Language, Discourse and Power in African American Culture

Marcyliena Morgan
University of California, Los Angeles

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

© Marcyliena Morgan 2002

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Plantin 10/12 pt. *System* LaTeX 2ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
Morgan, Marcyliena H.
Language, discourse and power in African American culture /
Marcyliena Morgan.
p. cm. – (Studies in the social and cultural foundations of language; no. 20)
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 0 521 80671 2 – ISBN 0 521 00149 8 (pbk.)
1. Black English. 2. English language – Social aspects – United States.
3. Speech and social status – United States. 4. Power (Social sciences) – United
States. 5. African Americans – Social conditions. 6. English language –
Discourse analysis. 7. Language and culture – United States. 8. African
Americans – Languages. I. Title. II. Series.
PE3102.N44 M67 2002
427′.973′08996073 – dc21 2001043689

ISBN 0 521 80671 2 hardback
ISBN 0 521 00149 8 paperback

Contents

List of maps, figures and tables *page* x
Acknowledgments xi
Notes on the transcriptions xiii

Introduction 1

1 The African American speech community: culture, language ideology and social face 10

2 Forms of speech: verbal styles, discourse and interaction 35

3 Language norms and practices 62

4 When women speak: how and why we enter 84

5 Urban youth language: black by popular demand 111

6 Language, discourse and power: outing schools 132

Notes 153
References 164
Index 181

Maps, figures and tables

Maps

Maps 1–4 Expansion of the slave population in the United States, 1790–1860 *page* 21

Figures

1 Speaker and audience in African American culture 46
2 Goodwin's four-stage accusation pattern 89
3 Copula absence and identity in hip hop 130
4 "Speak Out Against Ebonics," Ketchum Advertising 146

Tables

1 Expansion of the slave population in the United States, 1790–1860 20
2 Duality in speech 43
3 Contrast between GE and AAE single-dialect speakers 69
4 AAE reduction, deletions and alternatives 77
5 Artists and recordings 119
6 Percentage usage of *got(s)/ta* and *have to* 128
7 Copula absence in hip hop 129
8 Major criteria of prestige discovered in sixteen empirical studies 148

1 The African American speech community: culture, language ideology and social face

One hot, humid evening in August 1992, after about a month of fieldwork in Mississippi, I was driving alone on a desolate highway from Magnolia to Lexington. The car radio was blaring as a caller explained that she had ended her relationship with a man who had "done her wrong!" The deejay was in fine form as she kept playing "Drop that Zero," a song about a woman who could "do bad all by herself!" As I sang along with the fifth broadcast of the tune in one hour, I suddenly noticed something in the night that paralyzed me with fear. It was a road sign that read, "Crossing the Big Black River."

During my stay in Jackson and Magnolia, people would give me the names and locations of family and friends who lived near the Black River. These names were offered whenever talk turned to the times when "You had to *know your place* in front of white people!" And "You could get into trouble for *speaking* like a grown man or woman!" These statements were often punctuated with ironic laughter, knowing nods and tense smiles. Invariably, someone would quietly ask me: "Have you been to the Black River yet? You need to go." Or begin their story: "There was a store . . . " or "You remember when Booker T went to that juke joint near the Black River and . . . " Their voices would trail off, never completing the story, and they would say earnestly, "You need to go there." At first I thought the name was a joke. It wasn't. While I knew that I would understand their past and present lives much better if I visited the Black River, I also sensed that they were cautioning me.

Later, a friend confirmed my worst fears. Countless black people had disappeared near that river. The names were an offering and a way to remember loved ones who were killed "for trying to be a man." The name offering was also a warning and test to see if I knew better than to go asking questions about black life and racism in those parts. I wrote in my notes, I have to learn to hear their warning – "Cousin Joe who 'wasn't never afraid of nobody'" The country store that was "always full of white people!" The bar and fish and chicken shack that they were never allowed to enter from the front – and the Black River. I had heard them.

And I put my foot on the gas pedal until the Big Black River was safely behind me.

The first time: language and the contact zone

Though this book is not about the South, it begins there. For many African Americans in the North, the South is a sort of homeland. My people came from Mississippi or thereabouts. Where my people's people came from is a question that I've never heard anyone in my family answer. My grandfather just used to say, "They were Africans." That was all we knew and somehow that said it all. And when my grandfather talked about olden times, it was often impossible to tell whether he was talking about Mississippi at the end of slavery or stories of Africa. The connections between Africa, Mississippi and Chicago were obvious. They were everywhere and came in the form of folktales, language and family history. These stories were records of how African American communities survived, thrived and changed. Surviving the horrors of slavery was a badge of honor to the older generation around me, as they talked of the hypocrisy of Jim Crow and segregation in Chicago. Their tales raised innumerable questions but perhaps the most beguiling was the time they actually picked for their beginning. From a child's perspective, it was always mysterious when our questions about great-great grandparents or how somebody died or – as they would say – "came up missing" were immediately suppressed as though our curiosity was itself an egregious act. To make matters worse, there was little public discourse about what life was like during slavery and neither schoolbooks nor teachers offered a clue about the atrocities our families suffered. Still, the older generation persisted in their contorted dance around family history as well as the moment(s) when stories about family and friends – that could be recounted and contested – actually began as *our* stories. They just never answered. And they had good reason.

