

Interrogating African American, NWAV workshop, Renée Blake

In reference to the European immigrants in the early twentieth century, Warner and Srole (Warner and Srole 1945: 3-4) state,

What has happened in Yankee City [Newburyport, MA] illustrates much of what has happened and is happening to the “minority group” all over America. Each group enters the city at the bottom of the social heap (lower lower class) and through several generations makes its desperate climb upward...It seems likely that oncoming generations of new ethnics will go through the same metamorphosis and climb to the same heights that generations of earlier groups have achieved...Many of the children’s children of the early arrivals have ceased participating in the ethnic life of their ancestors and have disappeared in the larger American world. Others are on their way to assimilations...

Waters (1996) notes, however, this “straight line” assimilationist model does not apply to the black immigrants (and their children) to the United States, who largely entered in the middle of the twentieth century. She notes that, “...if these immigrants [black] assimilate they assimilate to being not just Americans but Black Americans” (799). Further, “given the ongoing prejudice and discrimination in American society, this represents downward mobility for the immigrants and their children” (Waters 1999: 5).

Spears (1988) notes the sorely underestimated social and linguistic heterogeneity of the black population in the U.S., which needs to be considered in studies of the language of black speakers.

Caribbean Americans, Afro-Latinos and more recent African immigrants and their children living in New York City reside alongside and commingle with long-standing African American communities, and are often identified with African Americans socially, racially and linguistically (Zentella 1997; Waters 1999;

Blake and Shousterman 2010). Within American sociolinguistics there is a substantial body of research on race as a social variable that conditions language behavior, particularly with regard to black speakers of African American English (AAE) in contact with their white neighbors (e.g., Wolfram 1971; Rickford 1985; Myhill 1986; Bailey 2001; Cukor-Avila 2001). However, with the black communities that sociolinguists study being more multi-layered than ever, particularly in a metropolis like New York City, more complex analyses of the interaction between race and language are warranted.

Just as AAE is complex and varied, so too is the social category *African American*. By studying the sociolinguistic behavior of other black ethnics (i.e., non-African Americans solely), we can illuminate the ways in which individuals from these communities use and manipulate language, consciously and unconsciously, as a resource to mark their identification relative to their native-born African American counterparts. In addition, as language scholars, it would benefit us to learn about the everyday lives of community members in order to gather information about individual's socio-historical backgrounds and ideologies. While we need to couch our analysis in social categories defined in the national imagination, we also need to incorporate the nuances of how groups and individuals define themselves, with and without the imposition of a national ideology of race (cf. Blake and Cutler 2003). We must ask community members about ethnic backgrounds in relation to the language and history of the region, and the perception of ethnic differences (or lack thereof). Such information can then be correlated with the linguistic patterns found in the data and/or judgments community members give about certain linguistic constructions, as well as meta-commentary about language use to uncover the nuanced ways in which black communities negotiate race, space and place in their everyday lives.