

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 082 250

CS 500 415

AUTHOR Smith, Arthur L.
TITLE Theoretical and Research Issues in Black Communication.
INSTITUTION Speech Communication Association, New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE Nov 72
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Black Communication Conference (Pittsburgh, Pa., November 1972)

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.65 HC-\$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *African American Studies; Cultural Differences; Cultural Factors; Information Theory; *Language Usage; Negroes; Nonverbal Communication; Public Speaking; *Research Opportunities; *Rhetoric; *Sociocultural Patterns; Verbal Communication

IDENTIFIERS *Afro American Communication

ABSTRACT

There has been little research on the communicative behaviors of Afro-Americans, whose language and public messages rarely fit into traditional patterns of Anglo-Saxon discourse. Intensive study is warranted in numerous areas. One is the area of linguistic continuity research, which investigates similarities in vocabulary and expression between West African and Afro-American language usages. A second area is "metarhetorical" theory, based on symbolic behavior and the assumptions that conventional understandings of rhetoric are foreign to the African ethos and that Afro-Americans place considerable emphasis on rhythm. A third area is diachronic-synchronic comparative research, which reveals how Africans and Afro-Americans, respectively, structure and react to their public speeches. Other areas include descriptive field studies, to reveal what happens when the black communicator speaks, and the development of a notational system for recording black nonverbal behavior. There is also a need for additional bidialectal research, exploring methods for teachers of black English, and for symbolic studies, which reveal the effect of white, European cultural symbols on ethnocentric racist attitudes. (RN)

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRO-
DUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM
THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGIN-
ATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS
STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT
OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Theoretical and Research Issues in
Black Communication

by

Arthur L. Smith
Associate Professor of Communication Studies
Director, Center for Afro-American Studies
University of California, Los Angeles

Prepared for Black Communication Conference, Pittsburgh,
November 5-11, 1972

Copyright 1972 Speech Communication Association

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPY-
RIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Speech

Communication Assn.

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING
UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL IN-
STITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRO-
DUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM RE-
QUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT
OWNER."

ED 082250

CS 500 415

THEORETICAL AND RESEARCH ISSUES IN BLACK COMMUNICATION

Arthur L. Smith

The enormous lack of research into the communicative patterns and behaviors of blacks has confounded the best intentions of recent writers and has kept us locked into an infinity of misunderstandings. The philosophical and theoretical problems of black speech and speakers in the last quarter of the twentieth century will be concerned with the varied modes of how black people say something. Unfortunately, in spite of some initial studies induced, in part, by the platform rhetoric of the decade of the sixties, there are indications that a sustained examination of black communication and language will have to be based on systematic theories and a general explication of Africanisms in black American speech patterns.

Perhaps few people use vocal communication in as many and varied ways as the Afro-Americans, and the research that has been done, including my own writings, has scarcely unearthed the linkages and networks responsible for the significance of the spoken word in black America.¹ A rich oral tradition, augmented by lyrical aspects emerging from the slavery experience, contribute to the impact of the word. Saying something and doing something are parts of the same event, and it is this marriage of word and action which remains to be fully understood. The emphasis here is upon the spoken word as a significant modality in human activity. Thus, vocal communication emerged in America among the slaves as the vehicle for essays, jokes, novels, and short stories. In later times the preacher may have been to Afro-Americans as the storyteller was to Africans. He established moods, disseminated the folk-wisdom of the community and commented on contemporary morality.

In reviewing the work that has been done and is now in progress several problems are evident, all apparently related to the kinds of questions we have raised. The works that have emerged from our theorists and critics have been interesting and frequently provocative, but they have been fairly uncreative. And while one may respond with some validity, that the historical-critical approach is needed to put major figures in historical and critical perspective, it is not enough for those interested in some keen understanding of how black people have come to use and appreciate the spoken word, to engage in, what becomes, relative additions to history but little or no additions to theory of communication. The development of theories of rhetoric, capable of explaining how language functions in the community of men, is our most critical mission. And how the explication of black public speaking relates to that mission determines for us its universal significance. The practice of analyzing major speeches by prominent personalities in order to ascertain effectiveness certainly has its place but it has been criticized, both rightly and wrongly, in some of its features. Surely we cannot incorporate into the study of black communication patterns the mistakes of those who have explored platform speakers with no theoretical base in mind or who have not indicated the linkages and connections of the total communicative atmosphere. I am of the opinion that we do not have to hang explorations of black communication from the same old tree. In fact, there are, as there ought to be, implications in black research directions for other areas of the field. This paper shall describe each of several sorts of research frontiers in black communication by indicating its scope and possible methodological questions.