Questions of the beginnings of nations, a people, a family and so on are "first-time" narratives. These are often tales of desire, exploration, loss and awakening. That is unless the "first time" is also an instance of violence, subjugation and exploitation. In that case, the awareness of the "first time" is disturbed and disturbing because regardless of how horrific the circumstances, it was still the "first time." It remains a passage that belongs with other stories of new beginnings. But how does one tell the story so that all can appreciate a narrative of rebirth and death and truth and suspicion? The story of African American English is embedded in the story of the first time and laden with layers of significance because it is not simply about a contact language or variety. Rather, the question

wrestles with an epochal moment in American history – the beginning and confirmation of African American culture and society. It is in this sense that the existence of African American English (AAE) is much more than about the "first time" – it is proof of it. It is the evidence that something has been silenced – and the only possibility of resolution is through language as a symbol of collective recognition that slavery, white supremacy and racism happened – whether we talk about it or not. This moment is not exclusively about the politics and power of contact through the slave trade and plantation slavery – that would be complicated enough. Rather, it is also about how the contact changed everything. It is about how it spawned endless revisionist histories of American and African American culture.

Contact situations are often catastrophic events and include conquerors and the conquered, oppressors and the oppressed, intermediaries, onlookers, and many, many, more. As Mary Louise Pratt explains:

> A "contact" perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations among colonizers and colonized, or travelers and "travalees," not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power. (Pratt, 1992)

For African Americans, the importance of the first time and the nature of contact is not only to describe historical circumstances, but to contest the notion that the only way to describe African American culture is as a problem – through the interpretation and supposed benevolence of the oppressors, intermediaries and onlookers and their descendants. Thus any study of the contact zone, whether from scholars or laypersons, includes the critical analysis and interpretation of historical occurrences and narratives. This interpretation of contact occurs as an "historical trauma of an inaugural event and our collective memory of it" (Scott, 1991: 261). It also occurs within the less political terms of linguistics as in "when two or more previously existing languages come together" (Sebba, 1997).

The fact is, when two or more languages come together, two or more peoples have come together and the result is always about power and identity. If the result is that one language becomes the lingua franca, it means that the ideology of a dominant language/people has overwhelmed the other languages/peoples and the conquered must deal with that marginalization. If the result is a pidgin – a language that is nobody's mother tongue, where there is no recognizable grammatical structure associated with a particular language – then there is a desperate need to

communicate, whether for trade or survival after conquest. If children use the pidgin language and they expand the vocabulary, introduce grammar and so on until it becomes a creole language, then that means that they were conquered people who never got back home. So if the history of a language speaks volumes, the history of African American English is deafening.

Irrespective of the political focus, the test of scholarly accuracy can seem extreme in language study – where history and historical linguistics often spar over both major and minor points. While many issues loom large within linguistic circles, the debate over the nature of the African American contact situation always returns to how to characterize the most basic factors that constituted the beginnings of African American English. It is a question about the nature of the language contact situation and the transcendence from individual captivity to collective identity. It is a question about the representation of life and death and truth and betrayal.

This point and the improbability of trying to fix one moment or linguistic influence is revealed in Richard Price's (1983) ethnography of the collective narratives of the Saramaka Indians of modern-day Suriname: *First-Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People*. These narratives focus on the struggle against the Dutch colonial army and the ongoing struggle for autonomy. They represent the harrowing and epochal points when the present began. David Scott (1991) argues that for the Saramakas, "'first-time'" knowledge:

> marks out for them a temporal and even a spatial break . . . first-time knowledge is embedded in a variety of other, disparate sorts of discursive or rhetorical forms: as Price describes them, they include "genealogical nuggets," personal epithets, commemorative place-names, proverbs, songs, etc. And this knowledge is preeminently knowledge of "events." (Scott, 1991: 266)

Thus for Saramakas, these narratives are chronotypes (Bakhtin, 1981b; Bender and Wellbery, 1991) in which time and the moments and nature of the contacts assume practical and conceptual significance. These narratives incorporate not only information about the past, but knowledge of the present and how those within the cultural and social present interpret history (Ochs and Capps, 1996; Bender and Wellbery, 1991). Thus narratives are constantly evolving "at multiple individual, social, and cultural levels . . . They change over time and therefore have a history or histories, the construal of which itself is an act of temporal construction. . . they are improvised from an already existing repertoire of cultural forms and natural phenomena" (Bender and Wellbery, 1991: 4). It is thus for both political and structural reasons that "first-time" narratives of those of African

descent are routinely contested and contradicted, especially regarding the historical sources of language and communication style. They are not linear narratives neatly packaged with temporal structure and moral tale intact. There is no one source, one moment or looking back without being aware of "now."

Race and culture in the social sciences

American anthropological theories on the "first time" and beginnings of African American culture, while effectively arguing against racial determination of culture, have also argued that differences between African Americans and other Americans are not cultural (Boas, 1945, 1963). Instead, as Szwed (1974) and others (Mintz, 1970; Willis, 1970) report, the theory that persisted in both anthropology and sociology was that slavery deprived African Americans of any significant cultural roots (e.g. Benedict, 1934/1959). E. Franklin Frazier (1934) commented on what he considered to be the conspicuous lack of culture for African Americans. Similarly, Kenneth Clark (1965) described Harlem culture as self-hating and destructive with dialect and speech style that "suggests mental disorder." Ruth Benedict (Benedict, 1940/1959, 1934/1959) argued that African Americans in the cities adapted the behavior of their white counterparts. In explaining the process of culture loss she wrote, "Their patterns of political, economic, and artistic behavior were forgotten – even the languages they had spoken in Africa" (p. 86). All of the above scholars were respected in their fields and considered proponents of racial equality. Yet, when it came to language and culture, they consistently supported arguments that trans-Atlantic slavery left African Americans with no cultural roots worth mentioning and they laid the foundation for later beliefs that aligned blackness with pathology and whiteness with progress.[1]

The fall-out from these social science theories proved devastating. Anthropology interpreted these theories as indicative of self-hate (or low self-esteem) and proof that African Americans are ashamed of their African and slave heritage (e.g. Nelson, 1993; Willis, 1970). Some sociologists (e.g. Glazer and Moynihan, 1963; Myrdal, 1944) interpreted the anthropological view to mean that African American behavior that did not mirror white behavior was pathological or deviant, while others (e.g. Clark, 1965; Frazier, 1934, 1939) considered attempts to mimic white behavior pathological.

