that shows a need for further investigation into the phenomenon of AAE in college settings. Having more participants would have furthered enriched this focus group and possibly provided more meaning making. For

future research studies, it would be beneficial to conduct more focus groups and expand the number of participants.

Even with limited data, this study provides an important look how AAE speakers think about their language practices. Research that further investigates how AAE speakers navigate college spaces and how they perceive language is needed to get a better understanding of student language needs in school settings. This research supports that language practices, behaviors and attitudes are complex; they are fluid and change as the social context changes. To truly attempt to learn about my case, the perspectives of the participants and how they negotiate meaning were essential.

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Appendix A: Transcription Symbols

Originally developed by Gail Jefferson, the transcriptions of my data utilize the following symbols:

- (0.5) Number in brackets indicates a time gap in tenths of a second.
- (.) A dot enclosed in brackets indicates a pause in the talk of less than two-tenths of a second.
- [] Square brackets between adjacent lines of concurrent speech indicate the onset and end of a spate of overlapping talk.
- (()) A description enclosed in a double bracket indicates a non-verbal activity.
- A dash indicates the abrupt cut-off of a previous sound or word.
- ↑↓ Pointed arrows indicate a marked falling or rising intonational shift.
- Under Underlined fragments indicate speaker emphasis.
- CAPITALS Words in capitals mark a section of speech noticeably louder than that surrounding it.

Appendix B: Focus Group Interview Protocol

Introduction

Thank you all for being here today! My name is Dominique and I am going to facilitate today's focus group.

I am a graduate student here at the University of Illinois and I am doing a research project that is trying to learn about the about language experiences of African American students in college settings. We would like you to share your opinions and experiences to the best of your ability. No identifying information will be used in any productions of this research. Your research participant rights and confidentiality are of the highest priority to us. To make sure that everyone is on the same page we have one basic rule for the session:

1. Be respectful

Here are the consent forms, take a moment to read through it and if you consent, please sign the form. There are two copies one you keep and the other I keep.

Does anyone have questions?

Now, we will get started.

Questions

1. How would you describe your language—your everyday language?
2. Do you think your everyday language is an acceptable form of English? Why or why not?
3. Is there such a thing as home/community language? If so, what does it mean?
4. Is there such a thing as school/academic language? If so, then what does it mean?
5. Are there any conflict between the language you use in school and the language you use at home? Describe.