

# To Continue Moving Forward in English Language and Linguistics Research in the Twenty-First Century

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## Introduction

Unlike Richard W. Bailey, whose experience of his own dialect is described in Dennis Preston's contribution to this section, I spent my early years hating my language (see Lanehart 2002). As an undergraduate I attended the University of Texas at Austin, which completely changed my attitudes and beliefs not only about my own language, African American Language (AAL), but about other varieties as well. I no longer thought of language differences as deficits to be pitied or remedied but simply as differences that represented our sociocultural and historical contexts. This experience helped me to integrate English

language and linguistics (ELL)—the combination of English Language Studies (ELS) and the tools of linguistics—applying linguistic theories and methods to English language data in social and cultural contexts.

While ELL courses helped me to respect language variety and understand the science of language, especially phonetics and phonology, ELS helped me to appreciate the cultural richness, histories, and narratives that embody linguistic difference. So, while linguistics fueled my interest in how language works and how users' languages vary even though there is no hierarchy in the functionality of languages, ELS fueled my interest in why language works and how users make it their own in spite of the similarities and differences from one language to another.

The contributions made to this section by William Kretzschmar, Dennis Preston, and Walt Wolfram continue the traditions of American dialectology and ELL. Each provides methods and methodologies as well as epistemologies for contextualizing and interpreting data in American dialectology. Kretzschmar's use of mapping, Preston's use of folk dialectology, and Wolfram's critique of ELL through AAL research provide both the retrospective and forward-looking perspectives on American dialect research necessary for productive research in the twenty-first century.

In addition to responding to the chapters in this section, I want to address three future areas of ELL research: (1) the importance of scholars disclosing and understanding the impact of their subjectivities on their research and its outcomes; (2) the importance of sociocultural and historical contexts in ELL; and (3) the importance of multimethod research in ELL. All of these areas are well-fitted to ELL scholars in English departments in particular because of the importance that literary analysis, historical research, and multidisciplinary research have in the humanities, all of which serve to balance, supplement, and challenge the social scientific methodologies of linguistic inquiry into American dialect variation and change.

## **Subjectivities vs. Objectivity**

Some people think of linguistics as "exotic": they speak language, but linguistics is beyond their experience. The first thing many non-linguists ask when they hear that I am a linguist is, "How many languages do you

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questions they ask, how they research those questions, and how they interpret data, since all scholarship is inevitably tied to individuals and their ideologies and epistemologies, in turn influenced by sociocultural and historical contexts.

For example, my upbringing in a working class, predominantly African American community till I was twelve, before moving to a multiracial, middle-class neighborhood, had a profound impact on me. The conflict between the general lack of respect for AAL and its social significance and the everyday reality of being surrounded by language use in the African American community was disconcerting. I grew up deriding and ridiculing my native language because others did so—both in and outside of my community. I saw how much my parents wanted to “do better” in their language and looked to me to help them because I had access to a level of teaching and learning they never had. One day in fourth grade, when my favorite teacher spoke racially pejoratively to a fellow Black student, the reality of my Blackness and its inescapability hit me in the face; my tendency toward language prescriptiveness and self-loathing was strengthened for years to come.

African Americans and others whose varieties are perceived as inferior to the mainstream are expected to hate their language; that hatred should foster in them a desire to speak “better,” as if speaking a variety not their own will somehow help them to be and think “better.” So, as an ELL scholar and a Black person, I am expected by non-linguists to believe that those who speak the language I grew up with and others with similar histories need to be salvaged or, better still, transformed. Though I certainly was “transformed” during my childhood and young adulthood, it was at great sacrifice to my identity—a sacrifice I came to regret. I spent many years deconstructing and reinventing myself, and such rebirth has had a profound impact on my subjectivities. As Preston’s contribution to this section shows, although we may have humbling beliefs about our own language varieties, there are sure to be many others who agree that we should.

It would be helpful to science, art, and the humanities if scholars would recognize that who we are is integrated with what we do (method), how we believe it should be done (methodology), and how we see or know it (epistemology). For example, as Walt Wolfram’s contribution to this section notes, the historical data regarding the origins of

lead scholars to quite different, even mutually exclusive, positions at those origins. Depending on one's methods, methodologies, and epistemologies related to Africans in the Americas, one is more willing to believe that AAL is a language or dialect; an African and British English creole or British English dialect; a (bad) variety of American English; and so on. As such, the data one seeks and the ideologies one holds affect the interpretation of those data. It is no surprise that those who identify as Anglicists (i.e., those who hypothesize that the speech of African Americans is essentially derived from British-based dialects) usually produce and interpret data that support their historical position about AAL, and those who identify as Creolists (i.e., those who hypothesize that the similarities between AAL and Caribbean creoles and the differences between AAL and British dialects is due to the existence of an earlier creole that has since decreolized) usually produce and interpret data that support their historical position about AAL.

