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Language and negotiation of ethnic/racial identity among Dominican Americans

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ABSTRACT

The ethnolinguistic terms in which the children of Dominican immigrants in Rhode Island think of themselves, i.e. as “Spanish” or “Hispanic,” are frequently at odds with the phenotype-based racial terms “Black” or “African American,” applied to them by others in the United States. Spanish language is central to resisting such phenotype-racial categorization, which denies Dominican Americans their Hispanic ethnicity. Through discourse analysis of naturally occurring peer interaction at a high school, this article shows how a Dominican American who is phenotypically indistinguishable from African Americans uses language, in both intra- and inter-ethnic contexts, to negotiate identity and resist ascription to totalizing phenotype-racial categories. In using language to resist such hegemonic social categorization, the Dominican second generation is contributing to the transformation of existing social categories and the constitution of new ones in the US. (Dominican, construction of race, African-descent immigrants, ethnolinguistic identity, Spanish)*

Dominican American self-definition of race in terms of ethnolinguistic heritage – as “Spanish,” “Dominican,” or “Hispanic” – runs counter to popular and historical US notions of race in which African-descent phenotype has preceded all other criteria (e.g. national origin, language, or religion) for social classification. African-descent RACE has historically been treated as equivalent to African-descent ETHNICITY in the US (Mittelberg & Waters 1993), with the result that immigrants of African descent have largely merged into the African American population by the second generation (Bryce-Laporte 1972, Woldemikael 1989, Waters 1994). Unlike these other African-descent groups, Dominican Americans are successfully reversing, in many contexts, the historical precedence of African descent over ethnolinguistic identity for social classification.¹

Dominican American enactment of identity in Providence, Rhode Island, shows that race, which is popularly treated as a static attribute of an individual, can be situational. Although it has long been recognized that an individual can count as a member of different races in different societies (e.g. Hoetink 1967) and that one

can “change one’s race” with a plane ride between countries, we will see that ascriptions of race can vary not only between geographical contexts, but also from moment to moment across linguistically constituted contexts.

In the Dominican Republic, where roughly 90% of the population is of African descent (Haggerty 1991:xxviii), such ancestry has very different social significance than it has in the US. In the Dominican Republic, there is no binary division among Dominicans into social categories based on the perceived presence or absence of sub-Saharan African ancestry; and Dominican notions of race do not differentiate Dominicans in the way that the US notion of Black/White race differentiates Americans.² For Dominicans on the island, Dominican nationality, Dominican ethnicity, and Dominican race are more or less the same thing (Del Castillo & Murphy 1987, M. E. Davis 1994), and most of the population do not think of themselves as Black or of significant African descent (Fennema & Loewenthal 1987, Moya Pons 1996). In the US, by contrast, the perceived presence or absence of African ancestry is typically correlated with ethnic and racial identity. The binary categories Black and White organize the social world – e.g. through residential patterns, marriage partner choices, church memberships, and overall social hierarchy – and they are treated by both Black and White Americans as useful guideposts to understanding social reality (Feagin 1991, Smedley 1993, Omi & Winant 1994).

These differences in social categorization systems are confronted and negotiated by Dominican migrants to the United States, the vast majority of whom count as African American by United States “one-drop” rules of racial classification (F. J. Davis 1991). First-generation adult immigrants are often shielded from contrasting systems of social categorization because of linguistic isolation and social networks (Milroy 1987) that are limited to immigrants and co-ethnics. Second-generation high school students, in contrast, encounter popular American discourses on language, race, ethnicity, and identity in their American neighborhoods, schools, and after-school jobs. The ethnolinguistic terms in which the Dominican second generation think of themselves – “Dominican,” “Spanish,” or “Hispanic” – are frequently at odds with the phenotype-based racial terms in which they are seen by others in the US, namely as Black. Everyday enactment of a Dominican American identity thus involves negotiating disparities between self-ascription and other-ascription of identity, and resisting phenotype-racial categorization, a fundamental form of social organization in the US.

Language is central to second-generation resistance to phenotype-racial classification. Dominican Americans explicitly define their race in terms of language rather than phenotype, explaining that they SPEAK Spanish, so they ARE Spanish. The many second-generation Dominicans who are phenotypically indistinguishable from African Americans regularly show that they can “speak Spanish” in order to counter others’ assumptions, in both intra- and inter-ethnic contexts, that they are African American; and many of their peers, including non-Hispanics, accept

this evidence of non-African American identity. However, at the same time that the Dominican second generation emphasize that they are “not Black,” many identify strongly with African American peers, with whom they share a political economic position characterized by low income, segregated neighborhoods, substandard schools, and non-White/African-descent phenotype. Many in the second generation extensively adopt forms from African American English, which serves Dominican Americans as a language of resistance to disparagement by dominant US groups, just as it does many African Americans (Morgan 1994).

This paper focuses on one 17-year-old Dominican American’s negotiation of ethnic/racial identities during a single class period at school. Through skillful use of multiple language varieties, the student, whom I call Wilson, is able to situationally highlight Dominican, American, and African American facets of his Dominican American identity. The ambiguity resulting from Wilson’s African-descent phenotype and his facility with multiple language varieties make his identity a topic of explicit discussion during this class period. Analysis of Wilson’s talk and interaction reveals much about the local roles of language and phenotype in the negotiation of identity, showing that language can situationally precede phenotype as a criterion for racial classification and that racial identities can shift across linguistically, interactionally constructed contexts.

But as language gives Wilson the freedom to highlight diverse facets of his identity, language is also used to impose restrictive identities. In segments of the talk and interaction presented here, Wilson’s African-descent phenotype is repeatedly invoked by his classmates in both English and Spanish, and is treated, sometimes jokingly, as relevant to his identity. Association of African-descent phenotype with social identity is so pervasive in the US that it implicitly informs social assumptions, even among Dominican Americans who claim identities outside the Black/White dichotomy. Language is a medium which affords individual social actors the freedom to highlight various aspects of identity; but it is also a medium through which constraining, hegemonic forms of ascription – e.g. social classification based on phenotype – are invoked and reconstituted.

METHODS AND DATA

Fieldwork for this study took place in Providence, RI, and the Dominican Republic between July 1996 and July 1997. Data collection methods included ethnographic observation, interviewing, and video-recording of naturally occurring interaction in school, home, and community contexts.

Transcripts in this article come from video-recordings made of an 11th grade student at Central High School, a Providence city school of 1,350 students, which is over 20% Dominican. Roughly 60% of the student body is Hispanic, with Puerto Ricans and Guatemalans comprising the second and third largest Hispanic groups. Sixteen percent of the students are of non-Hispanic African-descent, in-

cluding many immigrants; 16% are Southeast Asian, primarily first- and second-generation Cambodian and Laotian refugees; and about 5% are White American. Central High School has the problems typical of many inner-city public schools. Almost 90% of the students are categorized as poor, based on federal guidelines, and more than half of the students officially enrolled in the 9th grade drop out by the 11th grade.

Wilson, the principal subject of the transcripts that follow, was one of six students I observed and video-recorded in various school and non-school contexts. Wilson came to Providence from the Dominican Republic at age 7, and he had been back to the island once, spending his freshman year of high school there. During his elementary and middle school years, he had lived with his father and White American stepmother in a predominantly White neighborhood. During high school, he lived in an ethnically mixed neighborhood where many of the Hispanics were Guatemalan, but his close friends were predominantly Dominican or Dominican American.

Transcripts of Wilson's interactions in this article are drawn from a video-recording of a single class period at school. The teacher was absent, and students paid little heed to the substitute teacher's assignment; they treated the class period as a time to move around, talk, and socialize, making it a particularly rich period for documenting peer interaction. Rough transcripts from this period totaled more than 30 pages, and selected segments were transcribed in more detail following CA conventions (Atkinson & Heritage 1984).³ Bilingual Dominican American consultants, including Wilson, aided in the transcription and translation of talk, and offered interpretations and explanations of interactions.

SPANISH LANGUAGE AND DOMINICAN AMERICAN IDENTITIES

Spanish language use in the US is highly indexical (Silverstein 1976, Ochs 1992) of immigrant Hispanic, or Latino, identities. This association between language and social identity is so strong in local contexts that the label for the language, "Spanish," is also commonly used as a label for the ethnic/racial identity. Many consultants labeled their identity, including their race, as "Spanish":

- (1) BB: When people ask you what you are, what do you say?

