

## **African American Language Identities: Contradictions and Conundrums**

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For those of us who live and work in the Black community, the study of African American Language is not just an academic exercise, it is our life.

Geneva Smitherman, "Foreword," *Sociocultural and Historical Contexts of African American English* (2001: ix)

### INTRODUCTION

Researching language use in the African American community is a personal thing. I know we are often told not to research our own communities because we are too close. I do not believe that to be the case. I have an insight into my community that provides depth, not distraction. My language use in the African American community is part of my life and I take it seriously.

As such, I am concerned by the contradictory views about African American Language (i.e., language as spoken by or among African Americans) (see Mufwene 2001:21), both by African Americans and non-African Americans and the conundrums they produce. Although I think it would be simplistic to think that learning about language use in the African American community and applying our knowledge about it will cure all the ills in the community, I do believe that examining these contradictions and conundrums has the potential to make a positive difference not only in the lives of African American children and their community but all children and all communities.

My goals for this article are to discuss the contradictions we find in studying the language and the people in the African American community that arise from within and without as well as conundrums resulting from these contradictions. In examining these contradictions and conundrums, I will discuss socioculture, sociohistory, identity, and community of African Americans. To do this, I will use my research data that looks at five African American women across three generations and their language attitudes, practices, identities, and ideologies. I will situate and examine ideologies and beliefs about African American Language (AAL) across time (space) and place.

#### WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Over the last several decades, linguists and other scholars have given various names to the language used in the African American community: “African American Language,” “African American English (AAE),” “African American Vernacular English (AAVE),” “Ebonics”, “Black English Vernacular,” “Black English,” “Black Vernacular English,” and “Negro Nonstandard English” (Debose 2005). There are so many names. Unfortunately, the African American community has not chosen a name for itself, though they often refer to AAL as “bad” English, street talk, or slang. Although that is not the fault of linguists, it is in part due to the lack of acceptance and denial by the African American community: many African Americans do not acknowledge or believe that there is a “legitimate” or “substantive” language shared by African Americans that emerges from a shared socioculture and history that extends to the Motherland (see Alexander 1979; Mufwene 2001). Then again, there are linguists who share that view to a greater or lesser degree, so I guess this should not be a surprise. If the people who created and

use the language do not believe it is legitimate or is simply slang (erroneous as that may be linguistically),<sup>1</sup> why should anyone else?

There are two dominant perspectives on the history and development of language use in the African American community held by two distinctive groups: (1) Anglicists, mostly non-African American scholars who spend much of their time arguing that AAL is a dialect of British English, and that Africans in America who created AAL forgot their native culture and language upon arrival here (e.g., Poplack 2000); and (2) Creolists, mostly African American scholars who spend much of their time arguing that AAL derived from contact between Blacks and Whites and the cultures and languages they brought to their contact situation (e.g., Rickford 1998, 1999; Smitherman 1994, 2000). In other words, the latter group holds that Africans in America maintained intimate aspects of their native languages and cultures in adapting to their oppressive colonial environment, while the former group claims that Africans in America either did not have the inclination or ability to preserve their native languages to a significant extent or it is irrelevant to consider one's socioculture and identity in language genesis and evolution.

Despite this seeming harmony that is sung by those known as the Creolists, there is a disharmonious chord sung by those known as the (Neo-)Anglicists. (Neo-)Anglicists believe there is little for Blacks that beckons back to Mother Africa; there is nothing they can hear across the Middle Passage that let them know that they know that they know that their language was surely birthed by their African forefathers and foremothers, only their European American ones (see Rickford and Rickford's 2000 rebuttal to this position from a language and identity perspective and Molefi Asanti's work on Africanisms). Culture and identity matter; to study AAL without those ingredients can only provide an inadequate picture.

When I tell people outside of linguistics about language use in the African American community and the linguistic camps, they seem dumbfounded that anyone would believe that AAL is not historically rooted in Africa since the people who speak it are (see Rickford 1998 for a look at linguistic connections between AAL and other African Diasporic languages).

Linguists have spent decades trying to articulate how best to describe and define AAL (though I prefer the simple definition stated at the beginning of this article). They have studied particular linguistic features (e.g., Bailey and Thomas 1998; Baugh 1983; Rickford 1999; Wolfram 1969), discourse (e.g., Morgan 1996, 2002; Spears 2001; Troutman 2001), lexicon (e.g., Major 1984; Smitherman 1994, 1998), system (Green 2002), linguistic culture (e.g., Alim 2004, 2006), and history (e.g., Mufwene 2000; Rickford and Rickford 2000; Winford 1997, 1998). Despite being one of the most studied language varieties (Wolfram 2001), we still do not have a consensus view or knowledge about the development and status of language use in the African American community. We do have lists of features, though, that linguists often refer to as salient (see for example Baugh 1983; Etter-Lewis 1993; Green 2002; Lanehart 2001, 2002; Mitchell-Kernan 1972; Morgan 1996, 2002; Mufwene et al. 1998; Rickford 1999; Rickford and Rickford 2000; Smitherman 1994), despite the problems of defining or describing a language by a list of features (i.e., who, after reading a grammar book of syntax, phonetics, and morphology knows how to use the language?). But, as spoken of many times before by Walt Wolfram at paper presentations, a language cannot be defined by a list of features. Language is more than the sum of its parts.