Though these perspectives represent the dominant view of anthropology and sociology until the late 1960s, there were, in fact, competing views concerning African American culture and language. Melville Herskovits

(1925, 1935, 1941) introduced the notion of African continuity along with Zora Neale Hurston (1935/1993) and later Sterling Stuckey (1971, 1987), Lawrence Levine (1977) and others. Though Herskovits is a major proponent of this position, Sidney Mintz and Richard Price (1992) contend that the African continuities may have been overstated since Herskovits focused on specific cultural traits that were not widespread throughout the African continent. They write, "Treating culture as a list of traits or objects or words is to miss the manner in which social relations are carried on through it – and thus to ignore the most important way in which it can change or be changed" (p. 22). Instead, they suggest that the areas of culture that may reveal widespread continuities are in African language and cultural values (see also Alleyne, 1980). They consider historical arguments about the origins of African American English to be one element of proof of African continuities. More importantly, they argue for cultural and social analysis that might reveal "by what social processes such a language became standardized, was taught to newly imported slaves, could be enriched by new experiences, invested with new symbolic meanings, and attached to status differences" (Mintz and Price, 1992: 21).

Though providing analyses of how language reflected and helped shape the culture and social order is of fundamental importance, it was first necessary to prove that aspects of African languages survived slavery. Lorenzo Turner (1949/1973) presented conclusive evidence of Africanisms in the Gullah language. Turner's work was followed later by creolists who identified features of African American English that are similar to those in African or creole languages (e.g. Dalby, 1969, 1972; Dillard, 1972; Stewart, 1967). Since disputes about the speech of African Americans often concern political and social statements about African American culture, politics and history in general, linguistic arguments likewise involve the entire gamut of possibilities. These include the origins of AAE, the social, cultural and political conditions from which it emerged and whether it is a language or dialect. There are also questions about its identifying features, the context in which information about it is gathered, why it exists, the social and political implications of its continued existence, its orthographic representation and the role of African American activism in the scholarly representation of culture and language.

Great language expectations: Paul Lawrence Dunbar

The fact that scholarly work on African American language behavior and culture would always embody the issues described above was firmly established at the dawn of the twentieth century with the publication of

poetry by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1893). Dunbar was one of the first American authors of "pure" African ancestry and the son of ex-slaves. He was born in Ohio and graduated from Central High School in Dayton, was editor of a student newspaper, class poet, and president of the literary society. He was a celebrated and prolific writer of essays, short stories, novels, librettos, plays and poetry. Because it had been illegal to teach slaves to read, Dunbar wrote at a time when there was still a limited black readership and he could not reach a wide black audience through his writings. Thus his success was the result of a mainly white readership (Rauch, 1991).

In spite of his accomplishments, the achievements of Paul Lawrence Dunbar were plagued by debate within and between black and white America over the communicative and linguistic norms and values of Americans of African descent. Dunbar was treated as a "novelty" of his time because few African Americans possessed advanced literacy skills, and it was routinely argued that only "mixed" African Americans with discernable European ancestry were capable of such skills (Rauch, 1991). Additional irony accompanied the work of Dunbar because, though well educated, he wrote many of his poems in plantation "dialect" – the early twentieth-century literary version of the vernacular. According to James Weldon Johnson (1922), Dunbar wrote in plantation dialect because he believed it was the only variety in which he could write that a white readership would find acceptable.[2]

Dunbar's writings are often cited as the first example of a culturally rich and insightful portrayal of typical black life during and immediately following slavery. At the same time, African American writers and critics have vilified his writings as generally sentimental, humorous, childlike, absurdly optimistic and agonizingly uncritical of slavery (e.g. Johnson, 1922; Locke, 1974; Wright, 1957). This harsh assessment occurred because Dunbar's cultural portrayals were constructed with categorically stereotypical language, which, according to the above writers, confirmed and reconstituted racist stereotypes of African Americans as possessing childlike dependency and low cognitive ability. The contrasts between the variety of language used and content are apparent in his classic poem "We Wear the Mask" and excerpts from "The Party" (Dunbar, 1940).

We Wear the Mask
We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, –
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but O great Christ, our cries
To Thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh, the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask.

"We Wear the Mask" explicitly highlights the dignity of the African American experience and indignity suffered under white supremacy. It also highlights the importance of a social face – with its subtleties – that does not express the agony to those who either inflicted or were spared the experience of slavery and its aftermath. In contrast, "The Party" is about celebration.

