African American Women's Language

African American Women's Language: Discourse, Education, and Identity

Edited by

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For my awesome God,
who blesses me in spite of myself.

For my family,
who always believe in me even when I do not

For all the Black women in my life,
who have helped me come to believe what filmmaker Julie Dash knew:
“In my world, Black women can do anything.”

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I have spent my time with such an honor, in part, contributing to providing a spotlight on language use in the African American community in general and African American women in particular. By being able to organize and host the first ever conference on African American Women's Language (AAWL) in San Antonio, March 2008, I believe the expression of my labors was just beginning. I did not complete this first project on AAWL alone and it is time to give thanks where thanks are due.

I would like to thank my husband, Paul, and my son, Isaac, for their unwavering support and encouragement. They endured me through my many impossible days and provided the time, space, and attention I needed to complete this book.

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FOREWORD

JUST TAKE ME AS I AM

MARCYLIENA MORGAN

She's been down and out
She's been wrote about
She's been talked about - constantly
She's been up and down
She's been pushed around…

So take me as I am,
Or have nothing at all.
Just take me as I am,
Or have nothing at all.
(Mary J. Blige “Take Me As I Am”)

In the mid 1970s, I had the opportunity to see the great Beryl Bailey, the first African American woman linguist, deliver a tearful and bitter plenary address where she derided her colleagues for the racism and sexism in her field. It was not what I expected. The professors who invited me to the session assumed that I would witness an address by a Black linguist of Jamaican descent who would inspire me to consider linguistics as my field of study. Many of the linguistic superstars who were present tried to console me by saying that Professor Bailey had overreacted and was being “emotional.” My youth, race, and gender made me think otherwise and I imagined that there must be a good reason that she would choose such a public platform to speak directly about perceived injustices to friends and colleagues. I was sure that what I witnessed could not be dismissed as emotion. I resolved that I would never forget her bravery and determination as she stood there in front of thousands, in ill health, trying to deliver a message they would never forget and one that might address issues of racism and sexism in linguistics. Beryl Bailey’s speech was passionate. It focused on a real problem and challenged those present to do something about it. I admit that the intensity of her bitterness took me

aback. I decided at that moment that if I went to graduate school I would never allow myself to feel betrayed, defeated, and bitter to the extent that I regretted my decision to pursue linguistics, something I loved. As Aretha Franklin (1965) warned: "How cold and cruel is the (wo)man who paid too much for what (s)he got?"

I had no idea what actually awaited me. In my first linguistics class in graduate school, I, along with everyone at the time, was introduced to the standard sentence for presuppositions: "When did you stop beating your wife?" Young women in my class consistently argued, "Do we need this type of sexist example to teach presupposition?" If endless sexist examples were not bad enough, it was particularly disturbing to find that in order to learn about African American Vernacular English, I also learned that 'regular' Black men were criminals, gang members, drug dealers, pimps, hustlers, etc. Moreover, the Black men who went to work everyday, attended church, supported their family, etc. were described as not part of urban Black culture, and therefore not linguistically interesting. Of course, we recognize now that while vernacular culture refers to ordinary people, it does not mean that behavior of those involved in illegal activity is necessarily representative of a community. Sociolinguists at that time relied on males who were available and looked to social life that was different from White middle class. Of course the linguistic data reflected language use in the community, but it probably led to some distortions of the extent and areas of variation.

The grammatical examples from these so-called 'regular' Black men included descriptions of Black women that crept into the linguistic and social science literature. These men had a lot to say about Black women– and it was not pleasant. It was as if the field of linguistics was asking us to consider the question: "When did Black women stop being controlling and oversexed bitches?" What did these 'objective' linguistic examples imply about Black women? What did they imply about Black men and the community in general? What are the implications for future research on the language of African American women? What has been the price we have had to pay?

While the types of sexist and often racist examples described above are rare today, their existence in the field of linguistics exacted a serious toll. As Sonja Lanehart states in her introduction to this volume, "To date, there are very few books that address the issue of African American Women's Language (AAWL) or simply language by African American women (p. 3)." In fact, many in the social sciences and humanities who reference African American Language (AAL) and discourse still rely exclusively on sociolinguistic works published the 1970s. When I point this out to my

colleagues in the social sciences they are surprised that anything of relevance to their descriptions and analyses of the Black community has developed. This may be because in the 1970s the social sciences referenced across developing fields. Because of this state of affairs, there are only a few studies on African American women's language. Yet there are many reasons that descriptions of Black women's language have not been included in the overall literature on African American language and discourse (see Morgan, 1994; Scott, 2004). In general, the portrayal of AAWL has been influenced by (1) multi-disciplinary descriptions of the African American speech community, especially in the social sciences; (2) stereotypes of women and Black women's roles; and (3) stereotypes of Black women's interaction and linguistic styles.