Nanette (recent Central graduate): I say I'm Spanish. I've had disputes over that one, "What do you call Spanish, you're not from Spain." When you're not Spanish, you don't really understand it, and I don't know if I really understand it myself. When people ask me, I'm Spanish. They're like, "What's Spanish? Where are you from then if you're just Spanish?" Well, there's tons of different Spanish people, but we just come from all different places. But we all speak Spanish, so we're Spanish. And they're like, "But no we speak English, and we're not all English." But it's just so different. There's something different. We all say we're Spanish.

For African-descent Dominican Americans, speaking Spanish is the primary means of differentiating oneself at school from those who count as African American or Black:

- (2) BB: If somebody asks you "What are you?", what do you say?

Janelle (Central student): I usually say Spanish, Dominican. I'll usually say Dominican first, cause most people – most people think I'm Black though. A lot of people think I'm Black. A lot of people! . . .

BB: Can you think of a specific time when someone thought you were Black?

Janelle: I was in the gym, and usually in school I don't really talk in Spanish, and I was talking to some kid in English, and some girl, I guess she was listening, and I said a word in Spanish, and she goes, "Oh my God, you're Spanish." No she goes, "You know Spanish." She thought I was just a Black who knew Spanish. I was like, "I AM Spanish." She's like, "Oh my God, I thought you was Cape Verdean or Black." I was like, "No." A lot of people think I'm Black. I don't know, it's usually just little things like that, just people be like, "What are you, Black?" I'm like, "No, I'm Spanish."

For the many African-descent Dominicans who have been raised in low-income, urban neighborhoods – and whose phenotype, dress, and English language can be indistinguishable from those of local African Americans – Spanish language is the key index of identity even in INTRA-GROUP encounters among Dominicans/Dominican Americans:

- (3) Wilson: Like for example, like I told you before, a lot of people confuse me like I'm Black.

Yesterday I got that comment, on Sunday. I was at the park playing basketball . . . there was this Spanish kid, he was Dominican, I was standing next to him and this other friend of mine, he's Dominican too, he was talking to me, and he heard me speaking Spanish to the other kid, he said, "Oh I could've sworn he was Black" . . . he asked me, "Yo, you Black? You're not Black, huh?" I was like, "Nah, I'm Spanish." He was like, "I could've sworn you was Black."

Linguistic forms can also INDIRECTLY index social identity, through the performance of particular speech acts and activities and the assumption of particular social stances (Ochs 1992). This indirect constitution of identity through language is an interactional process in which individual social actors align themselves with others (i.e. communicate co-membership) or differentiate themselves from others (i.e. mark social boundaries), marking the multiple and shifting "we"/"they" dichotomies of which identities are constituted (Cohen 1978).

The ways in which language functions to construct and reproduce identities has important implications for the analyst who seeks a window into members' phenomenological world. Interlocutors publicly display and continuously update for each other their ongoing understandings of talk as it sequentially unfolds, thereby making these understandings available for analytic treatment by social scientists (Heritage & Atkinson 1984:11). Since identity is a function of self- and other-ascription, the constitution of identities, through the negotiation of congruent ascriptions, is visible in the turn-by-turn talk of individuals. The micro-level social activities out of which larger-scale social constellations such as race and ethnicity are constituted and reproduced can thus be observed in language.

THE BILINGUAL/MULTI-VARIETY LINGUISTIC REPERTOIRE
OF DOMINICAN AMERICANS

The linguistic repertoire (Gumperz 1964) of Dominican Americans in Providence consists not of a unitary code or codes, but rather of a set of forms drawn from multiple varieties of both English and Spanish, as well as forms that result from contact between varieties of the two codes. Constellations of linguistic features that are officially authorized as codes or languages, e.g. “English” or “Spanish,” are often treated as if they were of monolithic, uniform character in the context of bilingualism, but this veils the diversity of linguistic resources available to speakers within codes. Spanish forms include standard Dominican ones as well as non-standard forms (e.g. /puelta/ for *puerta* ‘door’ and /poike/ for *porque* ‘because’) that represent regional and class variation. English forms include those drawn from dominant group standards, local Providence sociolects (e.g. *you guys*), and African American Vernacular English (AAVE, e.g. *He be working*). As a result of contact among these varieties, Dominican American language also includes novel forms – the result of, e.g. syntactic transference (Clyne 1967) or convergence (Gumperz & Wilson 1971, Clyne 1987) – and forms used in novel ways, e.g. modeling and calques (Weinreich 1953, Otheguy et al. 1989, Silva-Corvalán 1994).

Descriptive compartmentalization of the linguistic forms in Dominican American speech represents an etic, analytical perspective on their language. These categories provide a convenient means for describing features of Dominican American languages; but in actual communicative practices, these features form part of a seamless whole.

The variety of linguistic forms used by Dominican Americans in Providence, and their unmarked juxtaposition in everyday interaction, reflect a social reality of being raised in Dominican families with Dominican social networks, but residing and going to school in an American inner city. All language, including that of monolinguals, is heteroglot, shot through with multiple and competing socio-historical voices and ideologies (Bakhtin 1981). This heteroglossia is particularly salient in the language of Dominican Americans because they draw forms from grammatical codes that count as distinct languages, and from varieties with implications of stark social difference, e.g. African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Dominican Spanish, and American English. The explicitly hybrid or syncretic repertoire (Hill & Hill 1986) of Dominican American language practices reflects and reproduces Dominican immigrant heritage and a low-income, multi-ethnic/racial, urban US social reality.

HIGHLIGHTING FACETS OF IDENTITY THROUGH LANGUAGE

Just as Dominican American language consists of a REPERTOIRE of linguistic forms, Dominican American identities are multiple, comprising a repertoire of social identities (Kroskrity 1993), including competing folk/racial, ethnolinguis-

tic, national, and regional allegiances and ascriptions. Dominican Americans use both English and Spanish resources creatively, selectively invoking Dominican and American interpretive frameworks and highlighting particular facets of their multi-faceted identities. The ways in which aspects of identities are linguistically activated often belie one-to-one correspondences among code, cultural framework, and social identity (cf. Duranti & Ochs 1997). As illustrated in transcripts below, Dominican individuals can use English to invoke Dominican interpretive frameworks, for example; and they can use Dominican Spanish, ostensibly a language of solidarity, to highlight intra-group differences.

A characteristic feature of Dominican American identity in Providence is its embrace of language and cultural practices that are popularly associated with diverse social identities. To highlight this diversity and juxtaposition in excerpts 4–5, below, I label the linguistic forms or speech activities used by Wilson and his classmates. I classify particular turns by giving abbreviations for the different language varieties/activities occurring in them (adapted from Zentella 1997:32): SP for Spanish, DS for distinctively Dominican Spanish, AAVE for African American Vernacular English, DE for Dominican English, AE for American English, and HE for Hispanicized English (the variety spoken by recent immigrants just learning English).

The following segment of interaction occurs about five minutes into the class period. The substitute teacher is talking to the class about the assignment for the day during parts of the interactions. Wilson has been chatting with classmates in English and Spanish as students take their seats and others drift into the room.

- (4) (WR #2, 1:13:05) (Wilson turns to see Gabriella, a recent Dominican immigrant, entering the classroom wearing a mini-dress, and he turns his head to follow her progress across the room.)
- (DS) Wilson: (→Gabriella) *Muchacha diablo! Ssss* ['Damn, girl!'] ((inhales between clenched teeth))
- ((Wilson turns back to his desk and thumbs through a magazine.))
- (AAVE) Wilson: (→BB) () We just messing around today.
- ((Claudia, a Guatemalan American, takes a seat diagonally in front of Wilson and turns sideways to look back at him. Wilson turns toward her and sings a merengue as he rocks his shoulders to the beat:))
- (DS) Wilson: (→Claudia) ((singing)) *Dame del pollito, dame del pollito* ['Give me some of that chicken, give me some of that chicken']
- (AE) Claudia: (→Wilson) I hate that song. ((She rolls her eyes and turns away from him.))
- (DS) Wilson: *Del pollito*– ['Some of that chicken']
- (DS) Wilson: ((Pointing toward Claudia.)) *Del– pollita buena*. ['Some of that– good chicken']
- ((Another student asks Wilson a question that is not clearly audible on the tape.))
- (DS) Wilson: *Mira para allá*. ['Look over there']
- (AE) Wilson: Look over there. ((gestures with head toward blackboard))
- (DS) Wilson: ((singing)) ((looking at magazine)) *Dame del pollito* ['Give me some of that chicken']
- ((Claudia gets up from her chair to move toward the front of the room; Wilson grabs his crushed soda can off his desk.))
- (DS) Eduardo: (→Wilson) *Como tú vas*– ['Why are you going to– '] (Gazing at crushed soda can on Wilson's desk.))