The Party
Dey had a gread big pahty down to Tom's de othah night;
Was I dah? You bet! I nevah in my life see sich a sight;
All de folks f'om fou' plantations was invited an'dey come,
Dey come troopin' thick ez chillun when day hyeahs a fife an'drum.
Evahbody dressed deir fines' – Heish yo' mouf an' git away.
Ain't seen sich fancy dressin' sence las' quah'tly meetin' day;
Gals all dressed in silks an'satins, not a wrinkle ner a crease,
Eyes a-barrin', teeth a-shinin', haih breshed back ez slick ez grease;
Skut's all tucked an' puffed an' ruffled, evah blessed seam an' stitch;
Ef you'd sen 'em wif deir mistus, couldn't swahed to which was which.
Men all dressed up in Prince Alberts, swallertails 'u'd tek you' bref!
I cain't tell you nothin' 'bout it, yo' ought to seen it fu' yo'se'f.
Who was dah? Now who you askin'? How you 'spect I gwine to know?
You mus' think I stood an' counted evahbody at de do'.

For Dunbar's largely white audience, "The Party" may mistakenly be viewed as a minstrelsy blackface portrayal of happy-go-lucky black people. But it is an example of what happens behind the mask where people assume they are intelligent and capable – so they can speak their dialect among themselves, adorn their bodies, play their music and dance the night away – knowing that having a party is also one aspect of who they are and what makes them people trying to live a full life. In this sense, "The Party" signifies the urgent need of emotional concealment.

I begin with this brief review of the polemics surrounding Paul Lawrence Dunbar's work because it embodies nearly every issue that has emerged concerning African American language over the last thirty

years. The intellectual and critical ideas of Dunbar are regularly framed as grammatically and phonologically educated speech, while irresponsible and childlike behavior is associated with plantation dialect. Since dialect variety and cognitive ability are inextricably linked in this case, it was unheard of that any educated person would freely admit that he or she spoke and respected both. In fact, as in sociology and anthropology, some linguists have considered the phenomenon of educated African Americans using AAE subversive to the extent that they have argued that these varieties were fabrications and never existed at all (e.g. McDavid, 1963; Williamson, 1970). Others suspected that educated African Americans who criticized linguists promoting AAE suffered from self-hate (e.g. Stewart, 1975). Fortunately, scholarly research and public attitudes concerning the language behavior of African Americans continued to evolve throughout the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the initial depiction of Africans as primitive, the belief that African culture was completely lost during the middle passage and the belief that contact with Africans who spoke different languages meant the eradication of all vestiges of people's native language meant that AAE was destined to be endlessly stigmatized and evaluated. But before it was seriously scrutinized, it was dismissed as not existing at all.

Dialectologists were especially prone to dismiss any African influence in the speech of African Americans since their research focused exclusively on migration and influence from the British Isles (Dillard, 1972). The result was that AAE was described in relation to various types of US speech spoken by those of British descent (e.g. McDavid, 1963; McDavid and McDavid, 1951; Mencken, 1977; Williamson, 1971). In fact, George Krapp (1924) did not believe that there were any aspects of speech that could not be traceable to England. Moreover as Dillard (1972) reports, Raven McDavid Jr., who abridged H. L. Mencken's *The American Language*, suggested that AAE was a contrived variety developed for use among white patrons and dropped once out of their presence (p. 478 fn 4)!

In contrast to dialectologists who either ignored the presence of AAE or focused on British influences, sociolinguists and creolists attempted to develop comprehensive descriptions and analyses of AAE. This included efforts to describe its historical origins, lexicon, grammatical and phonological features, use and function within and among members of the African American speech community (Dillard, 1972; Smitherman, 1977; Tolliver-Weddington, 1979; Turner, 1949/1973) irrespective of other varieties of American English. At the same time, others (e.g. Labov, 1969, 1972a; Wolfram, 1969) focused on the systemic nature of AAE in relation to the system of American English.

After the mid 1980s, scholars of AAE expanded linguistic, historical and descriptive theories to reflect African American history and culture and connect it to other parts of the English-speaking African diaspora (Alleyne, 1980; Bailey, 1965; Baugh, 1980; Dillard, 1972; Mufwene, 1992a; Turner, 1949/1973). Still others have provided insight into its function, style and role and implications in education (e.g. Smitherman, 1977, 1981a,b; Ball, 1992; Baugh, 1999; Lee, 1993; Rickford, 1999; Rickford and Rickford, 1995; van Keulen, Tolliver-Weddington and DeBose, 1998). Even though some of these perspectives address the multicultural language contact first experienced by Africans and their descendants – who were both sold and born into US slavery – several questions remain.[3] How have African Americans used language to address political and social concerns and identities in the face of white supremacy and pervasive poverty? How was an African American culture that was influenced by but distinct from the African, Euro-American and (in some cases) Native American languages and cultures brought together by the contact? And how do we interpret the role and constitutive elements of African American culture and language in American society today?

The slave community

In linguistics, the question of the "first time" for African Americans is necessarily framed within the question of how the language and culture of African societies in contact with each other as equals under slavery, and subjugated under the rule of European travelers, traders, adventurers and exploiters, came to communicate with each other. Though there remain numerous unanswered questions regarding specific language backgrounds of Africans brought to the New World, there are several factors that are known. First slavery, and the development of African-origin communities in the US, occurred in two waves (Morgan, 1989).

