Valuing Black Language and Culture in Classrooms

By Anne H. Charity Hudley, Christine Mallinson, Rachel Samuels, and Kimberly Bigelow

Language is a central component of both culture and the educational process. The language that students bring to educational settings affects how they are treated and assessed in the classroom. Some students come to school already speaking the standardized variety of English that is valued and viewed as being the "most correct" in educational systems. Not surprisingly, these students are often more likely to succeed in school. Many other students come to school without already knowing the standardized variety, and as a result, they often face linguistic hurdles that can affect their opportunities for success in school.

We have been working throughout our careers as educators and researchers to create culturally sustaining pedagogy to ensure that all students in an increasingly diverse United States are educated in ways that enable them to achieve their highest potential. As a crucial part of doing so, we focus on variation within the English language and the relationship of that variation to cultural and racial identity.

Multicultural and culturally sustaining approaches to education help educators act on two essential concepts: that each student is unique and that uniqueness is central to the academic and social development of every student.[1] Language is a key aspect of this uniqueness, and because language is integral to culture and identity, understanding language variation and diversity is critical to education equity. All educators need knowledge and tools to honor and value students' (and their families' and communities') language differences and variations, to understand and address any language-related challenges students may face, and to support students' academic, social, and emotional development.

Efforts to help all students achieve their highest potential are incomplete without an understanding that linguistic discrimination, inseparable from racial discrimination, has historically limited African Americans' access to opportunities afforded other citizens. Thus, we focus in this article on linguistic variations specific to African American English and ways educators can actively and creatively support Black students.

We write as two authors with lived experiences as African American educators in the United States (Charity Hudley and Bigelow) and two white educators who actively learn with African American educators and students (Mallinson and Samuels). We draw on our cumulative decades of experience to provide strategies and activities for educators and learners that support the success of Black students in educational environments from elementary school through college.

We take a three-pronged approach in this article, covering the value of Black language and culture; the relationships among race, culture, community, identity, and language; and the specific knowledge about language and race that is essential for educators. Each of these parts is accompanied by a webinar on Share My Lesson, plus other Share My Lesson resources full of practical strategies for effectively working with culturally and linguistically

Anne H. Charity Hudley is a professor of education at Stanford University, where she focuses on the relationship between language variation and educational practices. She is a fellow of the Linguistic Society of America and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Christine Mallinson is the founding director of the Center for Social Science Scholarship, a professor of language, literacy, and culture, and an affiliate professor of gender, women's, and sexuality studies at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Rachel Samuels is an elementary student support specialist in Williamsburg, Virginia. She was the 2019 Virginia Reading Teacher of the Year. Kimberly Bigelow is an assistant principal of literacy in Washington, DC; she has 15 years of experience as an elementary teacher and instructional coach.

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

diverse students. It is our hope that through this approach, educators will increase their knowledge about language and culture and use it in their classrooms to lift every voice in ways that advance educational equity.

The Value of African American Language and Culture

Language varieties hold inherent value as markers of culture and identity. As a result, some speakers of African American English may feel—or may be made to feel—shame, insecurity, and embarrassment when they operate within a society that expects them to speak standardized English. Educators of students who use African American English, therefore, have a special role to play in understanding these students' personal and cultural experiences and helping them navigate comfortably across their linguistic diasporas, which may include African American English and standardized English as well as other languages and varieties.[2]

What do we mean by "African American English"? We use the term to refer to a culturally African American variety of English used in places where African Americans live or historically have lived. And yet, we fully acknowledge the variability and ambiguity that accompany any attempt to define how language is used along cultural or ethnic lines and the impossibility of attempting to put one name and one face on the range of those who identify as Black or African American.

African American English is both a product and a repository of African American culture, but it is not what makes a person Black or African American. (In this article, we use the terms "Black" and "African American" often interchangeably, while recognizing the variation across cultural identities and experiences.) African Americans are not a monolithic group, and neither are their languages, language varieties, and cultural practices. How a person uses language is shaped by the languages and language varieties of the communities that they are a part of as well as their individual experiences, including where they grew up, their friends and networks, personal styles, and more. A person's entire linguistic knowledge—the often multiple languages, varieties, and styles that they use or know to any degree—all make up their linguistic repertoire. For this reason, language variation occurs on a dynamic spectrum that varies culturally, locally, and individually.