Though some linguists may not accept the importance of socioculture and sociohistory, some politicians have. President Lyndon Johnson's Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA 1965) is the impetus for Title 1 funding in education. The idea was that one's context

mattered to one's being. As such, there was an effect on education. Surely it cannot be difficult to make the connection also to language. Though there has been a retrenchment from the ideals of Johnson's policy, the fact still remains that context matters—sociocultural, historical, socioeconomic, ecological, etc. (see Lanehart 1996, 2001, 2002)

A scholarly proponent of the importance of context as well as identity is seen in John Ogbu's (1978) work on voluntary and involuntary minorities. His point is that how you arrive in a place directly influences how you succeed in a place. Space and place matter in the development of a person as well as the people. Space and place matter in the belief of a people to persevere, overcome, and succeed in new territory where not everyone knows or believes that you can fly.

Well, sociolinguists and language variationists believe, at the very least, that there is a language variety used by African Americans. However, some believe that, whatever the name chosen, the variety is homogeneous regardless of where the people live, are from, or have been; whatever they have seen or want to be (see Mufwene 2000). The irony of this is that the sociolinguistic and variationist mantra is that language varies—or it is a dead language. So, to believe that language used in the African American community is homogeneous across space and place goes against the core of what language variationists and sociolinguists hold as a tenet of their discipline. Nevertheless, the view of homogeneity in the language of African Americans is not monolithic among sociolinguists and variationists. There have been calls for investigating the heterogeneity of language used in the African American community for more than 30 years (see Mufwene 2000; Troike 1973)—the call has just only recently been heard (see Mallinson and Childs 2005; Wolfram and Thomas 2002). Although it does not resolve the public denial on the part of the African American community to accept the fact that they do use “real,” “valid”

language that is as complex and sustainable as any other and that it is only right for them to name it as its users and creators (see Mufwene 2001), it goes a long way toward helping all language users to understand that all language varies and all communities have language and not one is better than another—just different.

Interestingly, there is also the notion by a group of African American scholars that what is spoken in the Americas and throughout the African Diaspora is connected in such a way that it should be described as “Ebonics,” a blend of “ebony” and “phonics” (see Williams 1975). Ebonics is the essence of a Mother language that is shared by a people with a common sociohistory, a common pain, a common spirit, a common song. The term was coined in 1973 by a group of African American, non-linguist scholars to call attention to the African Diaspora and its various forms of communication that needed to be recognized and researched and accepted by educators, lawmakers, the African American community and society in general for the success of African American children. “Ebonics” was not used by linguists for the language of African Americans until the “Ebonics Controversy” of the late 1990s, whose predecessor, the 1979 Ann Arbor “Black English case”<sup>2</sup>, garnered similar attention but used expert linguistic testimony and consultation of language variationists and sociolinguists who specialized in AAL. Williams (1975:vi) defines “Ebonics” as “the linguistic and paralinguistic features that, on a concentric continuum, represent the communicative competence of the West African, Caribbean, and United States slave descendent of African origin. It includes the grammar, various idioms, patois, argots, ideolects, and social dialects of Black people.” The Oakland Unified School District Board accepted the term “Ebonics” for the language of its multitude of culturally African American students who were in need of educational help (see Baugh 2000). Language was a

starting point. Why? Because, as Paule Marshall (1983) noted, “language is the only homeland” and, as such, is integrally connected to who we are as individuals and communities.

#### WHAT WE BELIEVE—CONTRADICTIONS AND ALL

In response to the Oakland school board’s December 18, 1996, resolution to recognize “Ebonics” as the primary language of African American students in that California district, poet Maya Angelou told the *Wichita Eagle* that she was “incensed” and found the idea “very threatening.” NAACP president Kweisi Mfume denounced the measure as “a cruel joke,” and although he later adopted a friendlier stance, the Reverend Jesse Jackson on national television initially called it “an unacceptable surrender, borderlining on disgrace” (Rickford and Rickford 2000:5).

This protest against AAL was not new. Benjamin Alexander (1979:437-438) said the following in response to the verdict in the 1979 “Black English case”:

I will not accept the legitimacy of Black English or any other kind of non-prescribed English.... If people cannot communicate in Standard English and have not developed their talents and skills—then who wants them? .... I consider it a cheap insult to see educational standards lowered in Ann Arbor schools—solely for black students. How can we justify recognition of their non-prescribed broken English and then ask teachers to learn it?

As can be seen, the Oakland controversy was not new. It was a repeat of history that we are sure to see again because the issue has not been adequately resolved or addressed socially,

educationally, legally, and politically. These differing opinions among African Americans represent a history of contradictions that I do not foresee an end to any time soon.

Well, you might ask, “Where were regular Black folk during these crises?” They too were denying the legitimacy of their language, culture, and history. Some of the very people who speak AAL everyday are some of its most vehement and vocal critics. In Mufwene’s (2001:35) “What Is African American English?”, he relates the following incident that exemplifies the contradiction:

A young man in a congregation to which I was explaining the situation said in reference to Ebonics, perceived as the speech of “the ignorant” and gang members, “Ain’t nobody here talk like that.” His focus may not have been so much on those features in his own statement that make it obvious to a linguist that he speaks AAVE but on the kinds of words and communicative exchanges which are contained in several examples that linguists and the media have provided of what AAVE or Ebonics is.

