

WHO ARE THE SPEAKERS OF BLACK ENGLISH -

A METHODOLOGICAL NOTE\*

By

Dr. Gerald A. McWorter  
Associate Professor of Black Studies

and

Ms. Marcyliena Morgan  
Lecturer in Black Studies

Presented At

10th Annual Convention of TESOL  
(Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages)  
March 4, 1976  
New York City, New York

The language behavior of Black people in the U. S. has been the focus of considerable controversy, some empirical research, and theoretical debate.<sup>1</sup>

The three main questions in this area of linguistic research are:

- a. What is Black English?
- b. Who speaks it?
- c. What difference does it make.

The purpose of this paper is to focus on one small but critical point concerning methodology -- how do we know who speaks Black English. In other words, the study of the Black Speech Community focuses on structural descriptions, social origin, historical development, the current interface of Black English with the social structure, and the social consequences of the linguistic variation of Blacks from the accepted norm.

[This question assumes that it is possible to define who is a Black person and who is not; although the use of the politically potent term--Black--has an immediately "felt" color-racial referent, the more substantive historical concept of nationality--Afro-American--would require rejecting this assumption pending further empirical research and theoretically sound analysis.]

We have singled this question out because it leads to a major test of the extent sociolinguistics has incorporated the procedures of the scientific method. It is a popular error to equate what is perceived as a correct statement about reality as being correct. This type of error has been attacked by all of the sciences of man with the scientific method. For example, a prevailing theory of Gullah was that it was a reflective imitation of archaic forms of English. Turner proved that the linguists who put this view forward had no knowledge of African languages, and with such knowledge he successfully linked Gullah to Africa.<sup>2</sup>

However, as we will mention later, the controversy remains as to whether Black people speak "bad English" or English that has gone through some creolization process. While this might sound like a chicken-egg question, we believe that science will eventually answer this question just like an experienced farmer can answer the question about chickens.

The main issue for our discussion is sampling. Basically, sampling is the method of choosing a part of a whole in such a way that what is discovered about the part can be the basis for a reliable inference about the whole.

The key issue then, is how reliable is the sample? Pickford wrote the following in a general critique of dialectical geography based on statistical advances in the social sciences:

Reliability is concerned with gathering a representative, unbiased selection of data, and procedures used in linguistics to this day justify an elementary review of the subject. To achieve a reliable sample two general procedures of sampling are in use. The random, or probability, sample is an automatic plan which virtually eliminates biases of selection, nonresponse, and estimation. Statistical formulae, based on the mathematical theory of probability, have been devised to calculate the sampling errors. The other procedure, the judgment sample, is an attempt to gather representative data by using informed judgment to determine which units are typical. In this procedure biases and sampling errors cannot be calculated mathematically; they must be estimated. It is important not to confuse the two types of sampling procedures, as linguists, it will appear below, do.

A recent survey of sociolinguistics notes that

The question of optimal sample size for the study of social dialects is still undetermined. On the one hand, there is the tradition of linguistics which generally relies on very small samples. In some cases, one or just a few individuals serve as informants, and sometimes the linguist acts as his own informant. On the other hand, the tradition of sociological surveys is to have rather substantial numbers of subjects, often in the hundreds or thousands. The investigation of social dialects must rely on samples that are somewhere in between these two traditions. It is, however, difficult to even approximate what might be a reasonable number of informants.

in each cell. There are both theoretical and practical considerations.<sup>4</sup>

However, Pickford correctly comments

A common misconception among linguistic researchers is that sampling biases can be compensated for by increasing the size of the sample. . . . This practice is again the result of thoughtlessness or unfamiliarity with sampling theory. Most biases are not removed or diminished simply by increasing the size of the sample. The important specification in a sample survey, to insure reliability, it is not how many, but how, informants are selected. . . .

So our focus is on how a sample is selected in order to formulate a scientific approach to the question - who speaks Black English. Specifically, we will focus on two major empirical studies, with some mention made of the origin and development controversy, and suggestions for future research.

The question of what is Black English can be seen as the continuing controversy between the creolists and dialectologists concerning its origin. The dialectologists maintain that BEV (Black English Vernacular) is similar to the dialects of whites from similar regional and social backgrounds and is derived from British dialects. The creolists maintain that BEV is a combination of the influence of white speech and the survival of creolisms.<sup>6</sup>

This difference reflects the use of different bodies of data which can be interpreted as samples of different populations.

