

DIRECTNESS IN THE USE OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN ENGLISH

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Introduction¹

...many studies show that the punishment meted out to blacks when they violate social and cultural norms is greater than that accorded to whites for the same offense. This differential treatment is clearly a matter of racial discrimination, and it should be emphasized that the same difference in treatment occurs at all social levels, even when what is involved is no more than a breach of decorum. Yet there are further grounds for blacks to feel indignant on this score, since whites often censure them for violating white norms even when blacks are behaving in ways appropriate to black norms. *That no consideration should be granted blacks when they behave in accordance with their cultural norms, when this violates white norms, reinforces a pattern of black cultural subordination* [emphasis added] (Kochman 1981:159)

This article deals with controversial speech that sometimes includes material that some speakers consider indecorous and/or obscene. Those not wishing to be exposed to such language should not read further.

Certain types of African-American speech are currently being criticized and to some extent censored. To give some idea of the speech I am talking about, I have only to mention rap records, particularly of the gangsta type; playing the dozens; trash talking on basketball courts; some kinds of urban street speech, some of which includes obscenity; and some of the speeches of Ministers Farrakhan and Khalid Muhammad of the Nation of Islam. Some of the speech included within the notion of directness would never be considered obscene, but it might well be considered excessively assertive, aggressive, or caustic—depending on who is judging it. I am not implying that these kinds of direct speech have anything in common beyond their being criticized and censored. Much of the language being criticized is not understood by many of those doing the criticizing.² Consequently,

¹All personal and place names have been changed except those of public personalities and places associated with them.

²This is particularly true in cases of public rhetoric delivered in a black cultural framework but interpreted by whites or other non-African-Americans. Perhaps one point would be helpful

my first point is that speech should be understood, its sociocultural context, before decisions are made to criticize or censure (cf. Spears 1998). Keep in mind that I am not arguing that none of the types of speech I refer to should ever be criticized or censured, but that linguistically sound analyses and assessments should be available before proceeding to do so.

Directness, the subject of this chapter, which is characterized below, is a highly important aspect of African-American verbal culture. It involves speech events such as cussin out (cursing directed to a particular addressee), playing the dozens (a game of ritual insults), snapping,³ reading people (theatrically delivered negative criticism), verbally abusing people (see below), going off on someone (a sudden, often unexpected burst of negatively critical, vituperative speech), getting real (a fully candid appraisal of a person, situation, event, etc.),⁴ and trash talk (talk in competitive settings, notably athletic games, that is boastful and puts down opponents). Given their importance, the kinds of speech events associated with directness merit theoretical attention.

Although much of the speech covered by the notion of directness is included in those facets of African-American speech behavior that many African Americans are ashamed of and/or do not wish to have aired outside of the African-American community, it nevertheless has to be discussed because it has already been “outed,” especially by the increasing, media-driven appropriation of black culture throughout U.S. society. *Controversial features of African-American verbal culture must be theorized by those with the linguistic expertise in order to counteract the many misbegotten discussions and analyses that are already in circulation.*

This leads to an all-important point. In this chapter, I in no way consider myself to be “airing dirty laundry.” I am defending the right of culturally subordinated African Americans to be themselves. Cultures are complex networks of predispositions, values, behaviors, expectations, and routines. Although we can expect to find some maladaptive behaviors within all cultural settings (some introduced and maintained by outside forces), what we see more often is the adaptive functions of cultural behaviors. In some cases, sets of behaviors are simply reflexes of what we may call a people's metastyle or expressive orientation.

concerning this (needlessly) very difficult topic: within the African-American cultural sphere, a person may speak “hatefully” of an individual or groups, but it usually does not mean that the speaker has anything against them. The speaker may simply be “going off” or engaging in another behavior falling under the rubric of abusing (see below). Blacks may speak abusively of blacks (e.g., “Niggas ain't shit”), but it seldom means they actually believe that. Such speech is often received as entertaining, because often it is. Common too is that, if the speaker sees that his or her words are entertaining or producing some kind of energetic response, she or he may well respond by intensifying it. I have witnessed individual's laughing while being verbally abused because it was done creatively and theatrically.

³As this term is used by most people, it refers to short insults, often in a ritual setting, of the form “Your mamma (or another relative) so [pejorative adjective], she” E.g., “Your mamma so ugly, she have to sneak up on a glass to get a drink of water.”

⁴Sometimes getting real is construed as a broader type of speech event that includes the more vituperative type of (sub)speech event of going off. Even if construed as two fully separate speech events, the boundaries between the two become blurred as a speaker moves from moderation in speech to vituperation.

In all cases, scientific analysis is required before we dismiss behaviors with negative value judgments, especially when those negative judgments are based on imposed values of an oppressive outside culture. This approach to the language under discussion is in line with the non-absolute cultural relativism practiced by contemporary anthropologists.