In a separate incident and as further evidence, the following conversation occurred between an African American mother (G: Grace) and daughter (D: Deidra), both strongly affiliated with the language and culture of the African American community:

- G: I see they took Patti LaBelle’s show off.
- D: I know. I likeded that show.
- G: Now what you sayin that fuh?
- S: It’s supposed to be on next week.
- G: That’s <undeceipherable> talking bout I likeded that show.



- D: I say I likeded that show.
- G: I liked. L-I-K-E-D.
- S: It's coming on today.
- G: Don't you go down there changing—acting—changing yo uh speech.  
That's two things—cause something else you said. Those tesses. Better be trying to tell them (Lanehart 2002:178).

Again, if the African American community cannot and will not accept its language publicly and proudly, without hierarchy and prejudice, then who will or should?

However, other African Americans are saying very different things about their language. Some realize the language and the people are inextricably linked, as evidenced in the work of Geneva Smitherman (e.g., Smitherman 2000) and attested by Toni Morrison during an interview in response to the question, “What do you think is distinctive about your fiction? What makes it good?”

The language, only the language.... It is the thing that black people love so much.... The worst of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language. There are certain things I cannot say without recourse to my language. It's terrible to think that a child with five different present tenses comes to school to be faced with those books that are less than his own language. And then to be told things about his language, which is him, that are sometimes permanently damaging. He may never know the etymology of Africanisms in his language, not even know that “hip” is a real word or that “the dozens” meant something (LeClair 1981:27).

While there are African Americans like Toni Morrison, Robert Williams, and James Baldwin (see Baldwin's 1979 article, "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?") who value the language of the African American community, there are many others who do not. This was evident during the "Ebonics Controversy" when prominent members of the African American community as noted above, such as Bill Cosby, Maya Angelou, Kweisi Mfume, and Jesse Jackson, spoke against what the Oakland Unified School District Board was trying to accomplish for the wellbeing of African American children because they could not see the educational goals or methods for their blind denial of the—their—language under fire.

An irony in this contradiction of practice and belief is the fact that the language of African Americans has existed for hundreds of years. While AAL speakers deny the efficacy of AAL, they continue to use it—at home with family and friends, at church, at beauty and barber shops, in literature and song eloquently and without excuse, and, yes, at school—but most will not publicly accept it as a legitimate form of communication and expression outside their community other than to refer to it as colloquial or substandard. Clearly there is an issue of covert prestige involved because no matter how much some African Americans denigrate AAL and say that it is "bad" English, they continue to use it within the African American community. For some African Americans, it is the only language they know. This contradictory stance presents a conundrum in a day and time when salient characteristics of the language and its people are appropriated by non-African Americans for the purpose of making money, selling African American culture to the highest bidders and the hungriest consumers of our culture. The message seems to be that it is OK to act Black or fake speaking Black, but it is not OK to actually be Black and talk Black (see Smitherman 1994). It may be cool to do so in certain circumstances, but it is certainly not legitimate.

## MY LITTLE PART

Given the pervasive unenlightened attitudes, beliefs, and ideologies and the subsequent contradictions regarding AAL in schools and society, as expressed by African Americans and non-African Americans alike,

- (1) I conducted a research project to understand how African American women who are speakers of AAL with varying attitudes about AAL and with differing educational and social class backgrounds sometimes hold contradictory beliefs about AAL and
- (2) I also investigated their use of AAL in varying contexts and how that use might have affected their educational experiences.

To answer my questions, I conducted a multidiscipline, multimethods research project encompassing four dimensions—education, language, literacy, and goals (including possible selves)—and two aspects of the dimensions—practices (e.g., linguistic repertoire) and beliefs (e.g., language ideologies). Here I focus on language practices and beliefs of the participants.

### *The Participants*

I collected data from five Southern African American women across three generations in one family with varying degrees of education and social class that are indicative of the sociocultural and historical contexts of African Americans: Maya,<sup>3</sup> the matriarch, who achieved a third-grade education; Grace, Maya's fourth oldest child, who finished high school and completed vocational school; Reia, Maya's youngest child, who has a B.A. and M.A. degree in Psychology; and Grace's two children, Deidra, who has been going to college in Social Work for two decades now, and Sonja, who has a Ph.D. in English Language and Linguistics.

### About Maya

Maya, my grandmother, was the youngest of 13 children—nine boys and four girls. They all grew up on a farm in the segregated, Jim Crow South. She only knew one uncle on her mother's side from her parents' families. Her mother, Sarah, had been married once before and had two sons from a previous marriage. Sarah had eleven sons and daughters with her second husband, Peter Johnson. Peter died at the age of 55 when he was intentionally hit by a group of White men driving a car, about four months after Sarah died of a stroke at around the age of 50. When her father Peter died. There were only two children still at home, Chet and Maya, after both of her parents were now dead. It was up to them to decide whom they wanted to live with. Maya originally chose to live with her favorite brother, Matthew. However, Matthew's wife wasn't very kind to Maya, often starving her. As a result, she later left to live with other siblings. After having her first child, Maya went to live with Vashti, the same sister her brother Chet had chosen to live with. Vashti became much like a mother to Maya and they remained close till the day she died in April 1990. Vashti was never able to have children and she fell in love with Maya's second child, Gloria, so Maya allowed Vashti and her husband, Joseph, to raise Gloria. Vashti died in 1990 at the age of 84 and her last living sibling, Charles, died March 1998 at the ripe old age of 100.