Attitudes and Beliefs About African American English

When students come to school using African American English, they are aware that many of their relatives, friends, and neighbors speak similarly to themselves.[3] They may also be mindful that many of their educators do not use African American English. The message that African American students may internalize from this situation is that educators expect them to learn a new way of communicating that may be at odds with their home language and culture. This creates a "push-pull" that many African American students face:[4] when they are pushed to assimilate to mainstream academic culture to succeed in school, they may feel forced to pull away from their home communities.[5] This affects students' linguistic and cultural identities, and over time, the burden takes an emotional toll. Many people would find it difficult to accept a message, even an indirect message, that they have to suppress part of their linguistic identity to operate within mainstream culture. African Americans, with their specific social and cultural history, often live this reality every day.

Negative perceptions about African American English have roots in racist ideologies that are apparent in early linguistic research. Scholars in 1924 described Black language as "infantile," and similar perceptions drove language education programs for Black students following the *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court decision in 1954.[6]

The first systematic study of attitudes toward African American English was published in 1969.[7] In analyzing evaluative judgments from 150 listeners, the researchers found that on a range of personal characteristics, listeners gave lower (more negative) ratings to the voices of speakers of African American English, especially on the characteristics of speech, education, talent, and intelligence. In contrast, they gave higher (more positive) ratings to the voices of speakers of other language varieties.

Since then, much additional research has found that educators of all backgrounds tend to rate students who use African American English as less intelligent, less confident, and less likely to succeed than students who speak in a more standardized way.[8] Many African American students report having heard their language use described as "broken," as "uneducated," or with other disparaging adjectives.[9] Consider the psychological and educational impacts on African American students when their language is framed as deficient. That's a raciolinguistic ideology at work, and it affects students' opportunities to succeed in school.

Linguistic discrimination, inseparable from racial discrimination, has historically limited African Americans' access to opportunities.

Studies find that classroom work containing features of African American English is often evaluated as inferior to otherwise equivalent work in which a student uses standardized English. One recent study found that the use of African American English negatively impacted community college students' grades on writing assignments because most educators in the study had little knowledge of this variety or its valid and well-established linguistic characteristics; even some who had that knowledge often saw African American English as "inappropriate" in academic writing.[10] The biases also extend to oral language: researchers have found that teachers are more likely to give lower evaluations to work presented orally by Black students, even when that work is equal in quality to work presented by white students.[11] And speaking and writing in African American English has been and continues to be a factor in Black students' disproportional placement in remedial classes and special education.[12]

The Intersections of Language, Race, and Identity for African American Students

It is important for educators to understand that internalized linguistic racism and racialized ideologies about language can affect individual speakers, which is often characterized in research as *linguistic insecurity*.[13] For students who use African American English, linguistic insecurity can manifest when they perceive that their language is devalued and when they do not receive linguistically and culturally appropriate feedback from educators. If students perceive their language is devalued, they may also perceive that they, along with their culture, communities, family, and friends, are being devalued. In turn, they may become discouraged in school and lose confidence in their educators. They may even reject this devaluing by disengaging from the standardized English-dominant school culture altogether.

Other students who use African American English might go a different direction, accommodating as much as possible to standardized English. Much educational literature has been devoted to understanding the concept that has come to be known as "sounding white," "talking white," or "acting white," which refers to the academic and cultural bind felt by some African American students who fear that any attempt to do well in school is seen by other individuals as trying to be something they are not.

The idea of sounding, talking, and acting white as a way of achieving educational success is complex. Carefully conducted research suggests that even though some Black students may sometimes reject what they perceive as white, middle-class styles of speech and behavior, most also understand that educational attainment leads to social mobility and that standardized English usage is often part of this process.[14] A Black student who uses standardized English and resists using African American English may be stigmatized by other African Americans who view the student's linguistic choices as snubbing the local language variety and, in turn, snubbing their cultural background. At the same time, even if Black students do sound and act in ways that are interpreted as white, they may still not be accepted by white peers, whether due to prejudice or to a range of social factors.