Multi-disciplinary Description of the African American Speech Community

While the descriptions and practices of the 1970s may seem discriminatory today, they were common in the social sciences. As Geneva Smitherman (1988) writes:

> The degree to which racism in American linguistic discourse may be materially explicit is governed by changing paradigms in American consciousness. The path of racist expression in linguistic scholarship must be charted simultaneously by the sociohistorical development of "race relations"… and by changing paradigms in the human sciences research tradition. (p. 145)

This was especially true for sociology, the field that at the time described Black urban life. Well into the 1970s Black men and Black women are depicted as pathological in every way, as separate gender groups, both in their relationships to each other, and as a culture and community. One aspect of this depiction of Black relationships as pathological is the idea that Black women have been masculinized and Black men have been feminized in relationship to each other. This view, made so popular by Moynihan's 1965 report (often referred to as the "Moynihan Report"), argues that Black women have become dominant to such a degree that they have emasculated, even castrated, Black men. The report alleges that Black women's pathologically overbearing strength—rather than a history of racism, classism, and sexism—is to blame for the desperate situation of the African American community.

The lives of Black women were actually introduced by folklorists, for whom the Black "subjects" of research were predominantly male (e.g.

Abrahams, 1970, 1976; Folb, 1980; Jackson, 1974,). As Smitherman (1988) reveals, there was a peculiar perspective of many of the predominantly male narratives, which rendered "the content of their speech data primarily sexual (p. 162)." The men who contributed to Bruce Jackson's (1974) popular collection of toasts (reissued 2004) learned them while in prison. Toasts are ritualized public narratives told mainly by men. (Boasting and bragging found in Hip Hop is often considered derived from toasting rituals.) The main character is constructed as unquestionably heroic and fantastically powerful. His power in any situation is limitless, overcoming all odds, and he is usually misogynistic, brutal to women while rendering them submissive (see also Smitherman, 2000). Jackson explains the role of Black women in toasting.

> Sexual relations in toasts are invariably affectionless and usually affectless; the female exists as a device for exercise and articulation of male options, not an integral member of a bilateral relationship... sexual conquest of the female is…important…yet the object of the conquest is consistently denigrated… the conquest has significance only insofar as it is there to be conquered…. One does not conquer the female to have sex; it is *with sex*…one negotiates, executes, and terminates the conquest… In the toasts, verbal agility is often the basis of contest between the pimp and whore: he first bests her in an insult or bragging session, and then superfucks her into adulating respect for "that too." (1974, p. 17)

While Jackson acknowledges that good women are mentioned in toasts, he says they are not discussed sexually and he doesn't mention them again. As Smitherman (1988) protests, "There is no denying that the 'toast world' is a dimension of Black linguistic tradition; the point, however, is that a slice of Black folk character was presented as the whole (p. 162)." Considering the predominate beliefs of the time, it is no wonder that linguists and folklorists did not take a second look at the assumptions they made about Black women.

Stereotypes of Women and Black Women Roles

The depictions of Black women in the folklore literature resulted in them being viewed as linguistically male in terms of outspokenness, dialect variety, etc. It led to the argument that the speech of the 'regular' male is the same as the 'regular' female who was the sexual partner of the criminal—and who had no virtue. How could there be Black women's speech when it had been shown that they were the same as the men? As mentioned above, the description of Black women in *The Moynihan Report* provides the academic and social context in which Black women's

language was represented. This is especially true in a system where the notion of the “good/normal” woman is constructed against Black women, working class women, and other women of color. Stereotypes of both Black women and White women invoked by discourses emerge from the ideology of the *Cult of True Womanhood*. Barbara Welter (1966) describes this nineteenth century ideology in the following terms:

> The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and her society could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them, she was promised happiness and power (p. 152).