- (AE) Wilson: (→Claudia) Can you throw that away for me please? ((He holds out his empty soda can toward Claudia, but she doesn't take it.))
- (DS) Eduardo: (→Wilson) *Cómo tú vas (a) botar esa lata? Eso vale cinco cheles para gente pobre. No has visto los viejitos recogíendolas?* ['Why are you going to throw away that can? That's worth five cents for poor people. Haven't you seen the little old people collecting them?']
- (AAVE) Wilson: She left me hanging, yo! hhh hhh ((in-breath of mock sobs))
- (DS) Wilson: (→group) ((Turns to recent Dominican immigrants behind him)) *Este viejo sí habla solo.* ['This old guy [the substitute teacher] sure does talk to himself.']
- (AE) Wilson: Man! ((thumbing through magazine))
- (AE) Wilson: (→teacher) Which article are we supposed–
- (DS) Eduardo: ((singing)) *Maria se fue* ['Maria left' ((a popular merengue lyric))]

In this short segment, Wilson switches among varieties of Spanish and English in flirting with females, telling a classmate to look at the blackboard, commenting on class activities to the researcher, making fun of the teacher to friends, and addressing the teacher, among other activities. The linguistic forms and speech activities in which he engages selectively highlight different facets of his bilingual/bicultural identity. Thus his use of Spanish to direct *piropos* ('amorous compliments', often undesired by the females at whom they are directed) at Gabriella, and then at Claudia, indexes his Hispanic male identity. His *piropo* for Claudia suggests a specifically Dominican identity because it is achieved through a *merengue* lyric, melody, and physical movement. While *piropos* are common to many Latin American countries, *merengue* is a symbol of Dominican identity both on the island and internationally (Duany 1994, Austerlitz 1997). This *piropo* displays knowledge not just of Spanish code and merengue lyrics, but also of the cultural frame in which Dominican popular music lyrics often contain double entendres (*Dame del pollito* 'Give me some of that chicken'). Claudia displays understanding of Wilson's Spanish utterance and speech activity, but she does not reply in Spanish. In this multi-lingual, multi-ethnic setting, individuals can frequently draw from a range of language varieties to achieve interactional ends. Claudia uses English to state her distaste for the song, and she turns away, effectively rejecting the young-Dominican-male-flirtation communicative frame that Wilson has constituted through referential content, code choice, genre, and visual channels.

The juxtaposition of codes evident across Wilson's and Claudia's turns also occurs across Wilson's turns, highlighting his bilingual/bicultural socialization. When a student asks Wilson a question (inaudible on tape), he responds initially in Spanish, *Mira para allá* – then reiterates the message in English, after a brief gap, "Look over there," indicating that she should look in the direction of the blackboard where the assignment was printed.

Wilson's use of codes varies with the speech activity that he is instantiating. While he uses Spanish to direct a *piropo* at Claudia, he uses American English to request a small favor from her. When she gets up to move toward the front of the

room, he holds out his empty soda can, asking her to throw it away. When she does not take the can and Wilson is left holding it in his outstretched hand, he uses yet another language variety, AAVE, to comment publicly on this rejection (“She left me hanging, yo!”). To “leave someone hanging” is an AAVE expression used to describe the situation when a hand is extended for a handshake or handslap – a symbol of solidarity – but is ignored, and the hand is left hanging in space (Smitherman 1994:110, 153).

In other cases, alternation of code follows a pattern of situational code-switching, depending on the linguistic knowledge of potential audiences (Blom & Gumperz 1972). Wilson uses Dominican Spanish to make a comment about the teacher to his Dominican classmates in a way that they will understand, but the teacher will not (*Este viejo sí habla solo*, ‘This old guy sure does talk to himself’); he uses English to address the substitute teacher and to ask about the assignment for the day.

Wilson thus uses linguistic resources variously associated with Dominican Spanish, American, and specifically African American varieties of English in this short segment to engage in speech activities which invoke various Dominican and American frameworks, and which involve minimally Dominican, Guatemalan American, and White American audiences/interlocutors. Multi-lingual/multi-ethnic contexts are the norm at Central High School, and the informal peer interaction during this class period affords speech activities such as flirting, various forms of teasing, and code-switching, which are particularly salient in indexing facets of ethnic/racial identities.

The ability to speak varieties of both English and Spanish allows Dominican Americans to align themselves situationally with members of diverse social categories, but it also differentiates them from individuals who are not Dominican AND American. In ex. 5, differences in linguistic/cultural knowledge between Wilson and a recent Dominican immigrant regarding the pronunciation of the name of a local park – Bucklin (/bʌklɪn/) – lead to a temporary breakdown in communication.

JB, who has been in America for several years, is the younger brother of one of Wilson’s best friends. During this class period they speak primarily in Spanish, although they have just been speaking English to joke with a student of Southeast Asian descent, immediately prior to this segment.

(5) WR #2, 1:36:05

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| Wilson (DS): | <i>Qué tú vas (a) hacer hoy en tu casa loco?</i> [‘What are you going to do at your house today, man?’] |
| JB (DS): | <i>Puede ser que vaya a jugar pelota con Tito.</i> [‘I’ll probably go play ball with Tito.’] |
| Wilson (DS): | <i>Con?</i> [‘With?’] |
| JB (DS): | <i>Con Tito.</i> [‘With Tito.’] |
| Wilson (AE): | Oh. |
| JB (DS): | <i>Que si no ibas para /buklin/ ?</i> [‘Weren’t you going to /buklin/?’] |
| Wilson (SP): | <i>Donde?</i> [‘Where?’] |

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| JB (HE): | /buklin/ |
| Wilson (AE/DE): | Oh, /bʌklɪn/. At what time? |
| JB (HE): | (five) |
| Wilson (AAVE): | Oh wor(d)! I'm gonna go break you up. |
| JB (DS): | <i>No me hagas reir.</i> ['Don't make me laugh.'] |

Both Wilson and JB use characteristically Dominican Spanish in this passage, e.g. non-inversion of question word order with subject pronouns (*Qué tú vas a hacer...*), elision of syllable-final /s/ (*va(s)*), and velarization of word-final /n/ (*con* → /koŋ/), thus marking themselves as co-members of a Dominican linguistic group. Wilson also uses several varieties of English: the American English change-of-state token “Oh” (Heritage 1984), the Dominican English “At what time?”,⁴ and the AAVE “Oh word! I’m gonna go break you up.”⁵

JB successfully responds to Wilson’s English in this passage, and Wilson displays understanding of JB’s Spanish; but Wilson is initially unable to understand what JB is referring to when he says /buklin/. JB assimilates the name of the park to Spanish phonology, using the Spanish vowels /u/ and /i/ and stressing the two syllables evenly. It is not so much a difference in language proficiency as a difference in social frames of reference that leads to this breakdown in communication. The park in question, Bucklin, is a feature of the American and English Providence world in which Wilson has grown up, rather than the island Dominican/monolingual Spanish context in which JB grew up. Wilson’s American English pronunciation of “Bucklin” may trigger (Clyne 1967) his subsequent continuation of speech in English (“At what time?”), representing the first English in this segment beyond the change-of-state token “Oh.” Differences between Wilson and JB in their relationships to their Providence environment are thus highlighted by a temporary breakdown in communication, even though they share Spanish as a grammatical code and their first language learned.

Although Wilson interacts primarily with Hispanic classmates in the above excerpts, he uses many forms that are characteristic of AAVE. He deletes the copula in addressing the researcher (“We just messing around today”), and he uses AAVE expressions in addressing a Dominican classmate (“I’m gonna break you up!”) and multi-ethnic audiences (“She left me hanging, yo.”). When Wilson interacts with African Americans during this period, his use of AAVE forms is matched with significant, mutual expressions of solidarity toward these classmates. Upon discovering that I was in class to videotape Wilson, for example, an African American classmate commented “Wilson? He’s cool” (WR #2 1:17:02); at this point, Wilson reached out to slap hands with her, a gesture that Smitherman (1994:125) defines as showing strong agreement among African Americans. He then pressed his right fist to his chest over his heart two times. Consultants defined this fist-on-chest gesture as indicating deep friendship.

This particular classmate also uses a term of address for Wilson that has historically been reserved for co-members of the category African American:

(6) WR #2, 1:28:17

Wilson: Angie!

Angie: What up, bro? ((Angie turns to face Wilson.))