The first occurrence was represented by the upper colonies' demand for domestic and manufacturing work and the lower colonies' for agricultural production of rice, indigo and tobacco (Johnson and Campbell, 1981).[4] The majority of the Africans were brought directly to the mainland ports and the Atlantic slave trade did not stop in the Caribbean (Mannix and Cowley, 1962).[5] During this first stage, language contact was with coastal West Africans as well as those from countries between Angola and Senegal.[6] Several historians (e.g. Berry and Blassingame, 1982) regard this period as one of both isolation and ongoing contact. For example, those who were sent to the Carolinas were geographically isolated on the Sea Islands and formed very different speech communities from those

Table 1 *Expansion of the slave population in the United States, 1790–1860*

Census year	1790	1800	1810	1820
Number	697,624	893,602	1,191,362	1,538,0022
Decennial increase		28.1	33.3	29.1
Census year	1830	1840	1850	1860
Number	2,009,043	2,487,355	3,204,313	3,953,760
Decennial increase	30.6	23.8	28.8	23.4

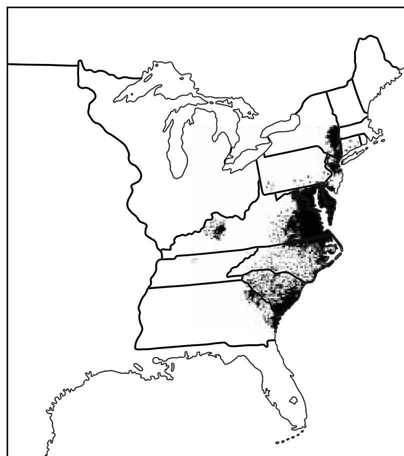
Source: Negro Population in the United States 1790–1860 (1915: 53)

involved in domestic and manufacturing labor (Berry and Blassingame, 1982; Fields, 1985).

The second stage emerged around 1793 with the introduction of the cotton gin. This invention's entry into the Southern economy was followed by the official cessation of the Atlantic slave trade in the early 1800s, though it continued years after (Franklin and Moss, 1988). In order for the cotton gin to realize its promise to increase the production of cotton, intensive slave labor was demanded. During this period of slavery the plantation system of the Gulf States and the Mississippi Valley expanded. By 1815, internal slave trading was a major activity within the US and between 1830 and 1840, nearly 250,000 slaves were transported over state lines. During 1850–60, over 193,000 were transported and by 1860, the slave population had reached over 4 million. Maps 1–4 and table 1 suggest that between 1790 and 1820 the language contact situation was such that many of the African slaves retained their first languages, a contact variety (see below) and some version of English (cf. Dillard, 1972).[7]

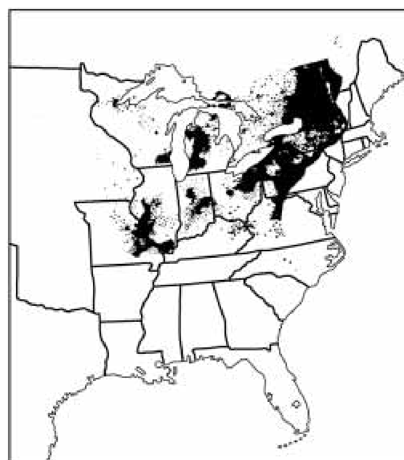
Once the internal slave trade became the dominant character of US slavery, and individuals within extended families, clans and national groups were forced to move to other states, it became increasingly difficult to determine one's country of origin whether originally from Africa or born into slavery.[8] The internal slave trade lasted over sixty years and was followed by eighty years of Jim Crow laws. What remains uncertain is how the plantation system and white supremacy after the period of Reconstruction, when national citizenship included those of African descent (roughly 1865–77), affected the linguistic development of African American English.

The concentration of African Americans in Southern regions formed what was known as the Black Belt South because it seemed to extend

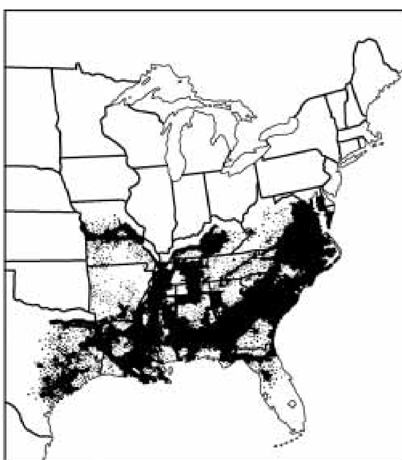


Map 1.1 Expansion of the slave population in the USA, 1790

Map 1.2 Expansion of the slave population in the USA, 1800



Map 1.3 Expansion of the slave population in the USA, 1830



Map 1.4 Expansion of the slave population in the USA, 1860

across the South when highlighted on a map. Though the speech community remained geographically concentrated and largely intact after slavery officially ended in 1865, gradual splintering and expansion began to take shape after the turn of the century. This change occurred in a population movement known as the Great Migration (1900–60). Blacks moved out

of the South in search of work and to flee lynching and white supremacy. During this period, over a million people fled to the North. As Carole Marks (1989) writes:

> The great Migration represents a "watershed" in the experience of blacks in the United States because it was the first mass movement out of the South, the beginning of significant industrial employment, and the initial exercising of the rights of citizenship. (p.1)

The availability of jobs in the North was partly due to World War I, which effectively halted European migration to the US and led to the loss of menial and factory labor in the North. At the same time, thousands of white men left their jobs to fight in the war – and in a segregated military. This was followed by the decimation of the Southern cotton crop by the boll weevil, leaving many blacks jobless. The final assault was the 1929 depression that devastated an already struggling black community, which did not reassert itself again until World War II.