As DuBois (1961 [1903]) and others after him have observed, African Americans have been burdened by carrying two inseparable and sometimes contradictory cultural frameworks, their own and the dominating one, the latter often preventing them from seeing the value of their own. African Americans should stop turning automatically apologetic when African-American cultural behaviors have a negative value within a white, mainstream context, even though they have a positive or neutral value within the context of the African-American community.⁵ Such African-American behaviors should be, if anything, explained. Many of the behaviors that African Americans sometimes wish to disclaim were integral, functional characteristics of the highly successful all-black institutions that flourished before integration, educational institutions not the least among them.

Consequently, the speech behaviors of concern in this chapter must be understood as not necessarily negative. Furthermore, they can be shown to have been (and still to be) of use in many institutional settings. A reader might object that there are many "positive" speech behaviors that can be written about. Why focus on speech that does not characterize all African Americans or all African-American social settings and puts the African-American community in a bad light? Such objections raise again the fundamental question, On what basis is speech to be judged negative, positive, or neutral? On whose norms is such an evaluation based? Is it not important to understand controversial speech through empirical analysis and interpretation? My claim is that we must approach this material free of biases in order to understand its true nature, role, and function in African-American communities. It is of prime importance that this speech occurs within a context of cultural domination and internalized oppression, which makes it difficult even for many African Americans to approach it neutrally and empirically.

African-American language scientists who are culturally African-American are in the best position, other things being equal, to theorize controversial realms of black language behavior and, particularly, African-American verbal culture as a whole. This is due to their intimate knowledge of it and the huge head start in this type of study that such knowledge provides, given that macro patterns are often not discernable without a lifetime of immersion in the community. Also true is that African-American scholars are not as vulnerable as non-African Americans to charges of sensationalism and exoticization, although they are certainly not immune to such charges.

Morgan's (1991) point that studies of African-American English fail to give a balanced view of African-American communities, having focused primarily on male adolescents of the working class and their street culture, was well taken. Missing, for the most part, are studies of the African-American middle class, females, and social environments other than those related to street culture. Though

⁵Of course, African-American culture is not monolithic, but there is certainly a shared core found throughout the U.S. (and the Caribbean).

her point was well taken, notwithstanding that what she criticizes has to some extent been corrected, it must be remembered that most of the aspects of language use that have been documented are also found, often in a modified form, among women and the middle class, to single out two underresearched African-American groups. Moreover, much of the behavior that the African-American middle class typically scorns is nonetheless well established among them. This is a reflection of the values conflict, as noted above, arising from the embrace of white mainstream norms as well as African-American ones, even though the two are sometimes in conflict. However, culturally African-American behavior is indeed more firmly rooted and more visible in the working class. In the middle class, a number of the controversial verbal behaviors are age-graded, not culturally so but due to life trajectories: by adulthood, many middle class blacks cease to engage in them with any frequency, due in large measure to their not finding themselves in the social situations where such behaviors would be appropriate or understood. One thing is clear: many people in the African-American middle class, currently highly-placed professionals among them, *have* engaged in the behaviors discussed below, whether they currently do or not.⁶ This is by no means cause for concern; it is cause for us to deepen our understanding of language use in the entire African-American community and cause for us not to stigmatize behaviors simply because they find disapproval in white mainstream culture.

These remarks about African-American researchers' head start in no way negate the important findings and insights of non-African-American language researchers such as Abrahams (1970, 1975, 1976, 1999), Dundes (1990), Folb (1980), Goodwin (1990), Gumperz (1982), Hecht and associates (Hecht et al. 1993), Kochman (1972, 1981), Labov (1972), and Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1998).⁷

Essential to stress is that linguists are in the best position to provide analyses and assessments of controversial African-American speech, and they should be doing so, but currently hardly any are.⁸ By far, most of the media commentary on these kinds of black speech behavior is done by nonlinguists, who often do not understand even the most basic principles of sociolinguistics and language change and who fail to place their comments on African-American language and culture within the context of institutional racism (Spears 1999). Thus, there is an entire media discourse, to take one example, on rap that is grounded in

⁶I am included among them. Since I now live in a culturally African-American community, I still have occasion to engage in direct language use, especially since the community is multiclass. Harlem, the community I speak of, has a considerable number of non-African-Americans, but the tenor of the community in terms of commerce, public interactions, and social life is African-American.

⁷Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1998:82 ff) use the term *directness* also. They treat what is basically the same phenomenon, but they do not use *directness* or *indirectness* (cf. *indirection* below) in exactly the same way it is used here. Notably, this chapter's notion of directness includes indirection. (I had started using the term before I accessed their work.)