Maya married three times and has eight children by four different men. An interesting thing about Maya's children is that she seems to have had them in two sets of four, with the two sets being separated by several years in between them. Grace is the baby of the first set of four (there were three different fathers) and Reia is the baby of the second set of four (all by the same father, John). Maya did not marry John until after she had married and divorced another man she never had children for. John died of a heart attack in his sleep a few years ago. With the

exception of her 50-year old drug-addict son who is a high-school dropout and doesn't work and never really has, she is pretty much alone no since all of her siblings and other relatives close in age to her have died. Maya has the least amount of education of all the participants and she had the most difficult life of all the participants. Yet, of all the participants, Maya is most comfortable with who she is and where she is in life. She is now 86 years old and living with Alzheimer's. Still, I can say without a doubt that Maya is the most resilient woman I have ever known.

### About Grace

Grace, my mother, is a central figure of this study partly because I have discussed language and uses of literacy most with her and partly because she is most concerned about these issues. She often asks me questions about language use and literacy. She admires me on the one hand, but denounces me on the other: She appreciates my ability to speak what she perceives as “good” English, but she admonishes me for using that same “good” English around those who do not use it. Likewise, she admires my vocabulary and often asks me to pronounce and define words, but she scolds me if I do not adjust my vocabulary to better fit my audience. She does not hold attitudes and beliefs similar to mine about language and uses of literacy nor does she want to be as “limited” in her linguistic styles as she believes me to be. She wants to be competent in my linguistic styles, but she does not want to be like some of the people she envisions in those linguistic styles—pretentious, snippety, mechanical, haughty, White. In other words, she does not want to forget where she came from and she would like to visit there from time to time without being perceived as out of touch.

One thing that continues to stand out in my mind about my mom, Grace, is how she tries to “talk proper” in phone conversations when the conversation is with someone she does not

know; e.g., a telemarketer or even someone who has dialed the wrong number. She answers the phone with a “hello” that is different from her everyday speech just because she cannot be sure who is on the other end of the line. That she changes her voice is one thing, but what she is trying to imitate is something else: talking “proper,” sounding White.

#### *About Reia*

Reia, my aunt, is Maya’s youngest daughter. As is true with many of the youngest children in a family, she is largely responsible for the welfare of her elderly parents. Reia has received the most education of any of her siblings even though her sister Felicia was her inspiration and the first to go to college (Felicia received a bachelor’s degree in Accounting). Reia is a single parent of two children she had at 38 and 40 years old, a fact Maya and her children are not very happy about. Though they love the children and do what they can to help, they had hoped she would have done better by her education than she has.

#### About Deidra

Deidra, my sister (we share mothers by not fathers), has great dilemmas with her language and uses of literacy as well as with her family situation (she was raised by her paternal grandparents, Joe and Stella, and not our mother, Grace). Her family situation only seems to have exacerbated her language and literacy problems. Looking from the outside in, she seemed to have gotten everything material she wanted as a child. I begrudged her that at the time because I felt I usually did not get what I wanted. From that experience, I learned you don’t always get what you want—and that can be a good thing.

Deidra is uncomfortable in situations where talking “proper” might be expected, such as a job interview. When she moved in with Grace and Jesse (i.e., her stepfather and my father) several years ago, just as I was going away to college, she made an effort to try to change her

style of speech. Grace constantly made her aware of her “problems” and she constantly “corrected” her. Grace still corrects Deidra if she hears her say something “wrong.” When Deidra was in the process of moving back to her hometown after having lived with Grace and Jesse for a few years, one of the things Grace kept telling her was, “Don’t go back there and start talking like those people again (even though that’s where Grace and all of her family and my dad’s family had grown up as well). I don’t want to hear you talking any old kind of way again.” What she was saying was, “Don’t speak African American Vernacular English.” She wanted—wants—her to talk “proper.” Deidra speaks African American Vernacular English (for more about distinctions in definitions of terms to refer to AAL, see Lanehart 2001, especially Mufwene 2001).

#### About Sonja

I am told I speak “proper” English. Even though I can speak African American Vernacular English and often do in certain situations, it is usually not associated with me—especially by my White husband. He teases me when I talk to a family member because he says I “try to sound Black”—but I don’t. He does not associate my speech with others in my family just as others in my family don’t associate my speech much with theirs. Yet, I do possess several characteristics of AAVE in my speech (see Lanehart 2002). They are most likely evident when I am talking to my family (or sometimes other African Americans). I enjoy high prestige in my family so I am allowed to talk “bad” (i.e., use non-standard language) without censure even though I have some of the same AAVE characteristics as my sister. I, however, am never corrected. My family seems to have a mental scale that rates some language characteristics as “bad,” but acceptable, and others as “bad” and unacceptable (who told us and made us believe

that some aspects of AAL are better or more acceptable than others?). To them, it would seem, I use the former and not the latter.