World War II represents the second phase of mass movement from the South and resulted in vacancies of thousands of jobs in the city that had been traditionally held by white men. It also revealed the presence of urban African American communities where the demand for labor presented renewed hope for black Southerners (Adero, 1993; Drake and Cayton, 1962; Johnson and Campbell, 1981; Marks, 1989). As a result of the urban period, three forces can be identified that helped to transform black culture and the nature of the community: (1) migration and urbanization, (2) creation of the black economic and social class structure and (3) commercialization. On the one hand, there was a concentration of blacks into urban areas. On the other hand, urban life was less intimate than rural life since the population changed more frequently. The result was a greater variety in attitudes, beliefs and practices. The population was transformed from mainly agricultural workers and families to individual workers within factories, often with white workers who performed similar labor.[9] As the African American population moved throughout urban centers, they encountered emigrants from Eastern and Western Europe, Asia, and the rest of the Americas. And as a black American culture and identity continued to evolve, so did a language ideology that reflected and represented all aspects of an ever-changing "first time."

Counterlanguage and power in discourse

Contact situations that result in subjugation and marginalization often lead to diverse speech communities that share geographical space but

represent different language ideologies. Depending on the relationship of the groups, the ideology of those in power can include denigrating the language and speech style of others. This is especially true for US plantation slavery where all behavior as well as speech and style of speaking were greatly regulated. Total institutions (Goffman, 1961) such as plantation slavery often lead to antisocieties and underground institutions where people resist subjugation (Goffman, 1961; Halliday, 1978). These antisocieties typically emerge when those who dominate individuals require that the subjugated display an attitude that reaffirms the dominator/dominated relationship – in the presence of others – by verbal or physical confirmation (e.g. bowing heads or saying, "Yes sir/ma'am"). However, antisocieties should not be viewed solely as underground institutions. They are in response to control from those with power and are only underground in the sense that disempowered or marginalized groups rely on and participate in them. Consequently, from the perspective of the non-dominant group, antisocieties are very much above the ground and a significant aspect of everyday speech. These institutions are cloaked and unseen by those in power. Thus they allow people a form of agency found in face-to-face encounters so that they can construct a system of communication that incorporates social face (Goffman, 1967), the image and impression that a person conveys during encounters, along with others' evaluation of that image.

It is important to remember that until the 1960s, Southern segregationists could, without consequences, control and regulate the verbal interactions of blacks, and especially interactions between blacks and whites (see chapter 3). These policies, which were protected by the legal system, considered certain forms of direct talk by African Americans to constitute claims regarding rights and status (cf. Gwaltney, 1981; Morgan, 1980, 1994a). Thus "talk" and "interaction" were constitutive elements of a system of inequity and participants' social roles were partially constructed through conversation. The resulting unwritten – but enforced – policy meant that in order to participate in the average black/white interaction, a black person minimally had to abide by language and communicative rules which functioned to mark a presumed belief in the superiority of a white audience/hearer. Goffman also mentions this type of restriction where the act of making a statement is viewed as a symptom of the problem (Goffman, 1961: 45). He uses the term "looping" to refer to instances where a person cannot distance him or herself from "the mortifying situation" (1961: 36) by any face-saving action. Instead, they lose any aspect of positive social face and must behave as though they comply with the assessment.

Some rules of how blacks were to communicate with whites included: (a) talking only when permission was granted; (b) never having direct eye contact with a white person; (c) never using educated speech (unless told to perform); (d) determining and then saying whatever the person wanted to hear; (e) never asking a question about a white person's intention; (f) never contradicting what someone says; (g) bowing heads and (h) saying "Yes sir/ma'am"; and (i) never receiving respectful forms of address in return (cf. Morgan, 1994b). The harsh consequences that might result when the communicative dictums described above were ignored have been brilliantly illustrated in many slave narratives and literature about lynching and black cultural life under segregation (e.g. Brent and Jacob, 1973; Gwaltney, 1981; Johnson, 1982; Morrison, 1987; Simonsen, 1986; Stevenson, 1997; Walker, 1982; Whitfield, 1988; Williams, 1986).

In response to the demand that they have the "attitude" of someone who should be oppressed, African American culture and antisociety undermined the values, attitudes and beliefs that the dominant society held toward them (cf. Bryce-Laporte, 1971) through the use of existing African systems of indirectness (Morgan, 1989, 1991, 1993). Indirectness occurs when cultural actors recognize talk as symbolic of ideas, values and occurrences that are not directly related to the present context. African American adult indirectness includes an analysis of discourses of power since these adults know that their cultural practices, beliefs and values are generally not shared by the wider society who may not be aware that they exist at all. Once the phenomenology of indirectness operated both within white supremacist encounters and African American culture and social encounters, interactions, words or phrases could have contradictory or multiple meanings beyond traditional English interpretations. Thus a counterlanguage emerged that was based on indirectness and functioned to signal the antisociety (e.g. ideological black audience) and provided a means for a speaker to reveal a social face (Goffman, 1967) that resisted and contested the practice of racial repression.

Though based on norms of African interaction, the counterlanguage developed in ways that reflected the social, cultural and political experience of African Americans. Thus in stark contrast to the cross-racial rules of interaction outlined earlier, black interactions embodied and highlighted an exacting sense of speaker agency (Morgan, 1993). This intense focus on speaker agency was co-constructed with a black audience for whom language forms and styles signal that content or speaker intent is being camouflaged. In other words, within the system of repression, the counterlanguage provided a vehicle for face-work (Goffman,

1967) and protected and confirmed the existence of the antisociety. Its function in instantiating speaker agency was so great that the "act" of talking was potentially political and highly symbolic.