“Bro” /bro/ is short for “brotha” [‘brother’], which Smitherman (1994:70) defines as referring to any African American male, derived from the traditional “Black Church pattern of referring to all male members of the Church ‘family’ as *Brotha*.” In this case, Angie addresses Wilson in a way that might be used to address fellow African Americans, thus implying a degree of sameness or affiliation with Wilson. (Zentella, p.c., notes that “bro” can be extended as an in-group term of address for low-income Latinos in New York, even those with relatively light skin.) Wilson’s use of AAVE and his concomitant alignment with African American peers not only highlight African American aspects of his socialization, but also, in combination with his phenotype, reinforce others’ perceptions that he is African American.

In this multi-lingual, multi-ethnic classroom, Wilson moves seamlessly among varieties of Spanish and English, constituting speech activities that range from giving *piropos* in Spanish, to boasting in AAVE, to negotiating an after-school activity in both languages. Language and communicative behavior serve as a resource for him in invoking these various communicative frameworks, and in alternately highlighting different aspects of his social and linguistic expertise, i.e. different facets of his Dominican American identity.

NEGOTIATION OF PHENOTYPE AND IDENTITY

The social indexicality of language affords individuals agency in the ways they present themselves, but it is also a medium through which others can impose labels and categories. In the transcripts presented below, Wilson’s classmates use language, both English and Spanish, to repeatedly invoke his African-descent phenotype and to treat it as relevant to his social identity. Language-minority ethnicity and phenotype-based racial/ethnic minority are the types of social identity most closely associated with individual behavior by dominant groups, and they are the types over which individuals have the least control of others’ ascriptions (Mittelberg & Waters 1993). Through skillful language use, Wilson is able selectively to foreground and background his Dominican and American language identities, but he cannot selectively display alternate phenotypes:⁶

- (7) Wilson: ... a lot of people confuse me for an African American most of the time. They ask me, “Are you Black?” I’m like, “No, I’m Hispanic.” And they’ll be like, “Oh I thought you were Black or something.” Most of the time I’ll be talking with them, chilling, or whatever. They’ll be thinking that I’m just African American. Because sometimes the way I talk, my hair, my skin color, it’s just that my hair is nappy. I use a lot of slang. You can confuse a lot of Dominicans as African Americans by their color.

Wilson defines himself unequivocally as “Spanish” and “Dominican,” and these categories are locally available to African-descent individuals (as shown in tran-

scripts below); but phenotype is readily apparent to all, and always available for others to invoke.

I examine this negotiation of African-descent identity in three sections, each revolving around chronologically presented segments of transcribed talk and interaction. First, a recent Dominican immigrant jokingly identifies Wilson as Haitian to the researcher, and subsequently to a Guatemalan American classmate. Second, a Southeast Asian immigrant student tells Wilson that she had never thought that he was Spanish, but rather assumed he was Black. Wilson and a Dominican confederate then attempt, without success, to dupe her by arguing that Wilson is, in fact, Black. Third, Wilson's African-descent phenotype is implicitly invoked in a discussion of relationships between athletic prowess and physical appearance. These segments show that, even as Dominican Americans see themselves as outside of the American Black/White racial dichotomy – and successfully resist ascription to the category Black, i.e. achieve congruent self- and other-ascription of themselves as “not Black” – they remain subject to phenotype-based racial thinking in a variety of contexts.

“HE’S FROM HAITI”

Wilson's African-descent phenotype is first invoked during this class by a recent Dominican immigrant, Eduardo. Except for the segment of transcript below, Eduardo speaks almost entirely in Spanish during the course of the class.

- (8) WR #2, 1:10:11 (The substitute teacher is discussing the assignment for the day. Wilson has been telling Eduardo in Spanish to hand over Wilson's soda, which Eduardo has been sipping.)
- BB: (→Ed.) Are you Dominican too?
- Eduardo: [(Yeah)]
- Wilson: [Yeah], he's, he's . . . ((Wilson raises his hand and makes a pushing/throwing gesture toward Eduardo as if dismissing him and laughs.))
- Eduardo: ((gestures toward Wilson)) He's from Haiti you know what I mean?
- BB: He's what?
- Eduardo: From Haiti.

Wilson initially acknowledges Dominican comembership with Eduardo (“Yeah”), but then distances himself from Eduardo: He twice says “he’s”, as if beginning to define Eduardo as something other than Dominican, but he gives no explicit referential characterization of Eduardo. Then Eduardo claims that Wilson is from Haiti. When I request clarification of this characterization of Wilson (“He’s what?”), Eduardo repeats “From Haiti.”

It is highly unlikely that Eduardo thinks that Wilson is Haitian. They have been classmates the entire term, they interact almost solely in Dominican Spanish, and they know each other well enough to share a soda. Asserting that Wilson is from Haiti is more likely a form of ritual teasing, or “cracking” on Wilson – a popular form of verbal play among Dominican American teenagers in Providence. “Cracking” is a form of verbal dueling that has been defined as a characteristically African American discourse genre under a variety of names – e.g. signifying,

playing the dozens, snapping, and sounding (Kochman 1972, Mitchell-Kernan 1972, Morgan 1998). Characteristic of this genre is the notion of play, which

differentiates the real from the serious by focusing on that which is socially and/or culturally significant (e.g., relatives, sexuality, physical appearance, political figures, class, and economic status) and placing it in implausible contexts. Whether a context is plausible or implausible is culturally determined. (Morgan 1998:267)

In this case, Eduardo is indirectly highlighting Wilson's physical appearance, which has significance in both Dominican and American terms, by referring to it in the context of an implausible claim, i.e. that Wilson is Haitian.

Eduardo's claim that Wilson is from Haiti invokes a Dominican communicative and interpretive framework – even though this exchange takes place in the US in English and involves a White American interlocutor. Both Wilson and Eduardo are of African descent and might be perceived as members of the category Black in America, but incremental differences in phenotype between them (Wilson is more African in phenotype) have meaning in a Dominican context. In the Dominican Republic there are no binary Black/White social categories, and no co-variation between “Dominican” phenotypes and ethnicity, but there is a long history of racializing “Haitians.” Dominican understandings of their own color, race, and nationality have been constructed in contradistinction to Haiti, both historically and in contemporary times (Silié 1989, Moya Pons 1995, 1996). Two 19th-century Haitian military occupations of the Dominican side of Hispaniola served to galvanize a sense of Dominican national identity when it was still a colony, and the occupations have been used to vilify Haitians in the popular memory. Today, Dominicans differentiate between themselves and Haitians in terms of color/race, culture, language, and religion. To Dominicans, Haitians are Black/African, while Dominicans are more or less White/European; Haitians speak an African-French creole, while Dominicans speak a European language; and Haitians practice African voodoo, while Dominicans are Catholic (Duany 1994:67, 69). Haitians are racialized as the Other, and for many Dominicans, the only *negros* [‘Blacks’] on the island are Haitians (Silié 1989:170).

In calling Wilson a Haitian, Eduardo is drawing attention to Wilson's African-descent phenotype and ritually insulting him in a way that occurs in the Dominican Republic (cf. Diaz 1996). What makes this verbal play, rather than serious assertion, is the implausibility, from a Dominican perspective, of the scenario presented. Wilson does not dress or speak like Dominican notions of Haitians, and he is more European in phenotype than popular stereotypes of Haitians. However, in many US contexts, it is NOT implausible that Wilson could be Haitian. Wilson grew up in the US and is familiar with both traditional Dominican and American frameworks for interpreting phenotype and race. He regularly experiences ascription to categories such as Black and Cape Verdean, so the claim that

he is Haitian may border on serious insult for him, rather than playful insult. This could be one reason why Wilson does not respond verbally to this crack on him.

Eduardo simultaneously displays alignment and disaffiliation with Wilson. He aligns himself with Wilson, perhaps unconsciously, by invoking a Dominican interpretive framework for understanding phenotype and identity. Such a shared framework typically serves as a unifying frame among Dominicans in America. But Eduardo differentiates himself from Wilson by invoking phenotypic differences between himself and Wilson in a way that denies this common Dominican identity. Thus speech activities that invoke a common cultural communicative framework are not necessarily speech activities that contribute to solidarity.