I don't remember when or how my language changed, but I know my schooling was influential as well as my acceptance of the indoctrination of schooling. I went to an integrated school when I was in the fourth grade because my parents had me bussed to a magnet school. Most of the students were White. The other African American students were bussed in just like me. We moved when I was in the sixth grade from an all-Black, working-class neighborhood to a more integrated, middle-class neighborhood and, as a result, a more integrated, ethnically-diverse school. By the time I reached high school, the school I went to was still fairly ethnically mixed but with African Americans as the majority. When I decided to go to college I went to a predominantly White university. My mother often tells me how she regrets sending me to that university. She says that at the same time she says how proud of me she is.

I struggle with how people look at me when I talk as if I'm not what they expected of an African American. I struggle with my mom's attitudes and beliefs about "good" language and "bad" language. I agonize when she expects me to "correct" her when she talks or when she asks me to help her write a memo or letter because she believes in me more than she believes in herself. That is why I believe there is a relationship between confidence and language use. Our perceptions of our language (and literacy) are integrated with our perceptions of our selves. Because of that, when we talk about language and literacy we should also talk about identity and goals and possible selves (a subset of goals) since they are at stake—or at risk.



*Instruments and Measures*

In order to address attitudes and beliefs about AAL as well as to better understand its significance for those who use it and the role it can play in the education and achievement of its speakers, I collected narratives from each participant which included language and education as primary foci and I collected formal speech data from interviews (INT) and informal speech data from contextual audiotaping which I called “kitchen talk” (KT). To assess the participants’ language of identity and compare/contrast usage patterns, or language behavior, I charted the use of 18 salient phonological, morphological, and syntactic features of AAE (see Table 1).

**TABLE 1: Salient AAL Linguistic Features**

<i>Phonological Features</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Final Consonant Cluster Reduction	mind [maln]
Vocalization of or Zero Postvocalic /r/	after [@ft{}]; your [jo]
Deletion or Reduction of Postvocalic /l/	help [hEp]; he’ll [hi{}]
Labialization of Interdental Fricatives	with [wlf]
Lowering of /l/ > /@/ before /4/	singular [s@4j{l{}]; thinking [T@4kln]
<i>Morphological Features</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Zero Plural -s	This five <i>pound</i> of shrimp.
Zero Possessive -s	This <i>Kathy</i> boy.
Zero 3 <sup>rd</sup> Person Singular -s	At least he <i>know</i> you have a phone.
Zero Past Tense and Past Participle -ed	I probably woulda <i>end</i> up keeping it.
<i>They</i> Possessive	They had <i>they</i> own area.
Generalization of <i>Is</i> and <i>Was</i>	Some people <i>is</i> worsen than me. You <i>was</i> determined.
<i>Syntactic Features</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Zero Copula	She know she doing wrong.
Multiple Negation	I <i>don’t want nobody</i> doing that
Existential <i>It</i> and <i>They</i>	<i>It’s</i> a lot of it in there.
Demonstrative <i>Them</i>	<i>Them</i> people are terrible.
Completive <i>Been</i>	It <i>been</i> so long.
Completive <i>Done</i>	He <i>done</i> sold all that.
Invariant (or Immutable) <i>Be</i>	I don’t <i>be</i> eating that stuff.

To assess their language and literacy attitudes and beliefs, I administered a questionnaire with 21 statements using a 7-point scale (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree) that represented language and literacy ideology categories I determined from previous research: (1) the Ideology of Opportunity, which claims that those who speak a language of wider communication (LWC) and are literate have better educational opportunities, greater success in school, diminished social barriers, and better job opportunities (e.g., “a society and people with greater social equity” and “a society and people who are achievement oriented”); (2) the Ideology of Progress, which claims that those who speak a LWC and are literate will overcome the adversities and shortcomings of a deprived or deficient culture that does not use a LWC and they will develop greater cognitive and logical abilities which will facilitate abstract thought (e.g., “a society and people who make a distinction between myth and history” and “a society with a lower birth rate”); and (3) the Ideology of Emancipation, which purports autonomy, empowerment due to the development of critical thinking, and emancipation (real or symbolic) because of the control one will be able to achieve as a shareholder in what can constitute or lead to real power (e.g., “people who are personally empowered” and “people who are social revolutionaries”) (see Lanehart 2002 for more detail).

## RESULTS: DISHARMONY

Each woman had a different relationship with her language of identity and literacy. Each woman clearly identified with AAL and distinguished her usage of AAL between the INT and KT contexts in at least one of the three linguistic categories analyzed as determined by one-tailed, correlated *t* tests (see Table 2). Some of them style-shifted more than others, but the point is that they all did it to some degree regardless of their level of education. Hence, it is likely that

these women used AAL in school at some point and to some degree and that their teachers encountered AAL whether they wanted to accept its use or not. This is especially the case with morphology where most of the participants were unable or unwilling to code-switch in this area. How those teachers dealt with the AAL they encountered and how their actions affected the women varied. For example, in Sonja's narrative she talks about the profound impact of her second-grade teacher on her language. That teacher was the major impetus for Sonja's choice to disidentify with AAL and fervently strive to speak a LWC from that point on. Sonja's teacher encountered her AAL and apparently found it unacceptable. Sonja was one who chose to accommodate. That is certainly not always the case as is seen with Deidra in her narrative. Deidra strongly identifies with AAL and chooses not to code-switch.