⁸See, however, Spears 1998. Some linguists have tackled the broader issue of so-called "bad language," which is included within what is referred to as direct speech, without special reference to the African-American community, e.g. Andersson and Trudgill 1990, Honey 1983, Hughes 1992, Jay 1992, and Milroy and Milroy 1985.

normative and linguistic biases that the commentators do not even realize they have.

Directness: Form, Meaning, and Function

In this essay I focus on speech typified by what I call **directness**, characterized by some combination of the following characteristics, expressed by inescapably biased terms that spring from the norm-imposing discourse of the basically white mainstream. These terms reflect the inherent cultural bias, or cultural loadedness, of a significant portion of the mainstream standard English lexicon. The characteristics at issue are aggressiveness, candor, dysphemism, negative criticism, upbraiding, conflict, abuse, insult, and obscenity, all frequently deployed in the context of consciously manipulated interpersonal drama. Direct speech is typically multilayered in terms of meaning and function, both of which may be dependent primarily on emotional states of interlocutors and audience response. Note that directness can in fact be characterized *only* by a lengthy discussion because *almost all of the terms we have to talk about African-American language are rooted in nonblack discursive practices, terms which do not handle well systematic ambiguity in meaning, intent, and function.*

The terms *direct* and *directness* are used in other senses, but those senses should not be confused with the sense used in this writing. For example, Morgan (1998:262, 263) characterizes "direct discourse" as that "marked by the absence of collaboration," in situations where the event or context prescribes speaker intent, for example, at school and work. (Cf. the remarks on semantic license below.) Morgan's "directed discourse," a different term, is "marked by (1) the absence of indirection and audience collaboration and (2) a disregard for social context. Directed discourse is often used to disambiguate a situation, determine truth, among other functions (Morgan 1998: 262).

Directness in the sense used in this chapter often involves inversion, that is, what may superficially or on a literal level seem to be direct is actually nondirect and vice-versa. For examples, an ostensibly and superficially nondirect comment may actually be direct in that it conveys a strong insult or reprimand to those participating in the speech situation, to those who have the background knowledge required to interpret it correctly.

Directness, in the sense used in this chapter can also be characterized on the basis of topic, for example, a willingness to bring up certain topics in certain contexts. Examples would be talking about someone's being fat, foolish, or ignorant, briefly or at length. Teachers talking disparagingly about students' parents and other relatives in front of a class would be another topic-based example. (See the discussion below of directness in segregated public schools, where it is noted that directness was purposefully called upon).

However, it must be stressed that these characterizations of directness describe only the superficial and literal aspect of direct speech. What seems to be a negative criticism can actually be a compliment or a very positive declaration. The intent of direct speech can be determined only by context. Direct speech can by no

means be assumed to be negative in intent, although it certainly may be. Motives behind direct speech range from encouragement and compliments to humiliation.

It must be stressed also that directness characterizes some of the speech of all human communities, including white Americans. The explicit comparative observation that I will make here is that there is significantly more directness in black language behavior, and that the rules and norms governing it are significantly different from those of the white U.S. community. Notably, this difference leads to important misunderstandings in educational, media, and other contexts. Certain aspects of African-American directness are witnessed in the language use of communities outside the U.S., Israel (Tannen 1998) and Hungary (Tannen 1998, Erika Sólyom p.c.), for example.

The question brought out by the quotation at the beginning brings up an important issue related to directness: how do we deal with mainstream-censured types of language use that are not considered controversial by speakers who at least sometimes use language in such a way? For example, let us consider this issue with respect to obscenity (which does not necessarily co-occur with directness; profanity might be used liberally in a remark intended as a compliment). If for some speakers of a community, what in mainstream contexts is considered obscenity is not obscene for those speakers, should those speakers be considered as using obscenity? In plainer words, if *muthafucka* is not an obscene word for me, but it is for you, whose norm should prevail?

I have argued elsewhere (Spears 1998) that what is obscene for some Americans cannot be considered obscene for all, unless of course we support the imposition of one group's, or what we may call hegemonic or mainstream, norms on all groups in the U.S. The sociolinguistic reality is that particular norm sets are in effect only where the power of the group upholding those norms is present. Thus, in local social settings where African-Americans hold the balance of power, African-American norms prevail. This is so in spite of the fact that hegemonic or mainstream, specifically white, norms prevail in those parts of society where mainstream institutions exert their power. Baker (1999) has shown how in colleges and universities, in settings in which blacks are in control, black patterns of address prevail; where whites are in control, white patterns prevail. (The black pattern is more formal, with title + last name being used normally in business and professional settings, while the first name is normal in white settings of these types.) Thus, where what is obscenity for some people has been neutralized, it makes no sense to speak of obscenity. Neutralization occurs when expressions considered by some as obscene are used by other people in negative, positive, or neutral ways depending on the utterance in which they occur. *Many people who function exclusively or primarily in mainstream settings are not aware of this.* Neutralization that occurs across most social contexts, if not almost all, results in the normalization of so-called obscenity. In analyzing the speech dynamics of communities where there has been neutralization and especially normalization, faulty, unrevealing analyses result if obscenity is considered as obscenity in that context. This point can be made perhaps more easily if we think of words such *bloody* and *thigh*, which in certain places during certain periods have been considered obscene, but which for present-day Americans are neutral. It is pointless

in the context of contemporary American society to speak of *bloody* as an obscene word, although it can of course occur in speech whose content is considered obscene.

