

The Words Unspoken

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The Hidden Power of Language

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Acknowledgments

I have always been intrigued by language. As a teen I sat before the television admiring the way words effortlessly rolled off the tongues of newscasters, dreaming that one day I myself might one day command an audience. And, like others, I have had my share of times of being misunderstood with regard to language. For instance, as a 15-year-old taking drivers' education class, I noticed a gap in communication between my white instructor and me. When "Coach Varney" would say "Okay, Debra, break her," I would speed up, incensing him. He often yelled at me, asking why I went faster when he was telling me to "brake." This went on for a week and I was truly close to failing the practical portion of driver's education. I had to train myself and my ear to actually slow down when Varney said "brake," as opposed to what I was accustomed to the word meaning which, was "break for it," or "break out" or simply hit the gas and go faster. This book captures my stories, my friends' stories and the stories of my students and others who have a narrative to tell about language.

While I admit to not being a linguist by training, my fascination for language is no less passionate. In this decade humans are intrigued by varieties of "language." Language isn't just "bodily" or spoken word. Just recently I played a cell phone company's signature ring tone for my students who could easily recognize it as "the Nokia ring." Southwest Airlines would lead us to believe that a computer tone sends prospective travelers running back to their desktops to check the latest flight sales, and the honking sound that interrupts your favorite television show "speaks" to us in such a way that we check the rolling words at the bottom of the television screen to determine if there is a nearby weather hazard. This project allowed me to explore all the "sounds" that have impacted my world and to examine the val-

ues and judgments we often place upon sounds. Research for this work reveals things about my family and friends that has pedagogic possibility. Moreover, it reveals personal stories about my family and friends. In that way, it was difficult to write at times because the memories that help to fill the pages carry with them a range of emotions—some still fresh enough to sting when they are questioned. For example, I left this portion of the manuscript laying out one day when my teenage niece and I were visiting together. As she chatted freely on the telephone for what seemed like an entire day, she picked up my manuscript which I had carelessly left out in the open and she read the first two sentences. “I can’t believe you did this stuff!” she scoffed at my recollection of perching in front of the television in awe of newscasters as a teen. My reaction was to seize the pages from her hands—an act which startled her and even surprised me. Hearing her read aloud my youthful obsession with language while she was on the phone with another teenager made me feel vulnerable for reasons I can’t quite explain. Yet the opportunity to read other authors’ accounts of language and the opportunity to recall some of my own experiences was peculiarly liberating as I spent month after month in front of the computer. I would never have had the stories or the determination to complete this project in the wake of tremendous challenge if not for so many people some of whom I will name and others who know they are part of this undertaking. I am indebted to my parents Laverne and James who always told me to “talk louder”—and then gave me the “when the porch gets dry” story to tell for the rest of my life. To my sister Shirley and brother-in-law David, my aunt Alma S. Brown, Sharon R. Johnson, Elsie Byrd, Donna Stitt, Desiree Sterbini and Arlene Ferebee who encouraged my writing and/or gave me great stories to add to my own collection. To Karla Price who always called with a great “example” (especially the one from QVC “girl”). To Regina Fisher who makes me laugh with the “dranking” and stuff story. To Valerie Hayes and Eddison Bramble who showed me a whole new approach to the language of business during that amazing homecoming in Chapel Hill and the subsequent birthday celebration in New York. To Bobby McNeill who is always proud of me no matter what I have to say. To Anthony Jackson who says everything unflappably and to the great communicator, Teresa Blossom,

who does not do enough sharing of her wonderful words with the public and therefore forces me to try to vicariously represent her talent through my own work. To Ditishia Simpson, my research assistant and to Dr. William Gay who said I should “do something” with my writing. To my best friend Nick Mackey (I know you can spell “restaurant”) whose language is known to be “non-publishable” and who is probably at work now on his own book in order to keep the competition alive. To Marc Wallace who always stumbled across useful information for me and talked me through this project and to David Yorker the statistician extraordinaire who not only can always seem to “abra-ka-debra” me through my numerical challenges but seems to be listening to everything I say. To Joseph Major and Toria Burch who tolerated my frequent late-night telephone calls and allowed me to chatter from Times Square to Pawley’s Island. And to Bryan Allen who, like me, never quite knew the art of spinning the story until now. To David Landrum, my “homey” (and my Miguel) who made me “bark” and encouraged me over and over again. To Amy Beddingfield who always remembered to bring the “letters.” To Channelle James for giving me just the “right” tea talk to fuel this project and to Harry Mack, Tina Gordon and Tiffany Mitchell for the much-needed “therapy” and infinite anecdotes (I was “gone” call you!). To Tonya Carson, Freda McClain and Mamie Wilkins who know many of my stories. To the members and family I have at Trinity A.M.E.Z. Church who surround me with the faith I need to tell my story. And, finally to Brittany who by her own freedom as a teen who can spend a day chatting endlessly about nothing, unleashed my own autonomy and made it possible for me to have words on the following pages.