Eduardo asserts that Wilson is Haitian twice more during this class period. About 10 minutes into the class, I ask one of the students sitting directly in front of Wilson where she is from, and she replies that she is from Guatemala. Eduardo then interjects, "He's from Haiti, too," pointing to Wilson (WR #2 1:17:13). No one responds to this interjection, however. Three minutes later, Eduardo once again asserts that Wilson is from Haiti, and this time Wilson responds:

- (9) WR #2, 1:20:07 (Claudia is the Guatemalan American who appeared in the transcript above.)
 Wilson: ((singing)) *Dame del pollito* ['Give me a little bit of that chicken']
 Eduardo: *Tú no dique eres de Haití? Tú no eres dominicano, Wilson.* ['Aren't you supposedly from Haiti? You're not Dominican, Wilson.']
 Wilson: *Yo nací en Haití,* ['I was born in Haiti,'] ((Wilson turns to Eduardo, smiling))
 Eduardo: [()] ((motions toward camera, Wilson turns to camera))
 Wilson: [*pero me*] *crié en Santo Domingo.* ['but I was brought up in the Dominican Republic.']
 ((Eduardo holds up both hands, palms forward, with middle and ring fingers curled down – the Dominican sign of the cuckold – behind Wilson's head; Wilson turns back toward Eduardo and hits him in the leg with the back of his open hand)) (1.5)
 Claudia: So you're Haitian, huh?
 Wilson: No I'm Dominican.
 Claudia: You were born in DR?
 Wilson: Yeah.
 Eduardo: *Nació en Haití* ['He was born in Haiti.']
 Wilson: *En Santo Domingo.* ['In the Dominican Republic.']
 Eduardo: *Es haitiano.* ['He's Haitian.']
 Wilson: *Es mentira, ven acá, a quién tú le vas – a quién tú le vas a creer, a mí o a estos dos locos?* ((turning his head laterally first to one side then the other, indicating Eduardo and an accomplice on his other side.)) ['It's a lie, look, who are you going – who are you going to believe, me or these two crazy guys?'] (.8)
 Eduardo: *A mí.* ['Me.'] (1.5)
 Wilson: *Eh, 'mano* ((looking down at magazine)) ['Hey, man']
 Wilson: *Azaros(o)* ((Hits Eduardo sharply on leg with the back of his hand)) ['Jerk.' – literally 'Cursed person.']

Here, Eduardo asks Wilson if he's from Haiti and asserts that he's not Dominican. As in the previous two instances in which Eduardo claimed Wilson was Haitian, this question and assertion are directed in part to an audience beyond Wilson – minimally Claudia, a Guatemalan American who is sitting directly in front of Wilson, and who has turned around to face him. Unlike the previous two instances in which Wilson did not respond to Eduardo's assertion that he was

Haitian, he addresses this claim. Wilson asserts in Spanish that he was born in Haiti, but brought up in the Dominican Republic. This is untrue: Wilson was born in the Dominican Republic to Dominican parents and came to Providence at age seven. This response, however, serves to maintain the joking, counterfactual frame instantiated by Eduardo. Wilson's claim that he was brought up in the Dominican Republic accounts for the fact that he speaks and understands Dominican Spanish, sings *merengue* lyrics, and socializes extensively with Dominicans. Wilson's smile, as he claims that he was born in Haiti – and Eduardo's cuckold gesture over Wilson's head for the camera – suggest that they are doing a joking speech activity.

Claudia, however, treats Eduardo's and Wilson's assertions regarding his identity as serious. She proffers a candidate understanding – that he's Haitian – which could follow from Eduardo's and Wilson's immediately preceding claims. Claudia is probably unfamiliar with the Dominican social framework in which relatively dark-skinned Dominicans are jokingly accused of being Haitian.

Wilson rejects her candidate understanding and asserts that he's Dominican, thus instantiating a serious communicative framework which contrasts with the joking speech activity that he has co-constructed with Eduardo. However, the joking line that Wilson is Haitian, initiated by Eduardo and maintained by Wilson, has been so successful that Claudia displays uncertainty about Wilson's identity, despite his new claim that he's Dominican. The condition on which this verbal play and put-on is predicated – the implausibility of Wilson's being Haitian – is not being recognized. Because Claudia does not unequivocally recognize this speech activity as play, Wilson is confronted with the stigma of being categorized as Haitian in front of Dominican peers.

Claudia then asks if Wilson was born in the Dominican Republic. She could be checking the veracity of the information, that he was born in Haiti, on which she is basing her conclusion that he is Haitian. She may also be suggesting that one's national/ethnic identity depends on where one was born. If Wilson was born in Haiti but was raised in the Dominican Republic, then he might claim a Dominican identity, while others might ascribe a Haitian identity to him. Wilson confirms that he was born in the Dominican Republic, but Eduardo reasserts that he was born in Haiti, thus maintaining the ambiguity surrounding Wilson's identity. Wilson shakes his head and counters Eduardo's claim, saying that he was born in the Dominican Republic.

Wilson switches to Spanish to say where he was born – a turn that repairs Eduardo's Spanish turn, but is directed at Claudia – and he uses Spanish in his subsequent utterance to Claudia. His use of Spanish in this context may be in response to Eduardo's use of Spanish, but it also serves to bolster his claim of a Dominican rather than Haitian identity. He uses Spanish to address Claudia, even though she does not speak Spanish in this exchange, and she responds to Spanish with English in all recorded instances during the class period. Wilson's fluency and his characteristically Dominican pronunciation – e.g. elision of syllable-final

/s/ and pronunciation of word-initial /y/ as an affricate [dʒ] – are consistent with a Dominican, but not Haitian, identity.

Eduardo again claims that Wilson is Haitian. Wilson then looks directly at Claudia and says that it's a lie. He asks her who she's going to believe – Wilson, or *estos dos locos* ('these two crazy guys'), Eduardo and a confederate who is sitting behind and to the side of Wilson. Wilson must thus resort to an appeal to his personal integrity to convince Claudia of his claimed identity. His highlighting of his Dominican heritage through language use does not suffice to achieve congruent self- and other-ascription of himself as Dominican.

In this excerpt, Wilson initially aligns himself with Eduardo by participating in a Dominican joke that could fool an outsider, Claudia. However, Wilson easily loses control over her ascription of his social identity. African-descent phenotype is such a powerful, pervasive, and totalizing criterion for social classification that Wilson has difficulty convincing Claudia he is Dominican. This occurs despite the fact that Claudia has been his classmate in two classes for nearly an entire term, and despite the prevalence of Caribbean Hispanics (of European and African ancestry) at Central High School. Dominicans are the single largest ethnic group at Central High School, and combined with Puerto Ricans, they make up nearly half the student body. Even though Wilson speaks fluent Dominican Spanish and regularly interacts with recent Dominican immigrants, joking assertions that he is Haitian or was born in Haiti are enough to cast into doubt his social identity. In this case, Wilson's phenotype highly constrains his individual agency to enact identity through language.

“I NEVER THOUGHT YOU WERE SPANISH”

Relatively African-phenotype Dominican Americans, such as Wilson, face conflicting ascriptions of identity in both Dominican and American cultural contexts. In the Dominican interpretive context invoked by Eduardo, the conflict in identity ascription was whether Wilson was Dominican or Haitian. It is much more common in US contexts for African-descent Dominican Americans to face ascriptions of being Black or African American. This section documents one such ascription and shows the power of language to precede phenotype in altering an ascription.

In this segment of interaction, Pam, a first-generation Southeast Asian immigrant, tells Wilson that she didn't think he was Spanish when she first saw him – she assumed he was African American – but she then came to realize that he was Spanish from hearing him speak Spanish. As a joke, Wilson and a recently immigrated Dominican confederate, JB (who discussed meeting Wilson at Bucklin Park, in a transcript above), pretend that Wilson is “Black” or African American, and not Spanish. Wilson never identifies himself as Black or African American, but both he and JB know that he is regularly perceived to be such. This creates an opportunity for Wilson and JB to get someone to believe something – that Wilson is Black – which is entirely implausible to them in a Dominican cultural framework.

When Pam cites Wilson's speaking of Spanish as evidence that he is Spanish rather than Black, JB and Wilson initially deny that he can speak Spanish, and then they devise scenarios that could explain his Spanish facility. They falsely claim, for example, that Wilson's father is Black, and that his mother is Black AND Spanish and was born in America. Wilson and JB are engaged in an adolescent put-on about Wilson's race, ethnicity, and language; but analysis of their talk reveals much about their criteria, and ordering of criteria, for defining a person as "Black" or "Spanish."

(10) WR #2, 1:34:57 (Wilson has just finished explaining to JB, in Spanish, the function of the wireless microphone he is wearing.)