Consequently, speech labeled as obscene, which may or may not occur in direct speech, as well as directness, involves the issue of power in determining which norms and whose labels prevail when norms and labels come into conflict.

Directness can be thought of as a principle of language use that is inherently comparative with mainstream, basically white, language use norms and African-American ones. I present directness as a **principle** of African-American language use, that is, a notion that accounts for a great deal of African-American speech use, perhaps most of it, but certainly not all. Direct speech, is identified on the basis of

1. Form - the actual sounds, words, phrases, etc. that are used
2. Content - the meaning of what is said on the semantic and pragmatic levels (semantics referencing basically invariant, literal, "dictionary" meanings; pragmatics referencing context-situated meaning, which depends on participants' shared norms, sociocultural knowledge, and background information, among other factors)

The directness of speech, consequently, may be based on its literal or interpreted meaning, the latter a function of various types of pragmatic input. Principles of language use, in the sense I use the term, are intended to allow us to describe significant portions of speech output in macro terms that go well beyond terms such as verbal routines, presentational routines, acting out lines (whereby a speaker expresses his view of a situation and the participants in it, especially him/herself),⁹ speech events, etc.

It is important to point out, if only in passing, that there are broad and deep commonalities in language use throughout Afro-America, a term many scholars of African descent use to describe that region from the U.S. to Brazil that has been so heavily influenced by African cultures. Thus, we would expect directness to play an important role in the speech of these areas, and it certainly does in those areas on which sufficient research has been conducted to support the claim of language use commonalities.

The Caribbean and circum-Caribbean communities of people of African descent are one example. An example of a speech event from this area is **busin** (cf. English *abusing*), which occurs in Guyana (and no doubt in other areas too). Busin is described by Edwards (1979), who observes that it consists of exchanges of insulting language and behavior meant to be taken personally. Unlike quarrels, the bone of contention is not kept clearly in focus. In busin, if there is at the beginning some issue in dispute, by the time the actual busin has begun, that issue has been forgotten and anything whatsoever can become the raw material on which insults are based. The following excerpt is from a busin session in midcourse:

⁹Abrahams' (1975) term, following Goffman (1955).

Joan: Why yu don't keep out, yu red whore yu.

Millicent: But look at she, comin till up me steps to call me whore.
Who is more whore than you?

Joan: Shut yu mouth, yu red whore yu.

Millicent: What me colour gat to do with you, yu fool yu
(Edwards 1979:32,33)

Something very close to busin, which I will call **abusing**, occurs in the U.S. Abusing, also, is concerned with straightforward, unmitigated insults meant to be taken personally (as opposed, say, to ritual insults in playing the dozens). The insulting from a topical standpoint is general: anything may be used as a basis for insult. **Cussing someone out** (a speech event, to be distinguished from **cursing**, which is simply the use of obscenity) is a form of abusing, as is **reading** a person (Morgan 1998, Spears 1998). However, abusing can take place without cursing. One instance of cussing out that I have found unforgettable occurred in San Francisco in front of a beauty shop, which was a gathering place for all sorts of people from the neighborhood. Two middle-aged men, shabbily dressed and perhaps homeless, in front of the shop were cussing each other out vehemently, with forceful gesticulations, and graphic threats. I thought there would be a killing.

(A rendering of the cussing out)

A: ... muthafuck you muthafucka, what the fuck you gone do, kiss my ass muthafucka...

B: I'll cut your goddamn throat nigga, get the fuck out my face before I whip the shit out of your crazy black ass

A: ...muthafuck you nigga, jump if you gone jump, nigga....

(The cussing continues for about five minutes and then starts winding down as the speakers walk away from one another, occasionally turning back to the other to hurl some more cussing. Then it ends, with no physical violence. [Cf. Kochman 1981 on black and white views of when a fight has started.])

The celebrated French Caribbean writer, Rafael Confiant has provided another example (at a conference on *Créolité* at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, Fall 1992): An older gentleman who is quite taken with one of the widows of a village passes her each day saying (English translation): "You're ugly! You sure are ugly!" The widow knows that his attention is positive and complimentary because she is communicatively competent in the language of her community. I can see this scenario occurring very easily, particularly among older denizens of my multi-class block in Harlem. The word *ugly* probably would not be used, though it could be. More likely would be surface insults referring to the car or clothes of the object of interest. Indeed, in these communities, the first moves in courtship not infrequently involve verbal sparring, which can include reprimands and put downs.

