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In the Profession

African American English

Connecting Linguistics' Message with a Mission

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Last fall, Robin had the experience that we think many of us in the United States have when we first present the history, grammar, and complexities of use associated with African American English (AAE) to an undergraduate class. She met with some nods of acknowledgment, some arms crossed in disagreement, some signs of interest and surprise, and some delight at recognizing a previously unknown puzzle start to come together. As do many linguists, we take a great deal of pleasure at seeing students start to understand the underlying structure of this variety of American English, but always find ourselves looking back to those whose arms were crossed initially to see if we have persuaded them, and this is especially true when those crossed arms belong to African American students. While a variety of sources may motivate the crossed arms of disagreement, they usually serve to remind us of how deeply rooted ideas about language are, including those that we as linguists hold. They also typically lead us to ponder what more or what else linguists might do to increase the delight and nods of understanding while decreasing the crossed arms.

For at least the last forty years, linguists, especially sociolinguists, have turned themselves virtually inside out demonstrating the fundamental systematicity of AAE and have used that fundamental systematicity to illustrate the most basic tenet of our discipline: that all languages and linguistic varieties share the same grammatical ground. Some scholars have developed curricula aimed at teaching teachers; some have gone into schools to work with children and young adults on matters of language; some have testified in court; some have written editorials, full-length articles, and books for the popular press. Many of us continue to fight hard for fair public treatment of this variety and for reasonable and effective policy decisions aimed at improving channels of access to the varieties of English most typically associated with upward social and economic mobility. The efforts at both public outreach and at rigorous scholarship concerning AAE, one of the most widely studied varieties of English, have been nothing short of impressive. In spite of these efforts, though, linguists have not achieved the desired impact on public understanding about the variety or about its complex relationship to other languages and varieties of English. In
this installment of “In the Profession,” we discuss a few of the reasons for this state of affairs and make a modest proposal for some things we, as linguists, could do differently.

The lack of impact is not entirely surprising given how AAE is often represented within linguistics. For instance, despite claims about the equality of linguistic varieties, Walters (1996) shows that the treatment of AAE (and other so-called “non-standard” varieties) in introductory linguistics textbooks does little to actually support our basic disciplinary tenets. Instead, textbooks position AAE as well as a few other varieties as examples of “sociolinguistic variation,” which stand in direct contrast with “English,” a variant almost never presented as one among equals, but rather presented as the default and standard it is already assumed to be. Wolfram (2007) notes a number of additional areas in which the representation of AAE undercuts our claims of linguistic equality. For instance, linguists have typically homogenized the variety both by denying or ignoring its regional and social variation and by viewing it as a variety that has undergone little change, except insofar as it is seen to be diverging from other varieties of American English. Such homogenization can have real strategic benefits for showing the systematic, grammatical properties of the variety. At the same time, presenting speakers who have usage patterns that are the most distinctive from other varieties of American English as the most authentic speakers disenfranchises those speakers who use fewer features less frequently. Such speakers may be the most likely to reject linguists’ insistence that AAE is a legitimate variety because, in foregrounding the grammatical systematicity of AAE, linguists appear to disregard its systematic variability. Convincing people that AAE is legitimate and equal to other varieties of English depends on taking seriously the claim that linguistic knowledge entails both rules and constraints of grammar and rules and constraints of use.

Similarly, linguists’ own ideological positions lead many of us to downplay the very real costs that may be associated with asking people to see AAE as legitimately grammatical, including in our choices about what we call the variety when we teach about it. Although we may dutifully explain that not all or only African Americans use AAE, the very name of the variety, African American English, can easily belie this claim. The name essentializes its users in complex ways, rendering the European American who uses this variety as exceptional as the African American who doesn’t. In short, linguistics has not shifted the burden of dialect authenticity off the shoulders of African Americans. Further, the name leads to multifaceted confrontations with respect to broader ideologies about language and social difference that linguists ignore at the peril of our message. While the name importantly celebrates the connection to a rich African American (and American) history, it also creates barriers to connecting to the critical point about the systematicity that led it to be named in the first place.

Finally, we have not been effective at explaining what the benefits might be for accepting the grammaticality of AAE. While we may have been successful at
demonstrating that *aks* is a historically older form than *ask*; that the AAE verbal system differs in predictable ways from other varieties; that AAE speakers are typically bidialectal and able to vary their usage according to context, we haven’t really explained the benefits of listening to linguists. It is not surprising that policy discussions about AAE may leave people, particularly African Americans, with the belief that educators (or legislators) want to use AAE in the classroom to prevent African Americans from having access to “standard” English. There is, as a result, a very important need to direct more effort to explaining the benefits of accepting the systematicity of AAE (and to using it as an educational tool in the classroom), such as celebrating the sheer creativity that language and language variation highlights or facilitating the use and mastery of “standard English” for students who come from communities where AAE is the predominant variety.

Many of our efforts at legitimizing AAE have in fact focused on this last issue, especially within the context of classroom teaching and classroom teachers. Increasingly, too, efforts are underway to include basic linguistic knowledge, a kind of linguistic literacy, as part of the core set of educational practices seen as a component of compulsory education. These efforts are critical given that linguistics is one of the few disciplines that most people first encounter at the post-secondary level—if they encounter it at all. Devoting attention to promoting this kind of general linguistic literacy requires linguists to think more carefully about how our discipline is presented in public and how our disagreements play themselves out. It also requires more of us to think creatively about how to engage with our own local communities concerning matters of language.

We believe linguists should do more to reach out to African American communities and to include working-, middle-, and upper-middle-class communities in our efforts to explain the benefits of a less prejudicial approach to AAE. Thus, in addition to our ongoing efforts to educate college students and public school teachers and students, we should also begin to promote a linguistically and sociopolitically oriented approach to AAE in the very communities where its varied speakers live. For instance, we can provide seminars at the public library or information meetings at community churches and other similar community-based institutions, talking with local citizens about the social evaluation of linguistic variation, explaining why, for example, both Oprah Winfrey and 50 Cent can be considered legitimate, authentic users of AAE. We can use other public venues to show how histories of African American migration and segregation intersect with and inform both the linguistic variation we see in African American communities and the various relationships between AAE and other varieties of English. Finally, we can foster and encourage grassroots organizing on behalf of the legitimization of AAE, sending ourselves and our students into a variety of communities to talk to individuals about language and to promote a culture of linguistic knowledge. In so doing we thereby promote the ideas that all language varieties are grounded in systematicity and that all language varieties represent a fundamental human resource, the value of which is tied
to long-standing political and historical struggles over power at both the local level of individual communities and neighborhoods as well as at the macro level of political entities such as nations.

If we want to uncross more arms in our undergraduate classrooms, we need to reach out to the communities where our students grew up, where their parents and K-12 teachers instilled in them often very powerful beliefs about how language works, about what is "right" and "wrong" when it comes to English. Rather than asking students to choose between what we are telling them in college classrooms and what they may still hear when they return home, we should try to make more information about AAE available to the communities that surround our own institutions. This modest proposal requires only that individual linguists take the initiative to share what they know with these communities, in ways that will not only be accessible but also ring true to those outside academia.

References