Dialect geographers surveyed whites and Blacks in the same geographical areas. So that the isoglosses that were formed represented the dialects in particular regions. Dialect geography concludes that the language of Blacks in an area is derived from the language of whites in an area such that

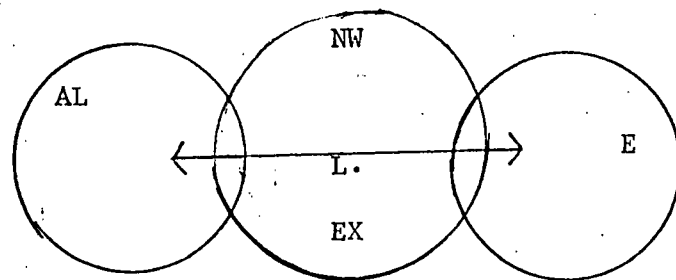
	Area A	Area B
White	$W_A$	$W_B$
Black	$B_A$	$B_B$

W = White Speakers B = Black Speakers

$W_A \longrightarrow B_A$        $W_B \longrightarrow B_B$

and that Blacks and Whites in each isogloss speak similar varieties of English with major differences occurring between isoglosses.<sup>7</sup>

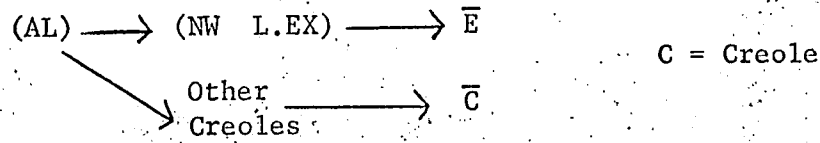
The Creolists, on the other hand, contend that the English many Black people speak reflects their historical, social, geographical experience in the world such that:



AL = African Language  
 NW = New World  
 L.EX = Language Experience  
 E = English

and that the African language experience was the precondition for the new world language experience which was the precondition for the variety of English Black people speak in the U.S. and the linguistic variability of Black people in other linguistic communities.<sup>8</sup> We

can thus develop an equation



It is our contention that the answer to this debate will be resolved when sufficient comparable samples at comparable historical time periods are studied.

### Who Are The Speakers Of Black English?

#### The New York Study

Labov, Cohen Robins and Lewis completed an empirical study of "the Non-Standard English of Negro and Puerto Rican Speakers in New York City" in 1968.<sup>9</sup> For this paper, their discussion of methods provides our first example. They wrote

"the objective of this investigation is to describe the grammar of a speech community, not a series of individuals".<sup>10</sup>

The speech community which is the main target is central Harlem. This is the target population, the universe out of which will be drawn a sample. "The sub population of greatest interest will be Negro boys from 10-17 years old in working class and lower class areas."<sup>11</sup>

The fact that Labov, et al., focused on "the vernacular used in casual and spontaneous interaction" of this age -- sex cohort suggests the need for study of other age-sex cohorts if we are to have a firm basis on which to generalize about the speech community of central Harlem.<sup>12</sup> Data was gathered from essentially seven others:

- a. Negro adults from middle class and working class areas
- b. 7-9 year old Negro boys
- c. Puerto Ricans in Negro Peer groups
- d. Negro boys of similar age who do not participate in the vernacular culture
- e. Similar white boys
- f. Similar boys from 5 other urban areas
- g. Adolescent girls

They conclude "auxiliary studies will make it possible to estimate the generality of our findings."<sup>13</sup>

3

Here is the main character of the sampling in this study. The 7 groups studied are non-random samples, drawn on a systematically stratified speech community. In other words

1. Central Harlem was the universe i.e., the population being studied
2. the community was systematically stratified. They used the parameters of class, age, sex, nationality and urban residence

		BLK	M Wh	PR	B	M Wh	PR
MC	Ad						
	10-17						
	7-9	B					
WC	Ad	A			A		
	10-17	(D&F)*	E	C	G		
	7-9	B					

MC - Middle Class  
WC = Working Class

Ad = Adult\*  
M = Men  
W = Women

\*The two categories are not described by the table in that the D group does not fit in the vernacular culture and the F group is not from New York City.

- however, rather than following a statistically reliable random sample of all cells in the stratified speech community, they make a judgment of which to study.
- and in selecting respondents in each cell they followed a non-random method of selection (though reference is made of random sampling in the case of Harlem adults and is partially correct).

Our comments have been based on Central Harlem as the speech community universe being studied. Our view, however, is that only when this study is evaluated as a comparative analysis of two case studies can its discussion of methodology be recognized as an advance. The main point being the identification of a vernacular language context, and the intensive study of the linguistic data from the "casual and spontaneous interaction". Indeed, the study successfully "defined the grammar" of the speech communities of the Cobras and the Jets.

If we refer to the Diagram of the Stratified Sample we can easily see the limitations on making an estimate of Central Harlem. However, it is clear that they had data to describe the speech of some of our male working class Blacks.



Later, Labov seems to agree with this point of methodological clarity by stating such in a later book:

Throughout this volume I will then refer to the black English vernacular (BEV) as that relatively uniform dialect found in its most consistent form in the speech of black youth from 8 to 19 years old who participate fully in the street culture of the inner cities.

### The Detroit Study

Our second example is the Detroit Dialect study.<sup>15</sup> The objectives of this study were

1. To describe the specialized linguistic features of the various English speaking sub-cultures of Detroit.
2. To determine the most efficient methods of language data gathering in an urban area.
3. To determine effective methods of language data storage, retrieval and analysis.
4. To provide accurate and useful language data upon which educational applications can be based.<sup>16</sup>

This study employs methods from survey research and is based on a stratified random sample of Detroit families. It focused on the city of Detroit as a speech community and used as parameters.