Sometimes the degree of directness of the interchanges in these situations is a function of the degree to which the person approached positively or negatively receives the attention of the initiator (who may be female or male). Consider the following rendering of an exchange that occurred at a potluck dinner party organized by the students in an African-American culture course. The party was at the home of one of the professors who co-taught the course; a few relatives, not in the course, of the hosting professor had shown up. One of them caught sight of a young lady he liked:

Man: So I guess you're one of the students in the course, learning all about black culture, hunh?

Woman student (fully aware of the remark's intent): Yes, I came with my boyfriend, over there; he's in the course too.

(For all practical purposes, she has told him to get lost, but he cannot drop the issue because others are present and have witnessed the exchange; he would lose face.)

Man: So what do you do with your spare time, when you're not studying and carrying on?

Woman student (falling into the trap; her speech and behavior strongly suggest that culturally she is not African-American or only slightly so): A lot of things.

Man: Like what?

Woman: Ummm, I like to cook.

Man (sharply): Cook! Well you need to study that some more. It looks like you damn near burned that casserole thing you brought.

(The woman tries to defend her casserole, but the scene has basically ended. The man has saved face, and he is ready to move on.)

Direct speech requires contextualization for correct interpretation. Members of the speech community alone are qualified to interpret it. Direct speech has the full range of functions and interpretations that nondirect speech has. It can be used, for example, to maintain decorum, teach, inform; aid in negotiating roles and role hierarchies; entertain, pass time, inform, demonstrate verbal wit and creativity; express the speaker's emotional state; and define a social situation. Essentially, then, words are all subject to their speakers' wills. Literal, dictionary meanings may be stripped off at the speaker's discretion, as they are in one set routine:

Father: Go to bed!

Little boy: Aw, daddy, we're playing dominoes.

Father: I'm gonna domino your ass if you don't go to bed now.

The word *domino* in this instance no longer refers to a board game, nor is it a noun; it has become a verb meaning something like 'whip', as in "whip your ass if you don't go to bed now." (I am aware that whites employ this routine also. Here, however, I am interested in the black use of it.)

The crucial observation here is that African-American English speakers have a broad kind of **semantic license**—to mean and not to mean, that is, to use language in a relatively literal way or not to do so, that is, to make words mean whatever they want them to mean, often but not always in cooperation with their audience.¹⁰ This is why speech that may appear to outsiders to be abusive or insulting is not necessarily intended to be or necessarily taken that way by audiences and addressees. It is also why speech that may seem a little odd or perfectly normal from the point of view of some hearers would actually be insulting and abusive if those hearers knew what was really being said.

As an example of semantic license, consider what I have observed repeatedly at parties where there are black and whites. There usually comes a point, late in the evening, when two or more blacks in attendance will get into a distinctively black verbal routine. Usually blacks, particularly middle-class professional ones, will allow white speech norms to prevail most of the evening, especially if there is a majority of whites. But the restraint eventually wears down. Often, the trigger for the initiation of the distinctively black verbal routine is the desire to say something with whites listening or within hearing distance that the blacks do not want the whites to understand. This is done with semantic license, seeming to talk about boats, cats, a staircase, a bottle of soda, whatever, while actually talking about people nearby or all the whites at the party, or even about other blacks at the party who are not privy to the meanings that have been negotiated. Such speech can be characterized by directness because of its content: disparaging or insulting remarks about others who are present in the social situation and possibly overhearing.

Sometimes semantic license simply becomes part of a conversation with no detectable triggering factors. When this happens and whites are part of the conversation, the whites very quickly fall silent, unable to contribute to the conversation following a new principle of discourse and meaning. Frequently, once a form has been stripped of its meaning and a new meaning negotiated, sometimes through nonverbal behavior—especially with eye and head pointing, the interlocutors take the "new word" or "new expression" and weave it through a lengthy conversational exchange.

Consider the following reconstructed conversation:

¹⁰This corresponds to Reisman's (1974) report on semantic license (my term) in Antigua, and is no doubt valid for the Caribbean in general.

A: I didn't know there were going to be so many *college students* here.
 B: (Picking up on the special meaning of *college students* and letting A know this) I know they must do a lot of *late night studying* too.
 C: (Has picked up on the meaning and continues the conversation) Um humh. They all need to be taking that course on...jurisprudence
 A: Or abnormal psychology...
 B: Or criminology
 (Laughter)

By the time C has mentioned criminology, the cat is out of the bag, so to speak. There is no longer any motivation to use semantic license. All have had a chance to display verbal wit and thereby entertain themselves a bit while waiting to be seated in the late night eatery, apparently frequented by a good number of persons of unsavory reputation and unorthodox occupation.