**TABLE 2: Participants' Speech Samples Data**

	<i>IT Mean</i>	<i>IT SD</i>	<i>KT Mean</i>	<i>KT SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i> <sup>2</sup>
<i>Maya</i>							
Phonology	33.80	30.73	45.80	39.54	2.10	<.10	.52
Morphology	41.50	18.32	75.17	35.69	3.06	<.05	.65
Syntax (1-5)	55.80	27.09	79.20	4.76	1.97	<.10	.49
Syntax (6-7)	8.00	9.90	23.50	10.61	NA	NA	NA
<i>Grace</i>							
Phonology	8.00	9.82	15.00	17.23	2.06	<.10	.51
Morphology	32.33	14.76	53.50	34.39	1.48	NS	.30
Syntax (1-5)	36.80	35.63	77.40	19.35	2.76	<.05	.66
Syntax (6-7)	3.50	3.54	9.50	7.78	NA	NA	NA
<i>Reia</i>							
Phonology	0.86	1.76	12.00	9.25	3.11	<.05	.71
Morphology	10.33	15.57	18.00	17.9	1.45	NS	.30
Syntax (1-5)	13.20	7.19	46.00	12.00	7.83	<.001	.94
Syntax (6-7)	1.00	0.00	3.00	0.00	NA	NA	NA
<i>Deidra</i>							
Phonology	17.20	15.04	35.60	19.09	2.09	<.10	.52

Morphology	35.83	35.23	64.00	33.18	1.46	NS	.30
Syntax (1-5)	36.00	36.70	82.60	18.27	3.74	<.01	.78
Syntax (6-7)	0	0	24.00	9.90	NA	NA	NA
<i>Sonja</i>							
Phonology	0.80	1.79	3.20	4.09	2.14	<.05	.53
Morphology	0.40	0.80	35.17	38.91	2.17	<.05	.49
Syntax (1-5)	0	0	32.80	12.50	5.87	<.01	.90
Syntax (6-7)	0	0	6.50	9.19	NA	NA	NA
<i>Group</i>							
Phonology	11.67	12.52	27.20	19.18	4.26	<.01	.82
Morphology	18.80	13.72	38.20	20.63	4.10	<.01	.81
Syntax (1-5)	20.60	17.79	63.60	20.27	5.90	<.01	.90
Comp. Done	0.60	0.55	8.00	7.91	2.08	<.10	.52
Inv. Be	4.40	6.43	18.60	12.20	2.95	<.05	.69

**TABLE 3: Participants' Language and Literacy Ideologies Data**

	<i>Maya</i>	<i>Grace</i>	<i>Reia</i>	<i>Deidra</i>	<i>Sonja</i>	<i>Group</i>
<i>Ideology of Opportunity</i>						
Mean	6.60	6.50	6.13	5.75	3.56	5.70
Standard Deviation	0.32	0.76	0.83	0.89	1.64	1.46
<i>Ideology of Progress</i>						
Mean	6.36	5.80	5.80	5.10	2.40	5.10
Standard Deviation	0.40	2.02	1.42	0.99	0.99	1.89
<i>Ideology of Emancipation</i>						
Mean	6.28	7.00	5.42	5.71	4.28	5.74
Standard Deviation	0.27	0.00	0.98	0.76	1.04	1.15
<i>All Ideologies Combined</i>						
Mean	6.43	6.27	5.80	5.43	3.17	5.42
Standard Deviation	0.36	1.54	1.19	0.94	1.41	1.65

Also of interest is the participants' strength in their agreement with the ideologies contrary to AAL espoused by schools and society and its relationship with the participants' level of education: the more education a participant had, the less they tended to believe in those

ideologies (see Table 3). Some participants were very conflicted in their feelings and beliefs given the reality they experienced. For example, Grace believed in the ideologies—that in order to succeed one had to speak a LWC—but she interacted with those with college and graduate degrees who spoke “worse than me” (Lanehart 2002:78):

I know a lotta educated people who know how to speak better and they don't. There are people who talk with me who's educated and they feel comfortable talking with me and they talk worse than me. But if they have to write something on a piece of paper, write a letter or write something or had to make a speech, they would do so much better than me because then they know how to do it. But just in the everyday, they talk just like me. And see I would like to do that: Know how to read and write, even though I may not use it all the time. But I would love to know how.

Deidra also noted that in her experience as a preschool teacher's aid, some children have parents that speak a LWC and, of course, the children of those parents do as well. From that experience, she realized those children would likely become adults who spoke LWC as a birthright. As such, some might assume they were intelligent or successful because of their language use when in fact it was simply their birthright. As a native AAL speaker, Deidra understood that she had to learn LWC along with her school subjects whereas others only had to learn their school subjects. That advantage may have given others a head start over her, but it did not indicate their future success (Lanehart 2002:134):

I don't think half of the people that speak good English, half of 'em can't probably read and write. I have heard that some people can just sit down and read and from that reading and stuff from the knowledge that they hear other people

talking. Some people can talk the way other people talk and it can be proper. For instance, like a young child can hear their parents talking correct English because that's the way they talk and they grow up talking like that. That doesn't mean that they know how to read and write. So therefore, it's not like it's a big deal to me because I might be a person that can read and write and might can't talk that well.