1. areas based on Lenski sociological study of religion in Detroit<sup>17</sup>
2. public and parochial schools
3. 4, 5, 6 grades

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Public	4,5,6; grades	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	lower grades										
	higher grades										
	no child										
Parochial	4,5,6 grades	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	lower grades										
	higher grades										
	no child										

The logically drawn sampling scheme has 80 cells, while only 20 were actually<sup>18</sup> used. They indicate 5 sources of sample bias.

- disproportionate representation of parochial school children
- self selection bias of respondents (based on returning a card to school with their child)
- imbalance in selection of mothers over fathers
- cluster of respondents from specific schools
- homogeneity based on selecting only families with children in upper elementary grades.

What they end up with is a sample size of  $N=702$ , with an average of 35.1 respondents in each of their 20 active cells. If they had drawn a random sample with an average of 35.1 respondents in each of the 80 cells the  $N$  would have had to increase to 2808; or if  $N$  remained 702, then every cell would have to have only 8.1 respondents.

However what they did accomplish was a significant marriage of intensive

linguistics research and extensive sociological survey methodology. The methodology of the Detroit Dialect study learned its lesson well from Pickford, and represents significant gains over the old school dialect geographers.

Based on this overall study with a sample size N=702, Wolfram analyzed data of "the speech of 48 Negro informants." <sup>19</sup> While the overall study is an advance in methodology, this sub-group is not a reliable basis on which to make estimates of what Wolfram calls his work "a Sociolinguistic Description of Detroit Negro Speech". At best, it is a non-random aggregate analysis for exploratory investigation. In fact, Wolfram says:

Although the above criteria somewhat restricts the randomness of the sample, this type of restriction appears necessary for a linguistic study of this type. <sup>20</sup>

Our position is that this is an unnecessary rationalization for only by spelling out the limits of ones method forthrightly is it possible to enable future research workers to climb on top of ones shoulders and climb to greater heights of scientific precision and accuracy.

As stated earlier, sampling is the method of choosing a part of a whole in such a way that what is discovered about that part can be the basis for a reliable inference about the whole. The fundamental question of sampling methodology is significant for this paper because far reaching generalization have been made about Black language behavior on the findings of these two studies.

The New York study isolated a natural community and studied it intensely to describe certain linguistic features. It adopts anthropological methodology in linguistic research. The Detroit study focused on a set of social variables

and their correlation with a set of linguistic variables by using sociological survey methodology to collect language data.

It is clear that these two methods compliment each other and should lead to the logical advance of scientific inquiry. The future of Black English Vernacular studies and the importance of sampling is a significant issue in the field of linguistics since it effects educational policy and the life chances of young Black people in this country.

So it must be survey research based on random sampling that linguists base their collection of data on in order that we can eventually make accurate statements about the language behavior of relatively large speech communities like cities, regions and countries in comparison to statements about voting, consumer behavior and other social phenomenon that sociological surveys can accurately make.

We must continue the forward movement of Black language study and not tolerate a lag in research that relies on judgmental inference or intuition in the name of scientific inquiry. Only with continuous sound empirical research will questions about BEV be answered.

So we have come full circle and the question still remains: based on sound scientific inquiry, Who are the speakers of Black English -- and after that question is answered -- Why is the Who so important anyway?

\*This paper is a working paper in a larger project that is designed to codify the methodological and substantive continuities and discontinuities in research on Black language behavior. It was delivered at the 10th annual convention of the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages. The project will be completed by the Fall of 1976. Inquiries about this project should be directed to the authors at the Black Studies Program of the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle (Box 4348, Chicago, Illinois 60680).

#### Footnotes

1. There have been numerous major bibliographies and anthologies on this subject. Note especially:  
  
Brasch, I. and Brasch, W., A Comprehensive Annotated Bibliography of American Black English. Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1974.  
  
Baratz, Joan, "Language Abilities of Black Americans" in Comparative Studies of Blacks and Whites in the U.S. Eds. Kent S. Miller and Ralph Mason Dreger. New York: Seminar Press, 1973.
2. Turner, Lorenzo, Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969.
3. Pickford, Glenna R., "American Linguistic Geography: A Socialological Appraisal" in Word, Vol. 12, 1956, p. 213.
4. Wolfram, Walt W. and Fasold, Ralph W., The Study of Social Dialects in American English. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1974.
5. Pickford, Ibid, p. 218.
6. A basic anthology that contains the opposing views including Stewart, Bailey and McDavid is Allen, Harold B. and Gary N. Underwood, eds. Readings in American Dialectology. New York: Appleton Century Droids, 1971.
7. This appears evident when reading McDavid.
8. This can be seen by reading Turner and Stewart, Bailey in Allen ed.
9. Labov, William, Paul Cohen, Clarence Robins and John Lewis, A Study of the Non-Standard English of Negro and Puerto Rican speakers in New York City. New York: Columbia University Press, 1968.
10. Labov, Ibid.