Linguistic insecurity is not limited to students; African American educators may feel similar tensions and dueling expectations surrounding language and culture. Like students, some may avoid the use of African American English. Other African American educators switch linguistically and culturally between the language of their communities and the schools in which they teach. Studies have found that Black educators who employ features of African American English in their classroom teaching often effectively build rapport with their African American students.[15]

These complexities surrounding language and culture are tied to what W. E. B. Du Bois first described as the "double consciousness" that many African Americans may feel when they navigate the social and professional demands of American society.[16] Those who use African American English may feel compelled to shed their home linguistic patterns to succeed in a mainstream climate. At the same time, they may be highly invested in maintaining what they perceive to be their authentic African American speech and culture. In the film *Voices of North Carolina*, such sentiments are expressed by Richard Brown, an African American man from Durham:

> Particularly in the African American community, there is this idea that yes, you know, you can speak in a much more relaxed, intimate Black speech in certain spaces. Then in other spaces, you have to speak a much more common English. And, for some people, there's an internal struggle about should you really do that. Should you really be trying to talk like white folk? Or should you always, all the time, no matter what setting you are in speak the same way—speak the same way your mama taught you to speak?[17]

African American English is an important part of African American culture. Because language is familial, cultural, and personally meaningful, we encourage educators to take a strengths-based perspective that accurately reframes language variation as a valuable cultural and linguistic resource.

> As a key element of a strengths-based perspective on language and culture, we have created the Share My Lesson webinar "Crafting Linguistic Autobiographies to Build Cultural Knowledge": sharemylesson.com/webinars/linguistic-autobiographies. The linguistic autobiography guides educators and students to think about the social context of language, culture, and identity. We demonstrate how to craft our linguistic autobiographies to build cultural and linguistic knowledge in our schools and communities and how to encourage others to share the linguistic and cultural richness they bring to our learning communities.
>
> –A. H. C. H., C. M., R. S., and K. B.

Reclaiming Race: Culture, Community, Identity, and Language

Race is a social construct, and by extension, race can be seen as a myth. But to many people from racialized groups, race is the realest thing we know. In particular, race affects where we live and attend school and who our classmates are. Teaching about race and culture to students matters, as the multicultural movement has been asserting for the past 50 years.

There is a clear need for educators to receive more resources, training, and support about race, culture, community, and identity in the classroom—and their intersections with language. Many educators want to more deeply understand what race and ethnicity are.[18] We must engage with Blackness to dismantle anti-Blackness, and language is a key part of these efforts.

The Personal, Cultural, and Social Dimensions of Language Use

Recognizing these interrelationships across language, race, culture, community, and identity is particularly important due to the personal, cultural, and social dimensions of language. Not everyone has the linguistic ability to code switch—that is, to choose to speak in African American English or standardized English, depending on the context. But even if a person can code switch, it doesn't mean they always want or need to. Continually engaging in impression-management strategies by changing one's communication style can lead to stress and burnout.[19] Robinson Cook, a Black senior at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, shared that "Code-switching is exhausting.… Coming home at the end of the day feels like taking off a costume. When I'm out in the world, I'm constantly performing for everyone else. It's never a positive experience. Either I succeed, and I get to continue playing along, or I'm outed as an imposter and shunned."[20] Other students have shared that being limited to standardized English in academic writing can feel like being locked in a box. Being forced to switch between African American English and standardized English can also take an academic toll because of the additional cognitive demand of maintaining a separation between the two linguistic systems, even in seemingly non-language-related coursework.[21] These academic inequities and psychological, cultural, and social burdens are a powerful argument in favor of students' right to use their own language.

Yet, beliefs about the use of African American English in educational settings vary. Some educators may wonder how best to teach students who use African American English so that they can succeed in mainstream environments while valuing their linguistic and cultural heritage. Others may believe it is inappropriate for students to use features of African American English in school contexts altogether. Some may feel that African American English is a substandard form of English that indicates a student's incapacity for linear thinking or logical analysis (although linguists strongly disagree).[22] Others may perceive students' use of African American English as a mark of defiance or as a signal of rejection of school culture.