The conflict for some AAL speakers between their language of identity (Lanehart 1996) and school and society is evident with all the participants except Maya and starkest with Reia, Deidra and Sonja. Analyses of the intersection of their language of identity and their language ideologies within the context of their sociocultural, sociohistorical, and educational experiences show these African American women were often convincingly told that who they were—speakers of AAL—was not who they should want to be. Reia and Sonja conformed; Deidra, in particular, did not:

[Standard English is important to some extent for me if I see a connection with reading and writing. For me it's not to speak it, it's] just to understand it better. (Lanehart 2002:133)... [Speaking standard English is important] only if you believe it is. Sometimes for a job it's good. People talk the way they wanna talk long as you understand. It's not that important to me. I mean standard English is a English that who prefer, want to better themselves in talking that way. When I say that someone speaks well are talks good, it's because the[y] have study hard in life. I don't care for talking proper or talking good English because long as I know what I'm saying and someone's understanding me, it's not that important. I don't think so (Lanehart 2002:135).

So, while lay persons, educators, politicians, and others balked at the plans of the Oakland Unified School Board to address the consistent failure of many African American students in their classrooms by recognizing their language and its significance to their education and their lives, it appears Oakland was at least making a justifiable effort by recognizing that many African American students do not speak or use a LWC and that such differing use needs to be recognized and addressed by schools as well as society if we really want to more effectively address the education, economic, and social achievement gap of African Americans through their language use. Further, regardless of how those students do in school, the more schooling they have the more they will begin to disidentify with society's and school's ideologies. Hence, maybe those ideologies need a reality check.

#### COMMUNITY, CULTURE, AND SHARED HISTORY

Although the idea of speech community is contested in some disciplines (see Patrick 2002), I cannot discount its existence for the African American community. When I watch “Comic View,” “Def Comedy Jam,” “The Chappelle Show,” or listen to the comedy of many African American comedians such as Steve Harvey, Bernie Mac, Cedric the Entertainer, Wanda Sykes, and D. L. Hughley—or, for that matter, the linguistic musings of ESPN “Sportscenter” host Stewart Scott (and those who are mimicking him mimic African Americans), I am reassured of my position. Comic View et al. succeed because there are moments of “umh humn” and “I know that’s right” and “Oh, no he didn’t” and “Tell it, tell it.” That is to say, the African Americans in the audience get the cultural jokes because either they have been there, done that, or they know someone else in their African American family or circle of friends who has. It almost seems like everyone has a Pooky or Ray Ray somewhere in their family. We know what they mean because it is part of our lives, part of our history. While watching a talk show one day,

I saw Denzel Washington talking about visiting family in New York. He talked about a family member in a service job. At that moment, I realized the veracity of how, no matter how far we go or get, we still have a history that connects us to one another—whether we want that connection or not. We only need reminisce about Tyler Perry’s film “Madea’s Family Reunion” (2006)<sup>4</sup> to see that.

My concern is that, despite the development of the history and socioculture of African Americans, despite the contributions to society and country as part of that history, and despite the hardships, African Americans struggle to exhort their community and cultural strengths in ways that benefit them outside of that community economically, educationally, socially, globally, etc. So, while advertising agencies and other businesses are appropriating and profiting from African American language and culture, African American language and culture are not respectable, legitimate, or valued by too many in the community and out of it. Our history works against us. We were brought to the Americas for exploitation and we cannot seem to escape the vestiges of that vicious cycle.

Despite a notion of speech community and culture, African Americans and the Black community do not have the sort of cache they need. Even though we speak of an African Diaspora, it does not have the same cache as the Jewish Diaspora. Black people live all over the world. We have been exported and imported like chattel. We have a homeland, but that homeland is not home. That was taken away when we were forced to choose between staying alive and forging a future. So, we can talk about an African Diaspora.

## LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY



I have discussed various aspects of the language perspectives of African Americans: Linguistic Pride and Acceptance (e.g., Toni Morrison as quoted in LeClair 1981); Linguistic Prejudice (e.g., Alexander 1979); and Linguistic Shame and Denial (e.g., Mufwene 2001). Now I want to provide a process for self-deconstruction among the language reality we live everyday. Mura (1992:17) provides a basis for the need for self-deconstruction:

What I am trying to do in both my writing and my life is to replace self-hatred and self-negation with anger and grief over my lost selves, over the ways my cultural heritage has been denied to me, over the ways that people in America would assume either that I am not American, or conversely, that I am just like them; over the ways my education and the values of European culture have denied that other cultures exist. I know more about Europe at the time when my grandfather came to America than I know about Meiji Japan. I know Shakespeare and Donne, Sophocles and Homer better than I know Zeami, Basho or Lady Murasaki. This is not to say I regret what I know, but I do regret what I don't know. And the argument that the culture of America is derived from Europe will not wipe away this regret.

Many people who speak a variety of language that is not valued or held in esteem share the sentiment in this quotation. What is interesting about that is those people still continue to use that language: it has covert prestige. They do so, in part, as a result of the following:

The person who talks right, as we do, is one of us. The person who talks wrong is an outsider, strange and suspicious, and we must make him feel inferior if we can.

That is one purpose of education. In a school system run like ours by white

businessmen, instruction in the mother tongue includes formal initiation into the linguistic prejudices of the middle class (Sledd 1972:320)

We are taught to hold linguistic prejudice. It is one of the few things dispersed equitably among the population. Some people's language is better than others. As an African American, we come to realize very early that we are not part of the "some." That "honor" belongs to those who have the army and the navy, as the linguistic cliché goes. However, our reality belies a conflict beyond double consciousness: multiple consciousness, multiple jeopardy.