Though American women learn that they are expected to internalize the ideologies of the Cult of True Womanhood, there is no evidence that this type of discourse is natural and not all women incorporate dominant society’s norms as their everyday language ideology (see Philips, 2003). Sherry Ortner (1996), in her analysis of *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*, found that females “had to be *made* passive, weak, and timorous, that is, [there was] a recognition that agency in girls had to be *unmade*” (p. 9). Lippi-Green (1997) contends that in most animated films, “For females…and for those who mark their alliance to other cultures and places in terms of language, the world is demonstrably a smaller place” (p. 101). Thus, it is the refusal to be unmade and the resistance to it that can make ‘gender talk’ a very serious proposition. Since Black women are framed as outspoken and not weak and passive, they were not relegated to a position of invisibility, but rather a position of insignificance.

Black feminist scholars have addressed Black women’s exclusion from the Cult of True Womanhood as central to their experience of racist and sexist oppression (Collins 1990; Davis 1981; Giddings 1984; Welter 1966). They argue that this ideology did not and was never intended to include Black women. Even in the middle of the nineteenth century, the idealization of White femininity was directly exploited in ways that excluded and perpetuated the degradation of Black femininity. Since they did not benefit from White patriarchy that could or would provide for and protect them, Black women experienced limited freedom to control economic and social aspects of their lives. However, as Mullings (1994) warns, “This window of freedom, narrow and equivocal as it is, poses a problem, a threat to the dominant society’s rationalizations of gender hierarchy” (p. 265). They were labeled and routinely worked within the

limitations of contested notions of *mammy*, *matriarch*, *castrator*, *manipulator*, and *whore*.

Black women could not meet the standard of sexual purity and virtue and the exhausting labor of slavery ensured that Black women could not meet the standard of domesticity, which eschewed all women's labor outside one's own home. Yet, as the work of Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993) documents, piety and religious faithfulness was one standard that some Black women were able to fulfill. Hence, in addition to meeting the spiritual needs of enslaved Black women, religious faithfulness also served to protect and promote their identities as "good" women. Consequently, Black women's devotion to family, church, and chastity is central to contemporary discourses of Black femininity and Black female identity. Yet this construction fails to address the ideology of *submissiveness*. Submissiveness is the pillar of the cult of domesticity that is the least frequently discussed in engaging Black women's engagement in that gender ideology; yet it is the one that introduces the most confusion in women's interactions.

Even in the age of feminism and the right for women to participate as equals in Western societies, the nineteenth century notion of the good linguistically submissive woman persists. As Marjorie Goodwin (1998, 2003, 2006) has demonstrated, there remains a somewhat surprising difference in the socialization of language and discourse when one compares middle class girls to lower- and working-class African American and Latina girls. In her studies of young girls, middle class White girls tend to behave as though conflict is disruptive while working-class African American and Latina girls introduce conflict and uncooperative interactions that challenge one's position and consider it a form of play. Thus White middle-class girls learn to play nice where African American and Latina girls learn to be assertive, take and give criticism, and so on.

Stereotypes of interaction and linguistic styles

Considering the prevailing beliefs about Black women's speech during the rise of sociolinguistic research on AAL, it is no wonder that linguists and folklorists did not take a second look at the assumptions they made about Black women. Black women found themselves caught in the shift from powerless and feminine discourse to a style symbolizing a powerful Black masculinity that challenges, threatens, and competes with White masculinity. To assert equal entitlements meant the negotiation of both feminine and masculine discourses, with racist and sexist baggage embedded in both.

As mentioned earlier, the feminist scholarship of the 1970s did not occur in a vacuum, but rather as part of an impressive body of scholarship related to race and the intersections of race and class. Nancy Henley's (1995) comprehensive review of ethnicity and gender issues in linguistics considered the representation of women's language both in the field of linguistics and in society in general and argued that the language of working-class women and women of color has been on the periphery as a unique, marginal, or special case, rather than as one among many examples of language use. Moreover, although there had been a rise in linguistic research on both women and men, there has been little if any research on interactions between Black women and Black men outside of sexual encounters and conflict—in the linguistic world they simply did not interact unless in relation to explicitly misogynistic conversations. As Patricia Bell Scott (1974) lamented, "The English language has dealt a 'low blow' to the self-esteem of developing Black womanhood" (p. 218).

