

“To be ourselves”: African American women’s and girls’ attitudes towards their language behaviour

Black feminist and womanist language and communication scholars point out the continued scarcity of studies concerning African American women’s language (AAWL), discourse, and identity (Houston and Davis 2002; Lanehart 2009). At the same time, they underscore the need for studies and methodological approaches that do not reinforce essentialist narratives, negative interpretations, and stereotypical views of this particular group of speakers (Scott 2002). Moreover, as Evans-Winters posits, “there remains a need for academic texts that center, amplify, and politicize the everyday lived experiences and multiple identities of Black women (and girls) in the U.S.” (2019: 9).

In this paper, I attempt to contribute to answering that need by investigating African American women’s and girls’ attitudes and ideologies regarding their language behaviour from a sociolinguistic perspective, based on the analysis of two focus group interviews I conducted with two different age groups: university students (ages between 19 and 22), and women from a church group (ages between 37 and 57). During these interviews I asked my participants about stereotypes and expectations (both mainstream and within the Black community) regarding Black women’s language behaviour, their attitudes towards the notion of African American women’s language, their opinions regarding African American women’s particular skills as users of African American English (AAE), and their lived experiences, both negative and positive, as Black female speakers of AAE. Using the Black feminist epistemology model (Collins 2000) as a governing social theory for this critical sociolinguistic (Mullany 2007) study, I place my analysis in a specific socio-historical context, and I position my co-researchers (participants) as experts on their own lived experiences and as knowledge co-creating agents.

Preliminary analysis has given some interesting insights into Black women’s and girls’ attitudes towards their language behaviour as expressed within these two particular groups of participants. The women were generally more hesitant to discuss their language behaviour as different from that of the (White) mainstream, while the girls exhibited affirmative attitudes towards their language as female speakers of AAE. Both groups shared some negative experiences as Black female speakers navigating mainstream communication spaces; however, the girls were more explicit in discussing the positive aspects of their lived experiences as Black female speakers of AAE, while the women emphasized the responsibility to represent other Black women in mainstream spaces and the historical sacrifice of the women who came before them.

With this study, I aim to illumine the variety of attitudes of Black women and girls towards their language as informed by their lived experiences and a specific socio-historical context. I hope to contribute to the scholarship on African American women’s language that highlights the importance of studying various and multiple women’s discourses within the Black feminist epistemology in countering the essentialist and negative perceptions of African American women’s linguistic behaviour.

Word count: 457

Selected references:

- Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Evans-Winters, V. E. (2019). *Black feminism in qualitative inquiry: A mosaic for writing our daughter's body*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Houston, M. & O. I. Davis (Eds.). (2002). *Centering ourselves: African American feminist and womanist studies of discourse*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Lanehart, S. (Ed.). (2009). *African American women's language: discourse, education, and identity*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Mullany, L. (2007). Gendered discourses: A critical sociolinguistic approach. *Gendered discourse in professional workplace* (pp. 17-48). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Scott, K. D. (2002). Conceiving the language of Black women's everyday talk. In M. Houston & O. I. Davis (Eds.), *Centering ourselves: African American feminist and womanist studies in discourse* (pp. 53-75). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.