

The Verticalization of African American Sociolinguistic Labor

Metalinguistic awareness includes a language user's knowledge about the relation of factors (like age, gender, or race) to linguistic usage, distribution, meaning, or context of occurrence variance (Author 2022). Such embodied knowledge (Bucholtz & Hall 2016) is directly linked to the social meanings available to an individual across linguistic markets (Bourdieu 1977; Zhang 2005), and the ways in which individuals choose to maintain or shift away from the numerous styles, varieties, and languages they command—both in real time and over time. This presentation will begin with a discussion of how embodied perception—stretched over time—interacts with institutions to create the conditions for linguistic oppression. This discussion will highlight points from African American history to quickly set these wider phenomena into a digestible perspective. Through this timeline of African American social history we will consider Verticalization's (Brown 2022) interaction with Standard language ideologies and the extent to which one's capability of exploiting the range of variation available in a given context is constrained.

To aid this consideration, findings will be presented from an innovative methodology—the Metalinguistic Method of Sociolinguistic Interview (Author 2022)—designed to elevate metalinguistic commentary in our inquiry (Babel 2015, Bassiouney 2018, Rutten 2019) and to introduce representative and equitable models of data collection. This method was first employed by interviewing 17 Black professionals from Detroit, producing a 40-hour corpus of natural speech which was analyzed through obscured qualitative coding (Author 2022, Holliday & Squires 2020). Metacommentary on these individuals' relation to everyday terms from African American Languages (AAL), such as *finna* and *deadass*, reveals Black professionals orient to their own sociolinguistic labor (Holliday & Squires 2020) when employing Standard (and thus verticalized) varieties through differences in their embodied positionality (see Table 1)—such as age, size, and skin color—because individuals imagine a (real or idealized) listening subject (Inoue 2006) monitoring for these identity characteristics. Such differences in orientation reflect the intersection of individually-held linguistic ideologies—or beliefs about appropriate language use (Woolard 1998; Hill 2008; Kroskrity 2010; Babel 2015)—with collectively-held identity-based social stereotypes (Operario & Fiske 2003; Tajfel & Turner 2004; Keels et al. 2017). This intersection illuminates the ways in which an individual's choices in the moment both respond to and maintain linguistic ideologies, which in turn shape the ways in which the linguistic systems an individual commands and participates in change over time.

This presentation will end by considering the value added to both our inquiry and the community under study when language users are invited to expand upon what they think words mean (Butters 2000). This consideration will focus on a (user or listener's) preference for assimilationist sociolinguistic labor and the ways in which we—as a community of experts—can find large and small ways to encourage the communities we enter to use the spectrum of varieties they command safely. Such efforts, while securing equity in real time, also promote the production of better or more complete sociolinguistic data for analysis by future historical sociolinguists.

Metalinguistic Commentary Divergence				
	Race	Region	Age	Gender
<i>Finna</i>				
<i>Lit</i>			x	
<i>Bet</i>				
<i>Stressed BIN</i>		(x)		
<i>Shawty</i>				x
<i>WHHW</i>	x			
<i>Deadass</i>		(x)	x	
<i>Mad</i>		(x)	x	
<i>Corny</i>	x			
<i>The N-Words</i>	x	x		x

Table 1: Metalinguistic commentary divergence based on factors of positionality from target terms discussion outcomes. Marks in parentheses indicate potential divergence.

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