Andree Tabouret-Keller's (1997:323) discussion about identity better explains this conflict:

An individual's ability to get into focus with those with whom he wishes to identify is constrained. One can only behave according to the behavioral patterns of groups one finds it desirable to identify with to the extent that:

- (a) one can identify the groups;
- (b) one has both adequate access to the groups and ability to analyze their behavioral patterns;
- (c) the motivation for joining the group is sufficiently powerful, and is either reinforced or lessened by feedback from the group;
- (d) we have the ability to modify our behavior.

Hence, there is a sense of community at the same time there is otherness. We choose to be part of groups, groups choose us, and others say we are part of some other group and not theirs—despite issues of covert or overt prestige. Why? I suggest there are two language realities for this situation: Robert LePage's "Acts of Identity" and Hazel Markus' "Possible Selves".

People create their linguistic systems (and we all have more than one) so as to

resemble those of the groups with which from time to time they wish to identify. Both the groups, and their linguistic attributes, exist solely in the mind of each individual. When we talk we project the universe as we see it on to others as on to a cinema screen in our own images, expressed in the language we consider appropriate at that moment, and we invite others by these acts to share our universe. This does not necessarily mean that we accommodate our behaviour to resemble that of our audience, though we may do so. Rather, we behave in the way that—unconsciously or consciously—we think appropriate to the group with which at that moment we wish to identify. This may be quite distinct from the group we are talking to (LePage 1986:23).

Possible selves represent individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming, and thus provide a conceptual link between cognition and motivation.... An individual is free to create any variety of possible selves, yet the pool of possible selves derives from the categories made salient by the individual's particular sociocultural and historical context and from the models, images, and symbols provided by the media and by the individual's immediate social experiences. Possible selves thus have the potential to reveal the inventive and constructive nature of the self but they also reflect the extent to which the self is socially determined and constrained (Markus and Nurius 1986:954).

I include them here (and I go into more detail in Lanehart 2002) because together they represent our language identity and our language selves (see Lanehart 1996, 1998). As African Americans,

we hold a certain socioculture and sociohistory that is uniquely ours. While this relates to double-consciousness or multiple consciousness, we can also think about this in sociopsychological terms: We have ways of speaking and communicating that are derived from our experiences. How that language manifests itself depends more on our degree of identity with particular aspects of our language selves and how we see ourselves in micro and macro ways than it does with the person we may be speaking to at a given moment. How we present ourselves linguistically stems from our identity, but that identity is composed of our past, current, and future possible selves as well as space and place. We “act” as we see fit; but it is based on a more holistic perspective of how we see ourselves.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the data for Lanehart (2002), I can draw some conclusions about our linguistic dilemma and the direction of language use in the African American community.

1. The conflict between the language of identity and education and society is evident with many African Americans, especially those with access to or immersion in higher education. We are convincingly told that who we are—African American Language speakers—is not who we should want to be. Some conform to this ideology and some do not—none should have to.
2. African Americans will continue to speak the language of their community despite antagonistic pressures socially, economically, educationally, and otherwise. We can continue to produce generations of African Americans who have a love-hate relationship with the very essence of who they are because they are made to believe that, though they cannot change the color of their

skin, things will be better for them if they can just change the color of their language—benefiting no one—or we can encourage a people who have been only discouraged and scorned to accept who they are and demand that others do the same—benefiting all.

We share our language with those we choose to and we keep it from those who are not worthy of our community or who are just simply not part of our community. We do not have anything to prove, but we have everything to gain. We have a community that has stood the test of time and torture—and still we rise.

## Notes

1. Although African Americans and others degrade or devalue their language by calling it “slang”, that term’s use as such is inaccurate linguistically because *slang* means “fleeting, temporary, vogue vocabulary.” Since all language varieties consist of more than vocabulary, it is inaccurate to refer to a language variety as “slang” just as it is inaccurate to refer to it as an accent (since the term *accent* in linguistics only refers to pronunciation).
2. The Ann Arbor “Black English case” is officially known as *Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children et al. v. Ann Arbor School District Board*, 473 F. Supp. 1371 (1979). Judge Charles Joiner ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, “observing that the defendant school district demanded standard English proficiency of African American students but made no provision in teacher education or ensuing student instruction to acknowledge the legitimate language barriers imposed by the plaintiff’s native nonstandard vernacular English” (Baugh 2000:66).

3. All names and places used are pseudonyms except “Sonja”.
4. Tyler Perry is a well-known playwright who grew up in New Orleans, LA, but lives in Atlanta. His plays are performed around the country and the central character is usually “Madea,” the composite Black “Big Mama” and Southern matriarch who spouts pearls of wisdom in a culturally Black way and who is endlessly in trouble or getting someone else out of trouble. In the movie *Madea’s Family Reunion*, which is based on the Tyler Perry stage production, Madea has just been court ordered to be in charge of Nikki, a rebellious runaway; her nieces Lisa and Vanessa are suffering relationship trouble, and through it all she has to organize her family reunion. For more information, go to <http://www.tylerperry.com/home.php>.

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