Educators may also want their students to use standardized English because speaking and writing according to existing standards yields many tangible, real-world benefits. Educators know that students who are comfortable using standardized English are not only more likely to be told that they sound educated but also probably more likely to get ahead in their educational and professional pursuits and less likely to face discrimination based on their language use.[23] For example, in one experiment, six African American applicants were sent to interview for secretarial positions at 100 sites. Those applicants who spoke in standardized English rather than African American English were given longer interviews and were more likely to be offered a job.[24]

Similarly, research found that Black workers whose speech was distinctly identified as "sounding Black" earned 10 percent lower salaries than white workers with comparable skills who did not "sound Black"; further, white workers with speech distinctly identified as "sounding Black" earned 6 percent lower salaries than their white peers who did not "sound Black."[25] In addition, Black workers whose speech was not distinctly identified as "sounding Black" earned 2 percent less than comparably skilled white workers. As these results make clear, racial discrimination, linguistic discrimination, and the intersection of both persist in the labor market. (Nevertheless, it is also important to point out that simply using the language of school assessment does not guarantee success for African American students, who may face the realities of racism and discrimination regardless.)

A strengths-based perspective helps reframe language variation as a valuable cultural and linguistic resource.

Honoring the cultural and linguistic heritage of students who use African American English while also preparing them to live and work in a society where standardized English often dominates is thus a complex and multifaceted goal for educators (and students and families). In many other communities, including immigrant communities, students face pressure to assimilate to English to do well in school and life. While there are many school and community programs to aid students who speak a primary language other than English, few programs are in place to help students who use varieties of English, including African American English. Often, the general sentiment is that students who grow up speaking English should be able to produce standardized English forms no matter their background. However, as the author and progressive activist James Baldwin contended decades ago, succeeding at school should not require African American students to abandon their linguistic and cultural heritage: "A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiate his experience, and all that gives him sustenance, and enter a limbo in which he will no longer be Black, and in which he knows that he can never become white."[26]

Educators must therefore recognize the ways in which language and race are interrelated and intertwined with culture, community, and identity. By working to establish an equitable learning community, all students' cultural and linguistic heritages can be valued and included as part of their trajectory of academic success.

> As a tangible strategy for creating an equitable learning community, we have created the Share My Lesson webinar "Affirming Students Through a Language and Literacy Equity Audit": sharemylesson.com/webinars/language-and-literacy-equity. Much like an equity audit, the language and literacy audit actively seeks out the linguistic strengths of your learning community and is designed to be used with teachers, students, administrators, and community members. The audit will help you support literacy in its multiple definitions and learn with students as linguistic experts by valuing what they know about language. We suggest you view the linguistic autobiography webinar (see page 16) before viewing the language and literacy audit webinar.
>
> –A. H. C. H., C. M., R. S., and K. B.

Essential Knowledge About Language and Race

Educators and students who come from different racial, ethnic, regional, and cultural backgrounds may feel unaware of, uncertain about, confused by, or even resistant to understanding each other's linguistic and cultural practices. Serious cultural and academic misunderstandings may arise between educators who use standardized English and students who use African American English—particularly when each person assumes that they understand and are understood by the other.

Yet, whereas students who use African American English are required to learn standardized English and its academic culture, educators are not often required to do the reverse—to learn about their students' local, culturally inflected linguistic variety. These inequalities contribute to cultural, social, and academic rifts and resentments, as well as unintentional misunderstandings, as educators and students alike may assume that the other is "operating according to identical speech and cultural conventions"[27] when, in fact, different norms may be in use.

For these reasons, it is critical for educators to understand the language patterns that students bring with them into the classroom to best help all students attain academic success. African American English is a complete linguistic system, and educators must have information about its specific features and understand how these features manifest in educational settings. Moreover, educators should keep in mind that language variation occurs on a dynamic spectrum that varies culturally, locally, and individually. In this section, we share some common characteristics of African American English, describe their variability, and discuss their educational implications.

Grammatical and Sound-Related Variation

For students who use African American English, learning to speak and write using the grammar conventions of standardized English can be a complicated process.* One major issue is that the grammatical system of African American English interacts with its sound system differently than the ways sound and grammar interact in standardized English. For example, a student who uses African American English may pronounce words such as *joined* and *marked* as *join* or *mark* and may also write "j-o-i-n" for *joined* and "m-a-r-k" for *marked*. As a result, this student may face additional challenges with recognizing and producing grammatical particles (including the *-ed* that marks the past tense) in standardized English. Educators may view students' use of words such as *mark* for *marked* on written homework and standardized tests as evidence of a significant grammatical error in standardized English despite it being a recognizable sound-related grammatical variant.