Research on Samaná provides a useful case study. Dawn Hannah (2001) studied the same Samaná English community previously studied by Jana Poplack and Sali Tagliamonte (e.g., Tagliamonte and Poplack 1986; Poplack and Tagliamonte 1989; Poplack 2000), but she came up with different results about copula absence (e.g., "She not here" or "My gone"—the absence of any form of the verb *be*). Whereas Hannah's data align copula absence in Samaná English with Creolist suppositions about AAL, Poplack and Tagliamonte's data align with Anglicist positions. The differences may be attributed to the fact that Hannah is a white woman who was married to one of the community's members (who was a graduate student working with John Rickford, a creolist) and viewed more as an insider in the community she was studying than Poplack and Tagliamonte (both white women whose research clearly positions them as Anglicists). Since we know that interviewer identity affects the data one gets in a community (see Cohen-Talpa and Bailey 2001; Bailey and Tillery 1999; and Rickford and McNair-Knox 1994), it should be no surprise that the data obtained were different. The more one is like the participant one is researching, the more likely the data obtained is closer to the participant's vernacular. Combine interviewer identity differences with different methods, methodologies, epistemologies, and ideological presuppositions, and one can easily get different interpretations of data as well as different data.

The ideologies *and* knowledge of the researchers conducting a study are important and have to be taken into account. David Sutcliffe (2001) shows how ideologies create assumptions and how those assumptions not only can affect our interpretations of data but also the data collection process itself. For example, Sutcliffe attempts to make the case that AA is related to tonal languages in Africa on the basis of ex-slave audio recordings that are transcribed in G. Bailey, Maynor, and Cukor-Avila's *The Emergence of Black English* (1991). A focal point of this evidence lies in the use of the particle *duh* in the ex-slave recordings, which Sutcliffe sees as a tonal marker. He argues that many researchers either do not investigate this feature or do not see it in the data they collect because they are not looking for it and because they do not know enough about tone and tonal languages to recognize its importance if they hear it.

As these two examples demonstrate, ideology and knowledge shape the ways in which researchers understand their questions, data, and interpretations. This is an emerging perspective in American dialect research with little research to evoke yet, but it suggests the important connection between ELL and English departments: most English departments' immersion in feminist theory, cultural studies, narrative, etc., provides critical frameworks for ELL in terms of recognizing the researcher's subjectivities.

## The Importance of Sociocultural and Historical Contexts

Richard W. Bailey's work captures the importance of sociocultural and historical contexts in ELL. It is no surprise that my first book, *Sociocultural and Historical Contexts of African American English* (2001), includes those words in its title. Our language is part of who we are—past, present, and future—and that informs my conviction that sociocultural and historical contexts are vital to ELL.

When as an undergraduate student I finally transformed from self-loathing (at one point I wanted to be a speech pathologist so that I could "cure" all the "bad" English speakers, especially African American) into an admirer of language variation, I was pursuing Medieval Studie

which I learned about the evolution of English from the Germanic dialects of a group without a single homeland, through several centuries to the present day. Because I undertook these studies at a university in the Southwest where linguistic ridicule was commonplace, I examined the socioculture and history of American English in order to understand the array of language attitudes all around me. As a senior in the Honors English Program, after having taken Medieval Studies courses as well as ELL courses, including Texas English and American English, I began to understand the relevance of who we are linguistically and where we have been to where we can go. Seeing the significance of history, society, and culture in medieval literature can make it easier to see that the same categories are at the foundation of the language we produce today and that social variation and change are reflected in language variety.

Dennis Preston's research in perceptual dialectology takes a multicultural view of Present Day English by asking people what they believe about their own language and also that of others. To this day, many language researchers are guilty of collecting linguistic data and then analyzing it by making assumptions about what the language users meant or believed or intended instead of asking them. We know that beliefs are not always reality—one's beliefs do not always match one's behavior—but one's beliefs about one's behavior are still important in understanding the complexity of language cognitively, psychologically, culturally, socially, and individually. Preston's work helps us to understand why Midwesterners and Northerners can hold complimentary beliefs (uninformed but sincere) about Southern speech as well as negative beliefs about one another's speech. Knowing the histories of these regions and communities along with current cultures and social workings helps to contextualize current beliefs and attitudes.

English departments bolster the viability of studying sociocultural and historical contexts of language more than linguistics departments because the former already have solid foundations in literary, historical, and critical analyses—such is not the case in linguistics research or linguistics departments. While linguistics departments are more concerned with theoretical issues about language use and production, ELL combines those theories with analysis of social, cultural, and historical contexts, both of speakers and their language. ELL scholars can thrive

in English departments because, though they do not often share a connection to literature in content, they do share a connection in context. Literary scholars have to study literature in context, in order to understand how societies, histories, and cultures influenced its emergence and reception. The history of the language is, of course, reflected in those same literary texts.

The collaboration between ELL research (e.g., perceptual research, language attitudes and beliefs research, identity research) and the English department should foster the integration of sociocultural and historical contexts into future research. By doing so, we will have a better understanding of language, language variation, and applications of such knowledge for the betterment of humanity. In order to be able to utilize this knowledge and complex data, however, we need more tools of analysis.