- Wilson: ((singing)) Angie Pelham is a weird person (2.5)
 Wilson: *Me estoy miando yo, 'mano.* ['I have to piss, man.'] (2.0)
 JB: () (2.0)
 Pam: Yo, the first time I saw you, I never thought you were Spanish. (.5)
 Wilson: [Who?]
 JB: [(He's)] Black.
 Pam: I never—
 Wilson: Cause I'm Black.
 JB: ()
 Wilson: Cause I'm Black.
 Pam: No
 JB: His father [is Black], her mother is—, his mother is uh—
 Wilson: [I'm Black]
 Pam: (Can he) speak Spanish?
 JB: No
 Wilson: Cause I was — [I was]
 Pam: [Yeah!]
 JB: So why (d— ?)
 Wilson: No, no seriously, I'm Black and I was raised in the Dominican Republic. (.5)
 Wilson: For real.
 Pam: Your mother's Black?
 Wilson: My mom? No, my father.
 Pam: Your father's Black, your [mother's Spanish?]
 Wilson: [My mom's Spanish]
 JB: His mom is Black— and she's Spanish
 Wilson: Is mix(ed)
 JB: His mom was born over here.
 (2.0) ((Wilson smiles at Pam and throws a piece of paper at her))
 JB: Wilson, don't t(h)row anything to her.
 Wilson: *Excúsame, se me olvidó, que es la heva tuya* ['Sorry, I forgot that she is your girlfriend.']
 JB: *Cállate, todavía no.* ['Be quiet, not yet!']
 Pam: English!
 JB: English, yeah!
 Wilson: I said I'm sorry.
 JB: He can't speak Spanish.
 Pam: I saw you were talking to him ()
 Wilson: I understand, but I don't speak everything.
 (2.2) ((Wilson smiles broadly at Pam))
 JB: I'm teaching him. (5.5)
 Wilson: *Qué tú vas (a) hacer en tu casa hoy, loco?* ((slaps JB on the back))
 ['What are you going to do at your house today, man?']

Pam says that she did not assign Wilson to the category of “Spanish” when she first saw him. It is likely that Pam assumed he was African American: Wilson reported that he was regularly perceived to be African American if people did not hear him speaking Spanish, and Pam subsequently treats “Black” as a relevant identity ascription for him. Both JB and Wilson respond to Pam as if Wilson were not in fact Spanish, but African American: JB says “He’s Black,” and Wilson says “cause I’m Black” twice, but Pam rejects this claim.

JB claims that Wilson’s father is Black, and begins to categorize his mother. Pam, however, does not initially address this claim, but rather asks if Wilson can speak Spanish. JB denies that Wilson can speak Spanish, and Wilson begins to offer an explanation (“Cause I was— I was”), perhaps an explanation of how he can speak Spanish if he is Black – an explanation that he subsequently offers, that he is Black but he was raised in the Dominican Republic. Pam has rejected JB’s denial that Wilson can’t speak Spanish, exclaiming “Yeah” – i.e. that yes, Wilson can speak Spanish.

Spanish language is being treated in this segment as the key to racial/ethnic identity, preceding phenotype. When JB and Wilson claim that Wilson is not Spanish, but Black, Pam asks if he can speak Spanish. The implication is that if Wilson can speak Spanish, then he is Spanish, rather than Black. Wilson and JB also treat Spanish language as the key to determining social identity, both for ratification as Spanish and for disqualification from the category “Black.” JB initially denies that Wilson can speak Spanish, despite immediately available counterevidence. Admitting that Wilson can speak Spanish would invalidate JB and Wilson’s line that Wilson is not Spanish but Black. One cannot be simultaneously Spanish and Black in the local system of social categorization.

Wilson presents a scenario in which he could be both Black and a Spanish speaker: He claims he is Black, but that he was raised in the Dominican Republic. Pam asks if his mother is Black (JB has already claimed that Wilson’s father is Black) and Wilson says that she’s not, but his father is, maintaining consistency with JB’s claim. Pam offers a candidate understanding of Wilson’s parents’ identities: that his father is Black and his mother is Spanish. Having a Spanish mother could explain how Wilson would be raised in the Dominican Republic, even though his father was African American. In theories of identity based on descent, it might also identify Wilson as at least “half Black.” Wilson, in overlap, identifies his mother as Spanish.

Identifying Wilson’s mother as Spanish, however, is incompatible with Wilson’s and JB’s claims that Wilson is Black. Among young Dominican Americans in Providence, there is no “one drop” rule that makes the offspring of an African American parent and a parent of another social group count as African American. When asked in interview questions what they would call such offspring, they did not call them Black, but rather “half Black, half x”; and fellow Central High School students with one Black parent were typically referred to in precisely such terms, e.g. as being “half Black, half Dominican.” If Wilson’s father were Black

and his mother were Spanish, Wilson would not count in local terms as Black, but rather as “half Black, half Spanish.”

JB then identifies Wilson’s mother in a way that could help to maintain their fiction that Wilson is African American: He describes her as Black AND Spanish and “born over here,” i.e. in the US. Her being born in the US would explain how she could have a Black parent, and it could make Dominican citizenship and national allegiance remote in Wilson’s background.

Pam does not reply to these final assertions. Wilson smiles at Pam and throws a small piece of wadded paper at her; this suggests that the frame that Wilson and JB have created – mock earnest assertions that Wilson is Black – is being recognized as a joking activity. The abandonment of this frame is further evident when Wilson addresses JB in Spanish, and he replies in Spanish. This use of Spanish language is salient enough to Pam for her to insist, as she does numerous times during this class period, that they should speak English. JB’s subsequent claim that Wilson can’t speak Spanish is rejected by Pam, who has just heard the two conversing in Spanish. Two final claims that Wilson can’t really speak Spanish get no reply from Pam; and Wilson drops any pretense of not knowing Spanish by beginning a conversation in Spanish with JB, about after-school plans for playing ball at Bucklin Park.

The term “Spanish” is used by participants here to refer to Spanish folk-racial identity four times, and to Spanish language twice. It is not only Dominican Americans who use the term “Spanish” to describe both language and race/ethnicity. Pam, a teen-ager of Southeast Asian descent, is using it as a social category that she explicitly juxtaposes with African American race/ethnicity: “Your father’s Black, your mother’s Spanish?” Thus “Spanish” is a local social category, based on linguistic and cultural criteria, that is treated as equivalent in type to traditional American phenotype-based racial categories such as Black and White.

Social classification based on linguistic and cultural heritage captures the local social reality at Central High School much better than Black/White classification. The American phenotype-symbolized racial categories of Black and White developed out of a particular centuries-long social history in the United States. The historical relations between White Americans and African Americans are not of primary importance to the vast majority of students at Central High School, whose families have only been in the United States since 1965 – or, in the case of many Puerto Ricans, since the 1950s. Binary racial categorization based on phenotype is less immediately relevant in this setting than students’ immigrant languages and cultures. Fewer than 10% of the students at Central are non-Hispanic White, and only 16% are non-Hispanic Black, many of them immigrants. In this largely immigrant context, Wilson’s immigrant ethnolinguistic identity is a more useful guide to significant attributes about him than his phenotype. At Central High School, such second-generation Spanish identity suggests that one speaks Spanish at home, eats Spanish food, socializes with Hispanics, goes to Spanish

nightclubs, has multiple ties to another (nation-)state, translates for parents, etc. Such a bilingual/bicultural immigrant identity is probably familiar to Pam and may have strong parallels in her own life.

Wilson aligns himself with JB in a playful speech activity that draws on disparities between Dominican and American cultural frames of reference. Their joke depends on making reference to phenotypic differences between Wilson and JB that have great social significance in an American interpretive framework, but little in a Dominican one. For JB and Wilson, this readily available and totalizing American identity is at odds with the way they understand and see him, as Dominican; and it is this discrepancy that they attempt to exploit in order to put on their classmate.

By contrast with the prior interaction, in which Claudia was unsure whether Wilson was Haitian or Dominican, Pam displays understanding of the implausibility of Wilson's being Black. The fact that Pam could not be convinced that Wilson was Black allowed Wilson and JB to remain united in insisting that Wilson was Black. The ambivalence expressed by Claudia as to whether Wilson was Dominican or Haitian, however, left Wilson potentially assigned to a locally stigmatized category;⁷ and he was forced to contradict Eduardo, eventually calling him a jerk (*azaroso*) and hitting him.

While Wilson's phenotype remains constant, its social meaning is locally negotiated through language. Wilson and his classmates use Spanish and English to construct Dominican and American interpretive frameworks and joking activities in which he alternately counts as Haitian, Dominican, Black American, and Spanish.