Past tense forms in standardized English that are spelled or sound exactly like present tense forms may be particularly difficult for students who use African American English. Research established long ago that students who spoke African American English were able to correctly pronounce the past tense form of *read* in the sentence, "Last month I read the sign," in which the phrase "last month" indicates the past tense. The sentence "When I passed by, I read the sign," however, posed much more difficulty. In this sentence, the students who spoke African American English tended to pronounce the verb *passed* as *pass*, and they subsequently pronounced the verb *read* in its present tense form (pronounced as "reed," not as "red").[28] These pronunciation differences indicated that the students who spoke African American English were comprehending the sentences as being in the present tense, not the past; that is, they interpreted the sentence as stating: "When I pass by, I read the sign." Therefore, it is important for educators to pay close attention to helping students learn the different pronunciations that accompany past and present tense verb forms in standardized English.

Other sound differences in African American English have similar grammatical implications. Speakers of African American English may demonstrate variation in the pronunciation of final consonants, which may make contracted future tense forms difficult to recognize. For example, "You'll go there" may sound similar to "You go there" due to the variability of the final *l* sound in *you'll*. Similarly, *I'll* can be difficult to distinguish from *I* for students who speak African American English and are decoding

*To learn more, see "Teaching Reading to African American Children" in the Summer 2021 issue of *American Educator*: aft.org/ae/summer2021/washington_seidenberg.

standardized English, as well as for speakers of standardized English who are decoding or listening to African American English. Therefore, it is important for educators to pay close attention to how students who use African American English are pronouncing and writing future tense forms in standardized English.

Knowledge of how and why specific language variations appear in students' oral reading and writing is invaluable when teaching and assessing students who speak African American English because features of this variety will often appear in students' speech, oral reading, and written work. It is critical, however, that educators avoid shaming students for their language variation or disproportionately penalizing them for the presence of language variants in their speech, oral reading, and written work.

When pointing out places where students' use of grammar diverges from the norms and conventions of standardized English, it is important to consider whether these grammatical "errors" might actually be rooted in students' use of a language pattern characteristic of African American English. If so, it is important to explain *both* linguistic patterns to the student. This entails guiding the student to recognize where and how their usage is influenced by African American English and, while acknowledging and appreciating this language variation, also comparing and contrasting it to standardized English.[29]

Above all, it is critical not to focus on standardized English grammatical usage in students' speech, oral reading, and writing to the point of overlooking the quality of the content, organization, or style of the student's work. Doing so over-penalizes students who use African American English and can lead to the educational frustrations discussed earlier in this article that many students unfortunately experience.[30]

Impact on Learning Mathematics

Although some may believe that learning mathematics is simply a question of manipulating numbers, in reality, some of the challenges that students encounter are linguistic, such as when they are asked to solve math word problems.[31] Math word problems frequently employ existential constructions such as "There is," "There's," and "There are," as in statements such as "There are six apples in the bag." This may cause difficulty for students who use African American English because existential constructions vary; "It is" and "It's" are commonly used in place of "There is," "There's," and "There are" (e.g., "It's six apples in the bag"). These and other similar variations may affect how students who use African American English read and process word problems.[32]

One study of the relationship between the linguistic complexity of word problems and students' success in carrying out the computations offers further evidence of challenges that may face students who use African American English in math classwork.[33] Working with 75 African American second-graders, the researchers estimated how each student's test performance was affected by two features of African American English: the variability of *-s* in third person singular verb forms (as in "He talk a lot," compared to "He talks a lot") and in possessive constructions (as in "My mama house is big," compared to "My mama's house is big"). The researchers accounted for each student's overall ability and the difficulty of the math problem. They found that a core group of students—those who were highly affected by linguistic differences—would have answered 9 percent more questions correctly, on average, if the linguistic feature in question had not been included in the word problem. The researchers explained their results by suggesting that some students who use African American English may face an added cognitive load on their working memory when they read and process math word problems due to language variation. Another study found an even stronger impact, estimating that US students who do not use standardized English may perform 10 to 30 percent worse on math word problems than on comparable problems presented in a numeric format.[34] These results indicate the importance of understanding the significant role that linguistic factors play, in addition to computational skills, in mathematics.