Introduction

Language sets people apart. Watch any primetime television show and that fact is starkly clear. Characters with southern accents, “foreign” accents and those who use formal English play distinguishably different roles. And, we think distinguishably different things about them. Who can forget the Clampett family whose mountaineer roots were reflected in their “hillbilly” references to “vittles”¹ or the James Bond² series, where Bond’s discernible British accent sets him apart as slick opposition? The “valley girl” language popularized by at least one film, *Clueless*³, enjoyed a long run in a host of popular television shows where popular girls were held in high social esteem. Visual electronic medium works to make the voices of people “familiar,” often by utilizing codes imbedded in each production. Those codes, which I will discuss later in this work, reinforce Bourdieu’s declaration (*On Television* 1996) that television is a medium that “enjoys a de facto monopoly on what goes into the heads of a significant part of the population and what they think” (18). One of the perils of those codes is the mistaking of them as truly characteristic of a population. Countless studies have demonstrated the veracity of this statement. Ella Shohat (1994) says that the “linguistics of domination” take into account that “English, especially, has often served as the linguistic vehicle for the projection of Anglo-American power, technology and finance.” Calling language a “social battleground,” Shohat adds that “language forms the site where political struggles are engaged both collectively and intimately.”

1. The Beverly Hillbillies television show aired from 1962–1971. “Vittles” was their word for “food”

2. James Bond movies have existed from the 1950s to this current decade

3. *Clueless* is a 1995 film

My own experience has been that people mistake me for being white when they speak with me on the telephone. I have found this baffling over the years because I simply did not know what “white” sounds like. Yet, “sounding white” was having an impact on my navigation of space. For instance, one year during graduate school, I called the public library system to have a book held. When I arrived to pick up the book, I was informed by the elderly white library attendant that the book I requested was, in fact being held for one “Debra Smith.” I responded that I, in fact, was Debra Smith to which the library representative responded, “honey, you sounded like a white girl on the phone.” Beverly Tatum (1997) recalls a similar experience: “Following a presentation I gave to some educators, a white man approached me and told me how much he liked my ideas and how articulate I was. “You know,” he concluded, “if I had had my eyes closed, I wouldn’t have known it was a Black woman speaking” (Tatum 24). Meanwhile in the article “Sounding Black: Court-Sanctioned Racial Stereotyping” by Lis Wiehl, the author asks if you think you can determine someone’s skin color by listening to his/her voice. Further, Wiehl asks “If so, would you swear to it in court? ... Would you testify to a defendant’s guilt in a criminal trial based on listening to his voice and deciding on his race—never having seen him?” The article goes on to detail a Kentucky State Supreme Court ruling that “a white police officer, who had not seen the black defendant allegedly involved in a drug transaction, could, nevertheless, identify him as a participant by saying that a voice on an audiotape ‘sounded black’.⁴

In another example of these same phenomena, I recall the experiences of my friend Arlene. During a volunteer project which involved transporting young black children to an activity, Arlene, a black woman, talked to the children in her vehicle about the activity in which they were about to partake. Along the way, she told them that they could tune the radio to any station they preferred. At one point while she was speaking, one of the children asked her “are you white?” Perplexed, because the child could clearly see her and therefore must be basing his inquiry upon her voice, Arlene asked him what he thought.