## Time for Multimethod Research

Because one's beliefs do not always match one's behavior and because humans are complex and curious and evolving, I believe the tools for processing the complex data required to *really* understand any language can be found in conducting multimethod research. Multimethod research can be defined as research that uses multiple quantitative research methods (e.g., survey, questionnaire, multivariate analysis, self-organizing maps), multiple qualitative research methods (e.g., portraiture, interview, observation, diaries), or a mix of both quantitative and qualitative research methods (Schutz, Chambless, and DeCuir 2004). Multimethod research is vital not just to ELL research, but also to most social science research. The questions to which we need answers are too complex for simply using a survey or questionnaire or phone interview. The complex interrelationships of the human condition, language, culture, and society demand more than a single method or methodology. English departments can be helpful in this endeavor because much research in English departments, including that in ELS, offers multiple qualitative methods, methodologies, and analyses. Since most ELS and linguistics scholars are trained in quantitative methods and methodologies, collaboration with liberal arts and education faculty can prove a win-win situation.



we gather more and more complex data in response to ever more complex questions, inevitably, better research will be done through collaboration than in solitude.

Although I see some researchers incorporating more than one method in their work (e.g., Elaine Richardson, H. Samy Alim, and Walt Fram), not enough do. One possible reason for this slow transition is that most colleges and universities do not offer enough (if any) methods or methodology classes for students as part of their disciplinary training nor do they provide the opportunity for applying those methods and methodologies in a hands-on environment. The universities I have been involved with across the United States at best offered one course in sociolinguistic methods for both undergraduate and graduate students, and that course usually did not involve applying those methods in an applied study. Most important, qualitative methods and methodologies were largely underplayed in such courses and too many ELL programs. Simply teaching ELL students VARBRUL (variable rules analysis, a statistical analysis commonly used in sociolinguistic analysis to describe patterns of variation between alternative forms) or providing them with training on ethnography is not enough to make them the multimethod researchers our complex language questions require.

Two examples of best practices in multimethod language variation research are Patricia Cukor-Avila and Guy Bailey's research in Texas (Cukor-Avila, 2005, 2001) and H. Samy Alim's research in California and Pennsylvania (e.g., Alim, 2004, 2006). Bailey and Cukor-Avila have had a research site in Texas for 20 years. They have become part of the communities they have researched, so it is more than just a research site—it is a part of their lives. They have collected a variety of data including diaries, questionnaires, interviews (researcher-participant and participant-participant), social network data, contextual audio-taping, perceptual data, and geographic data. Alim has conducted similar multimethod research. Instead of researchers trying to guess what participants of their studies think or believe or do, these scholars actually ask the participants: the participants collect data as well as the researchers, and then researchers triangulate all of the data in order to "locate" linguistic knowledge in the cultural space, which only increases what we can know about the language. Such research has generated rich data about, in these cases, African American Vernacular Englishes and Southern White Vernacular Englishes. In particular, we have

learned more about rural AAL from Bailey and Cukor-Avila and urban AAL and Hip Hop language and culture from Alim. It is encouraging for the future of ELL that the former researchers are senior scholars and latter relatively junior.

Multimethod research does not minimize quantitative inputs. Kretzschmar, for instance, has done an impressive job of including more quantitative research methods from other disciplines and refining them for American dialect research. His description and use of Self-organizing Maps in this section provides us with more effective ways of understanding and explaining dialects and language variation in combination with other quantitative and qualitative methods and methodologies. Kretzschmar has pushed the boundaries of dialectology before with (1) the Atlanta survey research he and I did by transforming the traditional dialectology interview of several hours into a one-hour interview that could yield similar data, (2) his Roswell study (a multimethod study that collected data from various community groups), and (3) his goal to make data available for study and use on the Internet (see <http://us.english.uga.edu/>).

Kretzschmar reminds us of Bailey's point in *Nineteenth-Century English* (1996b, vi), that

Reading the English of the nineteenth century is not made difficult by problems of intelligibility. The danger of misreading lies rather in the apparent familiarity of the language, lulling modern readers into imagining that this English is much like our own, when it is not.

This is not only true for Medieval English to Present Day English, but also within Present Day English. English speakers see the word *nice* in Middle English and believe it has its current meaning when it actually means 'foolish, stupid.' Arthur Spears has proven the point for Present-Day English with his investigations of what has been called "camouflaged" language. In his studies of AAL, Spears has determined that there are usages in AAL that look similar to General American English (GAE) in structure and meaning, but they are not in reality (Spears 1982). For example, *call* or *come* in the sentences "She call herself dancing" and "She come in here talking like she had something," respectively, appear to be GAE words, but they have AAL meanings; listeners unfamiliar

with AAL will misinterpret the sentences as though they were in GAE, much as many of us misread Old or Middle English texts.

We can easily be misled if we base our judgments and understanding of language on current methods and methodologies alone and decontextualize the information or data we collect from their socioculture and history or if we shortchange the data and analysis by not using more than one method or not starting with the complex research questions the real world demands. In addition, we also need to challenge our own ideologies and epistemologies in the process to be ever mindful of our own potential biases and shortcomings. I think more efforts are being made to mitigate researchers' blindspots now than at any point before, but we must continue to be vigilant and visible in our beliefs for future language variation research.