Intonation and Classroom Meaning

The sounds of English involve intonation, pitch, rhythm, stress, and volume, or what linguists refer to as *prosody*, and they can vary between African American and standardized English. For example, in standardized English, especially as used in the classroom, questions are generally expected to rise in their intonation. In the sentence "Are you going to the store?," the word *store* will usually be said with a rising intonation. In contrast, in African American English, questions may also be formed with falling or flat intonation. The question "Are you going to the store?" may therefore be said with flat intonation, as in "Are you going to the store."[35]

Students should not be shamed for language variation in their speech, oral reading, or written work.

Why does this matter? Differences in how questions are asked can be critical in how educators and peers perceive students who use African American English. It also might mean that educators who only speak standardized English might not immediately recognize that a Black student is asking them a question. Intonation matters in school and everyday interactions because it is directly tied to comprehension. It is also often implicitly tied to notions of politeness, friendliness, and enthusiasm that are embedded in school culture—and that are closely aligned to the cultural practices of a majority white and female educator population in the United States.

The lack of melodic variation in the voices of Black students, especially male students, is often misinterpreted in a negative light and may be infused with perceptions of emotions that students do not mean to convey. As a result, students who use African American English may be improperly evaluated academically, socially, and emotionally. In standardized English, the absence of a rise at the end of a question can be used to signal disengagement, disinterest, and disrespect. This is not the case in African American English, as speakers of this variety may equally produce questions with rising, flat, or falling intonation patterns. If a Black student says "Why am I taking this test" (with a flat or falling intonation) instead of "Why am I taking this test?" (with a rising intonation), an educator who is not familiar with this variety may interpret it as a signal of aggression, uncooperativeness, noncompliance, withdrawal, or disrespect, even though the student may not have intended to send such a message. Other intonation patterns that seem to signal negative emotions or behaviors, such as indifference or rudeness, interact with frequently misunderstood nonverbal behaviors, such as not making eye contact when listening to a speaker or shrugging one's shoulders.[36] As a result, misimpressions of certain students may be intensified.

The classroom must be a safe place to speak up, so that students are willing to have their voices heard.

For these reasons, it is essential for educators to have knowledge of and respect for differences in students' use of intonation. This is particularly critical when interpreting students' emotional states, including whether and how students are perceived to sound polite, enthusiastic, and respectful or bored, withdrawn, uncooperative, and angry. Educators should also be aware of intonational differences so that they can teach students about them, helping students better understand each other and build relationships. Intonation also plays an important role in reading comprehension, and sometimes intonation patterns are misinterpreted by students as part of this process. Variation in intonation may lead to students misinterpreting how a character feels or how the author intended the text to be read.

Conversational Differences

Conversational norms in African American English may also differ from standardized English and other varieties of English in key ways, such as in how individuals greet each other. Whereas white children and adults may often use each other's first names to show friendship and familiarity, African American children and adults may prefer to use titles to show respect, both in situations in which there is a hierarchical difference between the speakers (e.g., doctor-patient or educator-student) and in situations that are more egalitarian.[37]

Conversational differences between standardized English and African American English may be easily misinterpreted. One important example surrounds styles of turn-taking. When speaking with others, Black students may communicate in interactive and energetic ways, and they may engage in more conversational overlap, such that more than one person is speaking at a time.[38] Overlapping with another speaker is often viewed as normal and comfortable in African American English (and in other varieties, such as Jewish American English[39]). In standardized English, however, overlap may be considered a form of interruption and may be offensive to the speaker. These differences can lead to miscommunication. In one study, when African American students used overlapping turns, educators perceived them to be boisterous, loud, and out of control.[40] It is important to be sensitive to variations in how students converse with each other and with educators. If the conversational norms of standardized English are expected, these conventions may need to be explicitly taught.

Forms of verbal play have also been well documented in research on African American English, including the ways that students who use African American English interact with peers. Verbal play is a vehicle through which the speakers make use of figurative language, draw on cultural and personal knowledge, and learn verbal and creative improvisation skills similar to those that are built when artists learn to "improv" in jazz music or "freestyle" in rap and hip-hop music. Instigation, signifying, and other forms of playful teasing may be misinterpreted, however, which may segue into other forms of confrontation. Verbal confrontation at school can lead to conflict, which may cause a student to be reprimanded or punished. Knowledge of the rituals of verbal jousting may be important when assessing whether or not students are engaging in verbal play.