The foregoing example could be classified as signifying, since in the crowded eatery, various persons who were being referred to could have heard the derogatory remarks and interpreted them correctly. The example from the eatery shows directness via topic and function. The topic is the questionable character of many persons in the eatery; the conversation functions to criticize negatively those persons within earshot.

Directness includes at least some types of **indirection**,¹¹ which has been much discussed in the literature of African-American speech use. As Mitchell-Kernan (1970, 1972), Morgan (1989), Smitherman (1977), and a number of other scholars have stated, a key element of signifying is the signifier's addressing remarks to someone other than the target of the remarks, or even seemingly addressing them to no one in particular. Consequently, signifiers often make use of indefinite expressions such as *some people*, *a lot of people*, *somebody*, etc. to obscure the target. They may also use semantic license, as in the preceding example. In these ways, signifying shows indirection. It also shows indirection in the sense that figurative language is often used in making a point. A speech event such as signifying is direct, in the sense I am using the term, because, when properly interpreted, it manifests some combination of the characteristics of directness just mentioned, e.g., candor, negative criticism, insult, and so forth.

Mitchell-Kernan (1972) provides and analyzes a useful example of signifying that does not make use of semantic license:

I saw a woman the other day in a pair of stretch pants, she must have weighed 300 pounds. If she knew how she looked she would burn those things (Mitchell-Kernan 1972:167).

Mitchell-Kernan explains that

¹¹I use *indirection* rather than *indirectness*, which is also used in the literature (e.g., Morgan 1998). I prefer the first term because it is not parallel in morphological structure to *directness*, and in that way reflects the fact that indirection is not the direct opposite of directness. Directness includes indirection.

Such a remark may have particular significance to the 235-pound member of the audience who is frequently seen about town in stretch pants. She is likely to interpret this remark as directed at her, with the intent of providing her with the information that she looks singularly unattractive so attired (Mitchell-Kernan 1972: 168).

Mitchell-Kernan's example shows directness in the sense that it expresses candor and negative criticism, among other things. It also demonstrates that directness is not simply a property of the more formulaic, rule-governed kinds of verbal routine or speech events such as playing the dozens; it may be present in the least formulaic kinds of everyday conversational exchanges, even those that do not fit clearly into any of the more structured, formulaic speech events, acts, and routines that have been discussed in the literature. Consider the following example:

(A reconstructed conversation from an extended middle-class family Christmas day gathering)

Sheila (perky, in her 30s, wearing her new Christmas gift, a green warmup suit): Oh, I l-o-o-o-ve this, it's so nifty, don't you love it. Look!

Gloria (Sheila's sister, 40s, unimpressed): You look like a damn frog.

(Sheila continues merrily on; no one reacts except for a few faint chuckles)

As with all exchanges there is a great deal of history in this one. Sheila may simply have wanted to annoy Gloria. For one thing, Sheila's behavior could be interpreted as "acting like a white woman." She says "nifty," a word associated more with whites, and is walking in a perky way, tossing around her long ponytail. Hair in black communities is fraught with meaning: Sheila has long hair; Gloria, who is also light-skinned, has always had short hair. Sheila can be remembered as a girl, walking around our grandparents' house ostentatiously combing her waist-length hair, which had just been straightened, but not yet curled.

This exchange involves candid, straightforward, negative criticism. Gloria's remark shows a low key disapproval, but her remarks are almost matter-of-fact. None of Gloria's nonverbal behavior indicates that she is joking. Many blacks would interpret Gloria's attitude as one communicated by the standard phrase "Nigga, please," i.e., 'give me a break; surely you don't think I'm going to go along with this; this is *me* you're talking to.'

Directness in an Institutional Context

To give some idea of how directness is structured into the broad range of African-American verbal culture, I will briefly discuss the "Golden ghetto" I grew up in, located in a medium-sized, Midwestern city during racial segregation.

Golden ghetto is a term that brings out the positive aspects of large black communities during segregation, and has been used by prominent black social scientists such as St. Clair Drake (1945), who wanted to focus attention on the vibrant, positive-impact businesses, organizations, and institutions in such communities. Golden ghettos were multi-class, so at least one of their features was that black children growing up had an abundance of role models.

In the all-black schools I attended, directness reigned. I will concentrate on examples of directness that are very much in conflict with white, mainstream norms, but in other cases of directness there would have been hardly any such conflict. In those schools, woe was the student who came without her or his homework. They would be read, abused, you name it, but never with obscenity or coarse language, since that would not have been in keeping with the teachers' social position, although one might have heard an occasional *damn*.