“YOU DON'T LOOK LIKE THE GUY WHO PLAYS BASKETBALL”

In the three segments of talk just presented, Wilson's ethnic/racial identity is explicitly addressed. The ambiguity of his identity – a function of his phenotype and his multi-variety language proficiency – leads to a number of explicit identity claims: an earnest claim of Dominican identity (“No, I'm Dominican”), as well as playful claims that he is Haitian (*Yo nací en Haití, pero me crié en Santo Domingo* ‘I was born in Haiti, but I grew up in the Dominican Republic’) or that he is Black American (“Cause I'm Black”). Wilson actively and explicitly claims, rejects, and exploits for humor these diverse ascriptions. In the three excerpts presented below, racial stereotypes and assumptions inhabit his and his classmates' talk more insidiously. Even as Dominican Americans define themselves as outside the Black/White system of American racial formation, they display racialized assumptions about relations among phenotype, athletic prowess, and fitness for particular vocations.

The following segment of interaction occurs less than a minute after ex. 10 and includes the same participants: Pam, Wilson, and JB. Wilson and JB have been discussing, in Spanish and English, plans to get together and play basketball at a

park later that day. Each has been making boastful predictions of defeating the other, when Wilson asks Pam who she thinks to be the superior basketball player.

(11) WR #2, 1:36:16

- Wilson: Do you think he can beat me, playing, playing some ball?
 Wilson: Frank! ((gaze directed toward doorway of classroom))
 Pam: You don't look like the guy who plays basketball.
 Wilson: [Who,] him? ((gesturing toward JB))
 JB: [Who?]
 Pam: (→JB) You.
 Wilson: [No, he's got-]
 JB: [I'm (nice)] playing basketball.
 Wilson: You know what he does, he don't dribble a lot, but he's got a nice jumper.

In judging who would be the better basketball player, Pam asserts that JB, in comparison to Wilson, doesn't "look like" someone who would play basketball. She does not make her criteria explicit. Height is often associated with success in basketball, but JB is slightly taller than Wilson. Wilson is heavier and more powerfully built, but JB is not frail-looking, and physical bulk is not popularly associated with basketball skill.

One way in which Wilson and JB do differ in appearance is that JB appears to be of overwhelmingly European descent, while Wilson appears to be of African and European descent. Success in American basketball is popularly associated with African Americans, who are disproportionately represented among the elite players in college and the professional NBA. Because of this popular and pervasive stereotype,⁸ Pam may be associating Wilson's relatively African phenotype with successful basketball playing, and JB's European phenotype with lesser success.

It is not just Pam who assumes correlation between European/African phenotype and athletic prowess. In the following segment, Wilson reveals even more far-reaching assumptions about correlations between phenotype and vocational fitness, in suggesting that one can not only "look like" a sports player, one can also "look like" a lawyer:

(12) WR #2, 1:38:07 (Wilson and JB have been discussing their relative strengths as basketball players, and the previous night's NBA playoff game. They then return to the issue of Pam's perception that JB doesn't look like a basketball player.)

- JB: Why you think I'm not good?
 Pam: You don't look like the guy(s) who plays basketball.
 Wilson: [Him? Huh?] He don't. ((gesturing toward JB))
 JB: [How do I-]
 JB: How do I look? (.5)
 Wilson: Him, huh, like nothing! He just-
 Pam: Yes! ((laughter from at least Pam and Wilson))
 JB: ()
 Wilson: He can be like a, like a lawyer or something, that's what he looks like, for real.
 JB: What about you?
 Pam: Yeah.
 Wilson: I look like a straight basketball player=
 JB: =Like a- =

- Wilson: =or football player.
 Wilson: For real baseball player and shit.
 JB: Who?
 Wilson: Me.
 Pam: I hate baseball, it's so boring.

JB requests a reason why Pam doesn't think he's a good basketball player, but she simply reiterates that he doesn't look like the guys who play basketball. Wilson agrees that he doesn't, and JB asks how he looks – i.e. what he looks like if he doesn't look like a basketball player. Wilson uses this as an opportunity to tease his friend that he looks “like nothing.” Wilson then amends this characterization by asserting that JB could be a lawyer, “that's what he looks like.”

JB asks Wilson to characterize himself (“How about you?”), and Wilson claims to look like a “straight [‘pure’] basketball player or football player. For real baseball player.” Wilson does not state his criteria for judging himself to look like an athlete, or for judging JB to look like a lawyer; but it is likely that these judgments are based on relative degrees of African and European phenotype. Such degrees correlate both with athletic success and professional status in the US and the Dominican Republic. In the US, African Americans are successful in basketball, football, and baseball – the sports cited by Wilson – in numbers disproportionate to their percentage of the population. In the Dominican Republic, sports have also been an area where relatively African-phenotype individuals have excelled out of proportion to their successes in other areas of society. In America, professions such as law are disproportionately White; and in the Dominican Republic, they are disproportionately dominated by more European-phenotype individuals. Wilson's judging himself to look like a successful athlete, and JB to look like a lawyer, thus subtly highlights phenotypic differences between them in a way that treats such differences as having wider social implications.⁹

In this local context, looking like a lawyer carries less prestige than looking like a successful athlete. It is a consolation category for those who “look like nothing,” for those who do not look like athletes. In this case, neither Wilson nor JB has prospects for a career in athletics; e.g. neither participates in organized sports. Nevertheless, mere association with athletes by appearance carries prestige. The prestige of relatively African phenotype in this context is at odds with the prestige and privilege otherwise experienced by individuals of relatively European phenotype in both America and the Dominican Republic. Wilson's relatively African phenotype, a potential source of stigma, can also be a source of pride for him, even as it channels his visions of himself (as an athlete) in ways that are unlikely to be rewarded in the future.

Wilson's African descent is implicitly invoked one more time during this class period, through a ritual insult in which JB calls Wilson a “Larry Johnson wannabee”:

(13) WR #2, 1:55:38

JB: () Larry Johnson wannabee.

Wilson: Who?

JB: You.

Wilson: I'm no Larry Johnson wannabee, man. I'm myself-wannabee. ((Wilson leans forward with fists in front of his stomach and flexes his biceps in a body-builder pose. Multiple students laugh.))

“Wannabee” (from “want to be”) is a term, often associated with AAVE (Smitherman 1994:233), for a person who claims membership in a group or a status that he or she has not achieved. It implies that one is pretending to be more than, or different than, one actually is; so accusing a person of being a “wannabee” is always an insult. Wilson responds that he is not a Larry Johnson wannabee, but “myself-wannabee”; i.e. he does not copy others or pretend to be something that he is not. This response, which he gives as he strikes a body-builder’s pose, draws laughter from multiple students.

Accusing Wilson of being a “Larry Johnson wannabee” draws attention to Wilson’s African descent. Larry Johnson is an NBA basketball player who was a well-known star early in his career, before suffering injuries that made him a much less formidable player. By calling Wilson a “Larry Johnson wannabee”, JB may be claiming that Wilson exaggerates his own basketball skills; but Johnson was no longer a star, and JB probably would have compared Wilson to a more prominent player if basketball skills were the sole criterion of comparison. It is more likely that he used Larry Johnson in accusing Wilson of being a “wannabee” because of the strong resemblance in appearance between Wilson and Johnson. Although Wilson was much shorter, he resembled Larry Johnson in his stocky build, short hair, and face shape, with a distinctive shaved notch in his hairline above the middle of his forehead. Johnson is classified as Black or African American; and if Wilson were not of African descent, his resemblance to Johnson would likely not have been so strong. JB’s assertion that Wilson is a “Larry Johnson wannabee” thus depends on, and invokes, Wilson’s African-descent phenotype.

Even when ethnic/racial identity is not explicitly addressed in the propositional content of talk, such talk and interaction can reveal many social assumptions. JB, Pam, and Wilson all explicitly ascribe Wilson a Spanish/Dominican identity, as opposed to a phenotype-based racial one; but his phenotype is still implicitly invoked. Phenotype-based racial assumptions even enter into Wilson’s expressed ideas about individual fitness for particular activities.

CONCLUSIONS

Wilson’s skillful use of multiple language varieties and his African-descent phenotype create ambiguity for those who seek to assign him an ethnic/racial identity. His use of varieties of Spanish and English alternately foreground Dominican, American, and African American facets of his ethnolinguistic identity, indexing his agency as a social actor. Transcripts indicate that ascriptions of Wilson’s ethnic/

racial identity vary from moment to moment across linguistically constituted contexts. This power of language to situationally constitute transformative racial contexts is particularly notable, given the rigidity and mutual exclusivity that have historically characterized United States Black/White racial categories. Thus Smedley (1993:9) differentiates the American racial system from those of other societies precisely in terms of the impermeable nature of United States category boundaries: "One cannot transcend or transform one's 'race' status; in other words, no legal or social mechanism exists for changing one's race." But individual Dominican Americans, through speaking Spanish, ARE frequently able to transform their race status, from Black or White to Spanish.