Another important difference surrounds giving commands. Indirect commands are common in standardized English, especially in educational settings. For example, students may be asked to form a line through indirect statements such as "Let's get lined

up," "I don't see anyone standing in line yet," or "I like the way some of you are standing in line." In African American English, it is common to use direct commands, such as "I want you to line up now." Therefore, students who use African American English may interpret indirect commands as preferences or suggestions, rather than commands. Educators may wish to explicitly teach awareness of the differing cultural norms of suggestions and commands. For example, educators may need to explain that "Let's get lined up" and "I like the way you all are talking quietly" often carry the same meanings as "Line up now" and "Please talk quietly." By the same token, it is important to be mindful that educators who issue more direct commands to their students, such as "I want you to line up now" or "Stop talking," are not necessarily being harsh with their students but rather may be operating according to different cultural and linguistic norms.

Not Too Loud or Too Quiet

Volume is another linguistic characteristic that can have implications for classroom interactions. Many stereotypes perpetuate the idea that African Americans speak more loudly and tend to shout more often than other racial or ethnic groups, and that African American students are more rambunctious than other students. At the same time, the paradoxical stereotype also exists that Black students are silent or withdrawn, which often leads them to be perceived as "having a wall up" or as being standoffish, sullen, and hard to get to know.

Black students who do not talk much at school may also be perceived to have limited language skills. For example, teachers thought a student named Zora had a learning disability because she refused to talk while she was at school. As a result, Zora was asked to repeat first grade. Later, when she was in middle school, Zora explained that she had often felt nervous and out of place in school, and she chose not to speak up in school settings, both as a coping mechanism and to avoid drawing attention to herself. Zora recalled that many teachers "thought I was slow, because I didn't say nothing when they asked me a question."[41]

Classroom observations reveal that students who are less secure in adhering to the conventions of standardized English and who feel less safe in academic contexts may retreat into various stages of quiet or what may be perceived as withdrawal. Other students may speak more loudly and behave in ways that are perceived as "acting out." These students may also use more features of African American English, shifting the style of their speech from the standardized English that is generally expected in the school setting. Peers may even attempt to regulate or ridicule African American students' loud verbal performances, labeling them as "ghetto." In such situations, it is important not to assume that variation in students' communication patterns signals low intelligence, uncooperativeness, or hostility. Students may be using features of African American English to assert their identity.

Students gain confidence and can enjoy academic and social success when they know standardized English and when they and their educators value the language patterns that the students bring with them to school. How educators react to language variation sends an important message to students about safety and acceptance; positive messages of inclusion help students view learning as an accessible and engaging process. Language differences can add to other school stressors; thus, the classroom must be a safe place to take risks and speak up, so that students are willing to have their voices be heard.[42]

As a way to actively understand and incorporate language variation in the classroom, we have created the Share My Lesson webinar "The Sound of Inclusion: Using Poetry to Teach Language Variation": sharemylesson.com/webinars/inclusion-poetry-language. This interactive workshop will bring out the poetry in your students and in you! We will use poetry study to build from the ground up with students and integrate the academic, social, and emotional aspects of learning language. We focus on sharing ideas about the concepts of dialect, language varieties, and translanguaging.
–A. H. C. H., C. M., R. S., and K. B.

With the information presented in this article, educators are equipped to conceptualize and talk about the varied dimensions and shifting intersections of language, culture, race, and identity in all their complexity. Educators who are familiar with African American English as a linguistic system and who take a strengths-based perspective are also able to provide students with opportunities to draw upon the linguistic resources of their homes and communities in their academic work. Research reveals that this inclusive strategy is educationally effective,[43] and it offers the validation that students need to feel that they can show up as their whole selves in classrooms and schools.

Language is not just a theory or an idea; it requires dialogue and action. The actions that you take and the ways that you do language going forward matter—from the daily conversations you hold with students and families to the ways you advocate for linguistic justice in practice and assessment. As author and professor Toni Morrison said in her Nobel lecture after accepting the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993, "We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives."[44] ☐

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/winter2022-2023/hudley.