Within the counterlanguage, the basic concept of audience included all black hearers and potential hearers, as well as the likelihood that there were spies and overhearers/reporters. Thus the audience and hearer, whether immediately present or presumed present through gossip, spies, etc., were socially and culturally constructed entities. As a result, speakers were also expected to exhibit their conversational prowess and manage to direct what was said to a black audience who, in turn, held him or her responsible for what was said as well as possible interpretations. Thus in many profound ways, a speaker's social face, status and standing were always at stake (Morgan, 1991; Smitherman, 1977).[10]

From slavery until the 1960s, these principles continued to function as counterlanguage in the Southern United States within white supremacy dictums of interaction between blacks and whites, which were enforced by state-sanctioned policies. These policies considered certain forms of talk by African Americans to constitute and index claims regarding citizenship rights and status. Thus "talk" and "interaction" were constitutive elements of the system of inequity and participants' social roles were partially constructed through conversation (see chapters 2 and 4 for discourse and linguistic rules). The counterlanguage included multiple audiences, layers of understanding and concomitant multiple subjectivities. It may not have survived and been adapted were it not for dominant Southern society's relentless monitoring of African Americans' communication and language. Irrespective of the reason for its continued significance in African American interactions, the counterlanguage is the foundation of all African American discourse (see chapter 2). Following are two narratives about life and injustice in the South that employ counterlanguage and local knowledge as described above.[11]

John Henry was a hard-working man

The narrative of John Henry Martin illustrates life as a sharecropper, the difficulty in expressing rights and the desire to own property. This difficulty is embedded in the language ideology of white supremacy and that of African American counterlanguage. The art of telling a story, trying to fully represent "what happened," is a monumental task which most "everyday people" accomplish with authority, style and wit. Narratives do not simply relate human experience but culturally fashion it so that stories are constitutive of everyday life. In the lives of many older African

Americans like my grandfather, narratives were how children learned that their questions represented the truth about black life and their answers could only be understood within life's ironies and complexities. He taught that only fools (and perhaps children) are satisfied with simple answers. It is in this sense that narratives embody social reality and, in the case of marginalized groups, both deconstruct and interrogate life under hegemony. It is thus apropos that US African American narratives both embody and contest the multiple realities that emerge in the process of mediating identity and citizenship rights while functioning both within and in opposition to mainstream control (Griffin, 1995; Smith, 1987).[12]

John Henry Martin's narrative is one of work and independence. It is based on knowing the social and language rules of white supremacy.[13] It focuses on the significance of "work" and how the right to control the nature of work might be an act of defiance and therefore a source of stress (James, 1994).[14] Consequently, the mention of work in African American narratives is also a device to indirectly introduce the injustices that occurred while working or having to work and an indication of the character of the person/worker.

1 I was born in 1907, the 16th day of October, on a farm down below Rockcastle,
2 in Shelby County. My daddy was a sharecropper . . . When I was just a little
3 boy, 'bout five or six years old, I guess, we moved from below Rockcastle up
4 here to Wakefield County, to a farm near Cobb's Store. My daddy – I don't
5 know what happened – but he lost everything he had on that farm near Cobb's
6 store, and we stayed there for twelve years, workin' for one half . . .
7 And I said, then, that if I ever get me some more money, I'm gonna save me
8 some money. And then, in different ways, I wanted to be somebody. I wanted
9 to have somethin' – a car, a mule, and all that kinda stuff. Well, all of that
10 come true. How did it come true? Well, when I was 'bout twenty-one years
11 old, I decided that I was tired of workin' and givin' them white folks half my
12 labor. So, I told my daddy 'bout me and him buyin' a farm somewhere. My
13 mamma, Lord, she wouldn't a want us to do that! But I decided that I
14 couldn't, just couldn't keep on workin' and givin' out on my own. For I wanted
15 somethin'. I wanted somethin' for myself.
16 So I went on and hired myself out for wages, for nine months and fifty dollars
17 in money. That wasn't no money back then either! And this old white man
18 who I was workin' for asked me, he said, "Henry, I'll furnish your house off
19 for you and feed you too." I told him "Naw". I knowed he was tryin' to slip
20 me then. I told him, "Naw, I can buy it."
21 So, me and my wife done just that. And we had just a little bit of money left
22 over. And we went scarce with that money. But that fall, we didn't owe that
23 white man nothin but money for our fertilizer.
24 We stayed there four years – workin' for one-half. And this white man, his
25 daughters, sons, wife and all; oh, they was just good to me. They was! They

26 was good to me. For they would leave their house there with me, leave it wide
27 open. But what they was doing, you see, they was feedin' me on sugar! They
28 wanted me to feed the hogs, see to the mules, milk the cow. Well, that was too
29 much work! So my wife's brother, he kept on askin' me 'bout buyin' a farm. I
30 was regular workin', me and my wife. Workin' down at that white man's and
31 workin' for one-half. Well, it wasn't half! See, I had to furnish my clothes, get
32 somethin' to eat, and still he only give a man half. And it ain't even half! So,
33 my wife's brother kept on askin' me 'bout buyin' a place.
34 So, he kept on after me, and I finally went down to Knottsboro to see 'bout
35 gettin' a loan – FHA. I talked to them folks 'bout it, and they told me "Yeah,
36 we'll buy you a farm." That like to scared me to death! But after they said
37 they'd buy me one – furnish me the money – I got interested in it . . .
38 So, the government down there, they kept a writin' me letters and I'd read
39 'em. And the white man I was on halves with – he got a hold to one of 'em.
40 It was 'round bargainin' time, time to bargain to stay on another year. He
41 come out there to my house one day and said, "Henry, you aim to stay on with me another year?"
42 I said, "I don't know, suh, Mr. Tucker. I was thinkin' 'bout buyin' me a farm."
43 He said, "Buyin' a farm?!"
44 I said, "Yeah."
45 He said, "Man, you don't need no farm. Them taxes will eat you up!"
46 I said, "Well, you got one, and it ain't eat you up yet, is it?"
47 He said, "Naw, but they're sure high. It's hard times, and it's gonna be
48 harder one of these years."
49 I said, "Well, I don't know." [He said] "You have a home here just as long
50 as you want one." I said, "Yeah, believe I will; but one day I'm gonna get old,
51 and I won't be able to work. And when you get old, well, that home is gone.
52 You don't have no home then."
53 He said, "Oh no, I wouldn't do you like that." I reckon you heard old folks
54 say "white folks put sugar in your coffee?" Yeah, put sugar in your coffee –
55 sweeten you up so they can handle you.