Black women were described as both linguistically conservative and aggressive in interactions with men (Morgan, 1994). This was in large part because women were originally excluded as subjects of research, and the data presented contained numerous canonical grammatical and phonological examples of AAL with content that regularly supported racist stereotypes of African Americans and instances of profanity and references to drug use, violence, and misogyny (e.g., Folb 1980; Kochman 1981). While linguists and folklorists seemed to have no trouble finding linguistic examples that vilified Black women, they seemed to have been unable to collect objective linguistic examples, expressions, and terminology associated with racism, White supremacy, and hegemony and injustice in general—of which there are many throughout African American culture. Although Claudia Mitchell-Kernan (1971) and Geneva Smitherman (1977) provided scholarship based on ethnographic research and participant-observation with numerous rich models and instances of language and interaction, their work was treated as subjective, largely because it did not include extensive salacious examples typical of the times. I interviewed Claudia Mitchell-Kernan in 1993 about the overall reception of her earlier work. In my 1994 article I only mentioned one case where she was referred to as attractive as part of the review of her work. What I did not mention was that while somewhat condescending, Kochman was more supportive than the other scholars working at the time. Mitchell-Kernan showed me letters and documents where some openly tried to prevent her from receiving grants and publishing in major journals. Yet it was Mitchell-Kernan and Smitherman's early research that opened

the door to arguments for new ways to analyze Black women's language and the language of the African American speech community in general.

Sisters to the Rescue

Claudia Mitchell-Kernan and Geneva Smitherman relocated research on African American language and discourse from the streets into the community at large. They did not sanitize the Black experience and Black women's experience. On close reading, there were many examples of women speaking their minds loudly on many topics in their research. Instead, these linguists contextualized speech within a wide variety of topics, community practices, and social and cultural contexts. Their work became models of how to neither stereotype nor fetishize Black cultural behavior in general and language behavior in particular. In *Language Behavior in a Black Urban Community*, Mitchell-Kernan's (1971) study of West Oakland, California, women participated in signifying and linguistic practices similar to men. Yet the variety of content of linguistic and discourse examples meant that everyday life and conversation prevailed rather than a stereotype of oversexed, loud, and bitter Black women. Discourse and verbal genres like loud talking, the dozens, etc. were placed within the context of verbal genres that functioned within the culturally-specific communicative context. Geneva Smitherman (1977) followed with a rich and wide-ranging description and analysis of African American language behavior. In *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (1977), Smitherman celebrated preachers and preaching, poets and toasters, writers, cartoonists, journalists, singers, street philosophers, and all who represented the rich depth of AAL and cultural behavior. Moreover, the examples included content about a range of issues common and important to the Black community, including racism and injustice. These rituals include the game of signifying, he-said-she-said, and instigating. They successfully demonstrated that the linguistic question was not who Black women were most like; rather, they demonstrated that the scholarly question was actually, "Who are Black women from a linguistic, cultural, and discourse perspective?"

Conclusion

African American Women's Language: Discourse, Education, and Identity increases our understanding of complex speech communities and women's practices in language use. Because of the social and political history of African American culture, many speakers of AAL are

hypersensitive to and aware of talk and the consequences of talk. It is the hypersensitivity that caused critiques of previous sociolinguistic and folklorist tendencies that over generalize variation in African American communities and marginalize those who did not participate. Many women would argue that gender difference is not significant in AAVL. They would also argue that the exclusion of women and a variety of social class does not reflect the complex language usage and ideology around language that exists on an everyday basis in the African American speech community. The Black women who worked in linguistics in the 1960s and 1970s: Beryl Bailey, Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, Geneva Smitherman, and Henrietta Cedergren conducted their research and produced at the highest level. We respect them and their insistence on representing the complexities of the linguistic and cultural experience by paying attention to their work and doing our own.

This collection addresses many of the theoretical, social, and interdisciplinary issues in the linguistic study of the U.S. in general and African American community in particular. It does not attempt to either sanitize or sensationalize the language and discourse of African American women. Instead, this collection addresses the language of women in the social and cultural contexts and critiques theoretical assumptions, methodological restraints, and issues concerning complicated linguistic research on African American language use. This volume is an analysis of the language, discourse, style, and interactions of African American women as they are. In spite of having been *down and out, talked about, wrote about and pushed around* there is only one agenda that really matters. The language of African American women should receive the scrutiny, analysis, critique, and scholarly attention and respect awarded all varieties of language. *African American Women's Language: Discourse, Education, and Identity* is a welcomed step in the process.

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