Consider the day Patricia Ann, an excellent student, who for some reason came one day to her eleventh grade class without her homework. After berating her for not having her homework (no exceptions were allowed), the teacher went on to criticize her person and her family, mentioning along the way, "You're not pretty; you're just yellow."

The import of this remark can be explained as follows. As most African-American communities, this one suffered from colorism, the granting in most social situations of more privilege to lighter-skinned individuals, who were referred to with the color terms *yellow*, *high yellow*, and sometimes *red* or the equivalent *redbone*. (*Light* or *light-skinned* were often used in place of *yellow*.) Colorism in communities of people of color is one result of the cultural domination of such communities by the larger white-supremacist racist society.¹² In this school, colorism as a kind of internalized oppression had not yet been systematically challenged, as it was to be during the Black is Beautiful submovement of the Civil Rights Movement. *Yellow* is the basic signifier of light skin since it can be used to cover all kinds of lightness of skin instead of a skin color term with a narrower range of meaning. The prototypical yellow person was not only light-skinned, but also had wavy, curly, or straight hair, often referred to, then and now, as "good hair." Additionally, he or she had facial features more associated with whites, namely, thinner lips and straighter noses. The word *yellow*, without qualification, meant 'pretty' or 'good-looking' in most situations. So, the teacher in effect told Patricia Ann that, though she was yellow, she was not pretty as expected. His putdown also referenced the set phrase "a lot of yellow gone to waste," which cuttingly names the putative tragedy of being unattractive in spite of being yellow. The teacher's remark was even more cutting because the student was, arguably, not prototypically yellow because of her facial features.

Another day, in the same class, a very popular, very tall basketball player came without his homework. There was a great deal of tension in the class as the teacher began to read him (i.e., to berate him in a way associated with performance) after admonishing him, because the player was known to have a bad temper.

¹²It should be observed, however, that anti-colorism and counter-colorism (evaluating darker skin and associated physical features more highly than "yellow" attributes) exist along with colorism in African-American communities. However, colorism is dominant.

Eventually, the student told the somewhat short in stature teacher, who was "in his face" (he had violated the boundaries of his personal space) to get out of his face. The teacher addressed the tense situation directly by saying something along the following lines:

I know you don't think I'm scared of you. You may be tall, but I'm evil. (Everybody is on the edge of their seats—the student is known to have a bad temper. The teacher while continuing to talk goes to the window to grab one of the long, heavy hardwood poles that were used to open and close very high windows.) I'll take this pole a wrap it around your empty head. When I get through with it, it'll be empty and crooked too... you think I won't. Try it! Here I am, try it!

The student did nothing but mumble; the scene gradually dissolved as the teacher eventually went back to the lessons.

In white-mainstream-culture-dominant classrooms, the teacher's behavior would be judged in a highly negative way. In many contemporary urban high school classrooms, the student might well have assaulted the teacher in a comparable situation. However, based on reports I have received from students,¹³ a level of directness comparable to that I have described in this writing is evident in "all black" schools where African-American culture is dominant, i.e., those having African-American administrators and an almost completely African-American student body.

In the situation recounted, a student assault on the teacher would have been highly unlikely, and some reasons for this are not obvious. Chief among the obvious reasons is that the student came from a solid home, where the parents would have sided with the teacher if the event had come to their attention. Most of the students' homes were of the same kind; thus, discipline problems in the high school were nearly nonexistent. The teacher had a right, so to speak, within that community to be verbally aggressive—to use that culturally loaded term—with the student, especially given the teacher's professional responsibility to attempt to get the student to do his homework.

It just so happens that there was another dynamic present in the classroom that might well translate to a contemporary urban classroom with black students and a black teacher. The classroom situation was especially intense because the teacher was universally assumed to be a "punk" or "sissy" (largely equivalent terms meaning 'homosexual').¹⁴ His verbal aggression, then, was a double assault on the

¹³These are students who have attended New York City public schools that they characterized as "all black." I would assume that some of the students and administrators may have been non-African-American (in the sense of not having been born and/or raised in the U.S.), most probably from the Caribbean.

¹⁴*Sissy* tended to be used more by older black people in the Midwest where I grew up, but younger ones certainly used it too. For about one year only, the term *fang* was heard, but only in reference to females (and used primarily by females). This was what I call a "word of the moment," one that suddenly starts being used and whose meaning starts off rather specific but soon becomes very diffuse. *Fang*, in its early stage tended to convey the meaning 'lesbian' (a term not used) or 'someone who engages in questionable sexual behavior'. *Fang* was probably derived from *fag* (< *faggot*). The

basketball player's "face" or reputation: he made the student look bad in front of his peers and the student was being made to look bad by a "punk," an assault, so to speak, on the basketball player's masculinity. The especially high tension created by these factors was offset, however, by the stereotype that "punks" were vicious fighters, often carrying switchblades. Added to this was that the teacher had cultivated the impression that he was "crazy," i.e., likely to do anything. Thus, it was entirely believable that he would have used the pole on the student, whether he actually would have or not. As a matter of fact, this teacher was the most verbally aggressive of all, and the reason he was able to take directness to an extreme had to do with community norms of decorum, rights, and responsibilities; roles recognized by the community and stereotypes associated with them; and the persona the teacher had constructed. In sum, directness, in all social settings, comes in degrees, affected in complex ways by the many mental and material factors that come into play in any social situation.