4. Wiehl, Lis. Harvard Blackletter Law Journal

He responded that she “looked” black. I believe that Arlene’s proper English contributed to the child’s inquiry, which could suggest that either he had no prior experience with black people speaking proper English, or he was socialized in some way to believe that proper English is only spoken by white people. Beverly Tatum (1997), writes about black children, who describe black scholarly, achievement-driven classmates as, “acting white.” The author considers that their socialization has lent itself to their believing that the only studious, achieving people are, in fact, white. Therefore, for a black classmate to follow suit must indicate that they are mimicking white people. This concept is played out in a couple of examples on television. The “silenced” character is the term I use to describe that character who plays second-fiddle to the “star” of a situational comedy. “Carlton” from the *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*⁵ and “Michael” from *Good Times*⁶ are two examples. The former is hopeful about attending Princeton University even as he is an achiever in his senior year at the fictional Bel-Air High School. He speaks properly and is often chastised by his “cousin” Will (Will Smith, the star of the show) for being a “nerd.” He is often seen in the company of white friends in contrast to Will’s more masculine friends from “the hood.” And, he goofily dances about to the music of Tom Jones. Donald Bogle (1992) says “Hollywood has never understood that there are many people from the inner city who can speak without slang (or who use it judiciously), who have manners and are perceptive enough to know when to talk loud and bad and when to sit back, listen and take in the scene before making any moves” (292–3). Prior to Carlton’s marginalization, Michael from *Good Times* was often downplayed in favor of his brother J.J. (Jimmie Walker, the star of the show). While Michael spoke about Black Nationalism, and other political platforms, his exposure on screen played straight man (almost nerd) to his older brother’s colorful antics. This reinforces the notion that intelligent roles are “nerdy” or “white.” These characters are marginalized or play second fiddle or straight man to the more colorful characters’ role.

5. Carlton Banks is the character portrayed by Alphonso Ribeiro in the *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* which aired on television from 1990–1996.

6. Michael Evans is the character portrayed by Ralph Carter in *Good Times* which aired on television from 1974–1979.

While the “King’s English” has typically been the language of power, popular culture has given way to new forms of power within language. In modern times, designers, liquor labels, department stores, and jewelers are prospering from the exposure they receive within the lyrics of rap music. This book examines the language of dominance, the language of hip-hop culture and the transition in power between the two genres. For more than twenty years now, rap artists have created a rivalry of sorts between those language staples of power and the opportunity for new forms of power in language, thus creating a space for us to examine new possibilities for linguistic capital.

I begin in **Chapter One**, *Language in Story*, by presenting a short story very loosely based upon my own experience with language. I conclude the chapter by providing an analysis of the five characters from the short story who confirm, challenge and deviate from the use of formal language. These characters, Virginia Carraway, Cathy Carraway, Becca Carraway, Belle Williams and Gerald Williams each offers some component of language that can be explored in depth and that are contributory to our beliefs about black people and language. **Chapter Two**, *Language in Television*, examines electronic media’s role in language potential. The chapter examines the language of television that marks race especially for non-discriminating viewers like the young boy who interacted with my friend Arlene. In this chapter, I look at the function of characters like “Will Smith” and “Carlton Banks” in *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* (1990s) and “Michael Evans” and “J.J. Evans” in *Good Times* (1970s). These four characters especially impart details about language based upon the characters they portray. **Chapter Three**, *Language in Hip-hop*, examines contemporary hip-hop language, often not standard English, and its marketability, while **Chapter Four**, *Language in Society* reveals the results of a survey taken to determine how the language of hip-hop and the language of business intersect, if at all. I conclude with **Chapter Five**, *Language Possibilities in the Classroom*, which discusses the possibilities inherent in language and how they can be played out in curriculum. Language certainly has possibility for pedagogy. The classroom instructor has a forum in which to change perceptions of language. Angela McRobbie says that “if representation remains a site of power and regulation,

as well as a source of identity, then cultural academics working in the fields of representation have a critical job to do in attempting to recast these terms by inflecting new meanings” (McRobbie 726). Gray (1995) claims that culture can operate as a site of cultural politics as well as a source of cultural politics. Thus, he portends that there very well may be a relationship between representations and “the relationship of these representations to other discursive (and non-discursive) sites and practices” which include legal, theoretical and material (5). In this chapter I share some of the language stories from students and offer suggestions for curricular language inclusion.

In *Language and Symbolic Power*, Pierre Bourdieu considers that “the properties which characterize linguistic excellence may be summed up in two words: distinction and correctness.” Yet, the words of authors Rickford and Rickford particularly motivated my research for this manuscript with regard to Black Vernacular English when they articulated:

If we lost all of (the creative expression, culture and valued contained in Spoken Soul) in the heady pursuit of Standard English and the world of opportunities it offers, we would have indeed lost our soul. We are not convinced that African-Americans want to abandon “down home” speech in order to become one-dimensional speakers ... Bear in mind that language is an inescapable element in almost everyone’s daily life, and an integral element of human identity. If for that and no other reason, we would all do well to heed the still-evolving truth of the black language experience. That truth helps us confront one of the most critical questions of our day: Can one succeed in the wider world of economic and social power without surrendering one’s distinctive identity?”⁷

After journeying through the variations in language, this work seeks to deliver powerful possibilities for language that are often unspoken.

7. Rickford and Rickford. *Spoken Soul*. Page 10.