Indexing local knowledge: work, built environment, racism and power

As mentioned earlier, African American stories about social contact outside the black community often index significant, yet indirect, local knowledge. Thus John Henry Martin's description of the complex social issues involved in achieving economic independence in the 1920s is interwoven with local knowledge about "regular workin'," working your burden, citizenship rights and the assessment of white supremacist intentions. His revelation in line 5 that his father sharecropped near Cobb's store includes the local knowledge that his father was under constant surveillance and scrutiny since local wisdom about shopping in and living near stores owned and frequented by whites includes an

understanding that a black person could never exhibit his or her dignity in that setting (cf. Gwaltney, 1981; Simonsen, 1986; Whitfield, 1988). In particular, Mr. Martin's narrative reveals that his father's interactions were under constant surveillance and could be assessed and monitored for compliance and display of an attitude that corroborates that the domination is needed (e.g. looping). In spite of these restrictions, Mr. Martin directly and indirectly reveals the cultural and political economy that he desires to outwit, while doggedly analyzing and providing theories about the intentionality of landowners, bankers and relatives. His display of local knowledge occurs through indirection, providing evidence that blacks in the rural South lived under a system of forced labor based on indebtedness, the terror of lynching and the realization that whites felt justified in participation in the system of oppression. At the same time, life as part of agricultural labor often encompassed a middle-class consciousness associated with property ownership. Nonetheless, the longing for property among African Americans was associated with the belief that property rights were equal to citizenship rights.

Mr. Martin also supplies local knowledge about work and the significance of work in his life. His desire for fair compensation for work begins indirectly and becomes increasingly direct as Mr. Martin discusses his desire to own property in the face of possible repercussions. The expression *workin' for one half* first appears in line 6 with the description of his father's working life and is repeated in some form at least five times. This expression refers to a form of peonage where the landlord furnishes everything required to farm except the labor and one half of fertilizers. In return, the tenant gets one half the profit from the crop and the landlord gets the other. Since very few tenants could read, and they were not allowed to contradict whites, they had no access to profit records and most goods had to be purchased at the store owned by the landlord. Unsurprisingly, tenants seldom earned enough to pay all debts and leave the tenant system (Marks, 1989; Woodson, 1930). Of course a landowner was desperate to maintain this system, since he would be bankrupt or have greatly reduced profits if deserted by his tenants. Mr. Martin provides further local knowledge when he considers what appears to be a simple offer of assistance from his landlord, in line 18, to be a ruse to keep him entrapped. This is especially revealed in line 25 where he describes the landowner's demonstration of trust as in the following passage:

oh, they was just good to me. They was! They was good to me. For they would leave their house there with me, leave it wide open. But what they was doing, you see, they was feedin' me on sugar!

The expression *feeding me on sugar* conveys the notion that Mr. Martin thought he was being treated in a special yet patronizing way as an attempt to lure him into believing he had rights and a good life – when he didn't. In the process of telling his story, Mr. Martin deconstructs his expressions of local knowledge for the listener who might not understand what life was like under Jim Crow.

In contrast, Mr. West's story (below) about a lynching provides little direct interpretation of the local knowledge in play. It is a story that requires that we know about lynching and lynchers in order to learn what really happened.

They make it and they break it

When African Americans who have witnessed or been directly affected by lynching tell about what happened, they often provide detailed descriptive accounts of their understanding of what motivated the lynching and how it was carried out. Within the narrative, these details have a dialogic relationship with concepts of citizenship rights, including the right to work, the right to speak and the right to live. At some point in time, while conducting fieldwork between 1979 and 1999, all the generations in all of the Northern and Southern communities I visited mentioned something about lynching. Though people feared it and continued to consider it a possibility, even before the lynching of 1999 in Jasper, Texas, they were mainly disgusted. The nature of this disgust is revealed in the discussion of Emmett Till's lynching.

In 1955, while visiting his family in Mississippi during the summer vacation, Emmett Till was murdered at the age of fourteen because – reportedly – some white men believed he insulted a white woman because he whistled while at a country store![15] The lynchers did not witness Emmett Till's interaction with the woman; rather, it was reported to them after the entire African American community became aware of the incident. When the men arrived to take Emmett Till away, his family begged for his life, explaining that he didn't understand that he should not have addressed the woman in a way some might consider disrespectful because he was not from there and was raised in Chicago! They pleaded that they had already severely punished him and would pay the woman's family restitution. The white men, whom the family knew, assured the family that they would not fatally hurt him, but teach him a lesson. They lied – and Emmett Till was taken, tortured, killed and dumped in a river with weights tied around his body. During the trial the men who lynched the boy said that one of the questions they asked him just before he died was whether he thought he was as good as they were now.