In another instance, in the school office, the principal had come out of his adjoining office. Quite gregarious, he stopped to talk with the two or three students there for various reasons, but focused on one student, who was a very popular football player. The student, who was always very cool in his pose, seemed not to want to hear the advice the principal was giving him in an avuncular way. The student looked elsewhere, and seemed to be ignoring the principal, at which point the principal stated roughly the following:

Now you're looking out the window and every place else but at me, and I'm trying to tell you something... so you won't end up like your daddy. Now you don't even know who your daddy is, but I know him—and know where he is now. You look just like him, and if he was looking at you now, he'd be ashamed of your sorry, pitiful self.

Everybody in the office was embarrassed for the student, partly because the student was so embarrassed himself. But, the crucial point is that the student started paying attention to the advice the principal was trying to give him, if for no other reason than to avoid another profound embarrassment.

The high school was excellent in terms of the education with which it provided students. It ranked with celebrated all-black high schools, of which there were many, such as Dunbar in Washington, D.C. Classes were often named by the professions conspicuously taken up by their members. For example, the class right behind me was the "doctor class": roughly 6% of the class became physicians. All

term gradually became a generalized insult, not really having any specific meaning, simply a word to be used in verbal skirmishes, as the insult most likely to produce laughter in the audience. It becomes what we may call a "a speech genre marker," since it would only occur in genres whose goal is to insult or put down an addressee or a third person. See Reisman's (1974:122) discussion of a similar phenomenon in the Caribbean involving the word *knuckle*, which lasted about four months. I have witnessed in the U.S. nearly all of the speech practices (sometimes in mitigated form) he discusses in reference to the Caribbean. Reisman's observations reinforce that claim that in terms of directness and language use in general, blacks in the U.S. and those of the Caribbean are even more closely related than in terms of language grammar.

of the teachers and administrators were quite willing to insert themselves into students' lives to make sure they succeeded. When students thought to have great potential were backsliding, they were often called out in public and talked to with directness. Most important is that teachers knew how to get and keep students' attention and respect. They knew what kind of speech would be effective and the specific situations in which it would be effective. There was never a dull moment because all of the faculty, administrators, and staff accessed regularly a wide range of black speech genres to do their job and often employed them theatrically.

Persons who did not grow up in these communities would find the teachers' and administrators' behavior scandalous, cause for contract termination if not lawsuits. None of the students thought that their behavior was anything out of the ordinary, and it would never have occurred to us to complain to parents about it. The parents, had we done so, would have asked what we had done to elicit that behavior. Since such direct speech behavior was always purposeful, the parents would have agreed with the school teachers and administrators. Indeed, the parents engaged in the same kinds of speech behavior themselves.

Conclusion

Directness is one of the principal features of African-American language use. It has a long history of being effectively used in black cultural contexts for the full range of social ends, and, it must be stressed, for highly positive, important social ends.

Scholars who are most qualified to talk about directness often do not, and to some extent this is due to a desire not to "embarrass the community," or "to present the community in a bad light." However, salient features of black life and culture are just that, and there is no reason to be embarrassed by them simply because they are in extreme violation of white, mainstream norms of behavior. To do so would be to fall victim to the twoness in black life, described so eloquently by Du Bois (1961 [1903]), that is, the tension between community internal and external norms.

The huge differences between white mainstream and African-American speech norms have been cited by many black educators as *one* of the important causes of some black students' low achievement. The phrase I have heard over and over since the onset of integration is, "They don't know how to talk to black children," "they" usually referring to white teachers, and if not, nonblack teachers, or black teachers who are not culturally black. Keep in mind that directness is not simply about "aggressive" talk (in comparison with other verbal cultures); it also comprises candor, topic selection, and many other attributes that are structured into performance, drama, and ritual.

I pose the admittedly provocative question: to what extent is this true? How can we begin to talk more revealingly and candidly about disjunctions in language use and norms involving the full range of multiethnic, multiclass, and multigender contexts? The result of such investigation should not be to blame anyone, but to try to deepen our understanding of the range of American verbal cultures in order to improve education. The questions I pose reflect only one of the reasons that it is

critical that we improve our understanding of directness and other distinctive speech principles, practices, and norms involved in African-American language use.

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