Dominicans are the first large group of predominantly African-descent Spanish speakers to live in the United States. Their challenge to the hegemony of the United States "one-drop" rule over lingual/cultural classification continues the struggles that Puerto Ricans on the mainland began in the 1950s and 1960s (Rodriguez 1989, 1994). In the increasingly common US contexts where identities like "Spanish," "Hispanic," or "Dominican" are locally available, language has the constitutive power to overcome what are seen by many as static, natural boundaries.

The situational achievement of ethnolinguistic identities by African-descent Dominican Americans, occurring during a period of US demographic shift, has implications for the constitution of American social categories. It is commonly assumed that larger-scale social constellations, e.g. racial categories, affect individuals' social actions, including language; but such larger-scale phenomena are themselves constituted through social action and relations at a smaller scale (Giddens 1984). When existing patterns of social relations and meanings are merely reproduced by social actors at the micro-level, it is difficult to discern the agency of individuals. But the juxtaposition of social realities and contestation of meanings resulting from migration, in contrast, make clear the agency of individual social actors, because they are not merely reproducing pre-existing categories and meanings, but turning hegemonic beliefs upside-down. This agency is particularly evident in interaction among young people in multi-lingual, multi-ethnic/racial immigrant contexts such as the one described here. The ongoing negotiation of identity by individual Dominican Americans in everyday life thus contributes to the transformation of existing social categories as well as the constitution of new ones where they might otherwise not have existed.

Language is not just a resource through which individuals construct identities; it is also a medium through which socio-historical relations of inequality and reified, essentialist categories are reconstituted and reimposed. In the excerpts presented here, Wilson's classmates repeatedly invoke his African-descent phenotype, treating it as relevant to his social identity. When Wilson is presented as Haitian, for example, he has some difficulty in convincing another Hispanic that he is Dominican, despite displays of fluent Dominican Spanish. Wilson defines himself as Dominican or Spanish, and thus outside the American Black/White

dichotomy, but even his own talk reveals racial assumptions about individuals' fitness for certain activities. Language is a medium that affords individual social actors the freedom to highlight various aspects of identity; but communicative behavior occurs in a socio-historical context in which phenotype has been made to matter – and this association of phenotype with social identity is reproduced in everyday talk and interaction, even as social categories are situationally challenged and transformed.

NOTES

* I would like to thank the numerous Dominican American high school students – particularly Wilson, the principal subject of this article – who let me into their lives and made this work possible. Points made in this article were refined in response to comments by Julia Rueschemeyer, Ana Celia Zentella, and Bonnie Urciuoli.

¹ I use the terms “Dominican American” and “second generation Dominican” interchangeably and in a specific sense: to refer to the US-born children of Dominican immigrants (i.e. the “second generation”), and to Dominican-born children who came to America by age 8 (whom some researchers call the “1.5 generation”). By their mid to late teens, such Dominican-born individuals are very similar to their American-born peers in terms of being English-dominant, seeing themselves as American minorities (as opposed to foreign nationals), and planning to spend their lives in the US. There is a small group of third- and fourth-generation Dominican Americans, who experience a much more American than Dominican socialization, but they are not the subject of this article.

² This is not to say that the Dominican Republic is a color-blind society. Relatively European phenotypes are considered more attractive than relatively African ones (Alarcón 1994, Badillo & Badillo 1996); phenotype correlates significantly with class in many parts of the country (M. Davis 1994); and African descent of non-Hispanic groups, particularly Haitians, can be highly racialized.

³ Transcription conventions are as follows:

| | |
|----------------|---|
| Wilson: | The speaker is indicated with a name or abbreviation on the left of the page. |
| <i>como</i> | Italics indicate words spoken in Spanish. I have used standard Spanish orthography to represent Dominican Spanish even though pronunciation of Dominican Spanish, e.g. in elision of syllable- and word-final /s/, systematically differs from the Castilian varieties which written Spanish more closely reflects (e.g. Henríquez Ureña 1940). I choose not to represent these divergences, e.g. <i>e'to</i> or <i>e(s)to</i> for <i>esto</i> , because, as Duranti notes (1997:139), “Speakers of other [non-dominant] varieties are implicitly characterized as deviant, proportionally to the number of modifications necessary to represent their speech.” |
| [‘Jerk.’] | Text surrounded by single quotation marks and brackets indicates a translation of the immediately preceding Spanish. |
| () | Empty parentheses indicate material that couldn’t be heard clearly enough to transcribe. |
| (I can) | Words in parentheses indicate uncertainty about accuracy of transcribed words. |
| ((smiling)) | Double parentheses indicate nonverbal, visual, or background information. |
| [I don’t–] | |
| [He said] | Text in brackets directly above or below other bracketed text indicates words spoken in overlap. |
| (1.5) | Numerals in parentheses indicate periods of time, in seconds, during which there is no speech. |
| Da::mn | A colon indicates that the preceding sound was elongated in a marked pronunciation. |
| <u>rocking</u> | Text that is underlined is pronounced with emphasis, i.e. some combination of higher volume, pitch, and greater vowel length. |
| como l– | A dash indicates that speech was suddenly cut off during or after the word preceding the hyphen or dash. |

- (→Wilson) An arrow to a person's name indicates to whom a speaker's gaze and upper body are oriented during that turn, i.e. the ostensible primary recipient of the utterance.
- ? A question mark indicates a marked rising pitch.
- . A period indicates a falling pitch.
- ! An exclamation point indicates an exclamatory tone.
- , A comma indicates a continuing intonation in the sound(s) preceding the comma.

⁴ The phrase "At what time?" is typical of more formal registers in American English. It is common in the speech of Dominican Americans, as it better matches the structure of the equivalent phrase *A qué hora* in Spanish. **Qué hora*, a literal translation of the English "What time?", is not allowable in Spanish.

⁵ Smitherman (1994:69) defines "Word!" as an interjection of affirmation, and "break you up" as an AAVE basketball term meaning "to fake out the defense and create scoring opportunities in such a way as to break the defender's spirit and embarrass him."

⁶ Wilson refers to his skin color in English as "brown" or "black." In Spanish, terms for his skin color and phenotype are multiple:

BB: What Spanish word do people in the Dominican Republic use to describe the color of your skin?

Wilson: That's, um, I'm not going to say a trick question, but it's something that you can put a lot of words towards it, like they'll call me Indian, they'll call me *moreno* ['dark'], a lot of words, mostly, if I'm dark, any word that means dark they'll use. *Indio* ['Indian-colored'], *indio moreno* ['dark Indian-colored'].

In contrast to many Latin American countries where *indio* is a pejorative term for "indigenous," i.e. Native American, *indio* in the Dominican Republic refers to skin colors/phenotypes that reflect both African and European descent. It is an unmarked term in the Dominican Republic, and the skin color of the majority of the population is classified as *indio* in national census data.

⁷ These two identities, Haitian (American) and African American, are not equally valued in teenage Dominican circles, whether on the island or in urban America. There is prestige in urban African American youth identities for other low-income, non-White, urban teenagers, but not in Haitian/Haitian American identities. In contrast, economic sociologists of immigration (e.g. Waters 1994, Portes 1995), as well as many adult migrants, emphasize the superior social capital of African-descent immigrants over African Americans, and African-descent immigrants' greater chances for social and economic mobility.

⁸ Dominican Americans of relatively African phenotype have explained to me that one way they know they're being perceived as African Americans is their treatment in informal, playground basketball games. In such informal games, teams are frequently formed by two "captains" alternately picking players, the best players being chosen first. Relatively African-phenotype Dominican Americans report that they are often chosen earlier during such team selection than individuals who are clearly not African American.

⁹ Other differences between Wilson and JB may play into these assumptions about athletic fitness, but these differences are difficult to disentangle from racialization of phenotype. Wilson favored the baggy dress fashionable among many American youth (originally associated with African American youth); but JB wore narrower pants, and sometimes button-down long-sleeved shirts, typical of more recent immigrants. JB's style of walking was what Wilson called "all tight," characteristic of recent immigrants, while Wilson described his own walk as more relaxed and having its own "rhythm." Wilson was an indifferent and low-achieving student, while JB excelled in school.

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