I

Linguistic Continuity Research investigates similarities in usages, vocabulary, and expression between West African languages and the spoken language of Afro-Americans, both North and South. This research is fundamental to the African continuum and seeks to establish the presence of an African consociation in the new world. Such interest in continuity has artifactual

implications, insomuch as what is being discussed, is not necessarily a formal material artifact but a function, a sense, for which the evidence of continuity is not found in conventional methods of proof. Mervyn Alleyne gives the examples of the Rastafarians in Jamaica for whom language is a constant creation and re-shaping of words to bring about a closer relation of form and thing meant.² This he calls in somewhat unclear language, a formal link without the corresponding African content. Herskovits found nearly the same phenomenon in Brazil and portions of Central America, and Smith in a paper entitled, "Analysis of Continuity," published by the African Studies Center at UCLA, argued that sense and function is also present in the speech of blacks in the United States.³ This is yet an area of more conjecture than science, but will ultimately find its legitimacy in inferences based upon material artifacts: spoken words are artifacts. Lorenzo Turner's comprehensive and singular work, Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect significantly contributed to interest in this area.⁴ While Turner's work was primarily documentary, the implications were far reaching for the linguistic continuity studies. Language as the principle bearer of culture is a proper instrument to study in order to ascertain the limits of continuity which can provide us a clue to how blacks have come to use the spoken word. But we must always be wary of the vocabulary item itself as an indication of continuity. Vocabulary items are limited; they may or may not be used by a population. So while the work of continuity scholars is important and admirable we must not be led into believing that the vocabulary item is the end. More important, perhaps, is the approach to language, the presence of a certain attitude toward the use of language.

Work being done by William Stewart and several of the research associates at the Center for Applied Linguistics is of procedural significance in studying linguistic continuity because the attempt to correlate place of origin with intensity of Africanisms provides the researcher with a more solid base for his hypotheses. Perhaps the publishing of Philip Curtin's new book the African Slave Trade will have an impact upon the linguistic and communication researchers in search of more detailed information regarding the points of origin and arrival

of Africans. Hopefully, we will see a sort of bigamous relationship in this area where speech communication weds anthropology and linguistics in order to produce a concise statement of the communicative behavior, as was historically manifested and as is currently manifest among blacks, particularly in the regions of Georgia and South Carolina that received the greatest number of Africans near the end of the slave trade. If one determines that people from South Carolina descended from Hausa, rather than Yoruba, certain unique linguistic implications are present. But aren't we obfuscating the whole matter? African slaves were seldom all of one ethnic or linguistic group, although some groups tended to predominate in certain regions. Clearly, for example, the Twi-speaking Ashanti peopled much of Jamaica; but there is a strong Congo population around the Eastern shore. Thus, we can only hope that scholars who work in this area will consult geographers and historians in order to isolate the major influxes of people. Such information is needed to make sense out of black communicative patterns and to establish black norms. Continuity research must have as its objective the explication of behavior. And a premise of this research is that certain cultural factors influence how one communicates.

II

Metarhetorical Theory, according to Martin Steinmann, investigates theories of rhetoric and produces metatheories of rhetoric.⁵ Metatheories are decided upon, rather than discovered, and as such are products of logical analysis, rather than empirical investigation.⁶ I suspect that this will be one of the more fruitful frontiers because scholars will want to devise holistic views of rhetoric within a multi-ethnic society. Already work is underway to interpret the diverse symbolisms of our society in order to formulate a meaningful metatheory for rhetorical situations within an ethnically and racially pluralistic community. Such a metatheory is to be justified rather than verified, and as Steinmann suggests, its justification would be based upon the success of those rhetorics that conform to it.⁷ Included in any metatheory of rhetoric which would argue for symbolic engineering would be a definitive statement of the symbolic behavior of

black Americans. What inventional processes figure in the development of symbols among blacks? What aggregations of attitudes and opinions serve to bring about symbolic constructions? This discussion, however, could not take place without providing an understanding of symbolic structuring generally.

In recent years, I have given more and more attention to this problem in my own research. The fruit of that research however sweet or bitter is presented in the following assumptions about black communication. I admit that they are much like legalistic commandments but they must not be accepted as final law until, as well be explained later, our descriptions are complete. After all, the descriptions of what we black people do when we speak or write give rise to theories about those functions.

Assumption 1

Rhetoric as concept is foreign to the traditional African ethos.

That is, rhetoric as conventionally understood and written about is not found and has no parallel in traditional African societies. This is not to say that speaking does not exist or that persuasion does not exist. But rather this assumption underscores the western origin of rhetoric as a concept predicated upon certain basic western ideas about how man communicates with man. Thus, to say "black rhetoric" is to speak an aberration. Furthermore, the constant emphasis of the term cannot establish its rectitude any more than talk can redirect the flow of a river.

Rhetoric is foreign to the African ethos (here used in the sense of Kwame Nkrumah's African personality) because it accepts reason as the supreme authority. What must be understood by those of us who would plumb the depths of black expression is that reason is merely one authority in the midst of many authorities.

Assumption 2

Africans in America place considerable reliance on rhythm in expression.

By "rhythm" I mean a uniform recurrence of an accent or beat which stimulates in hearers an awareness of distinctive movement. When the black man

speaks from the public platform he must make his words conform to music. Recurrent sound in emphasis and volume indicates a reliance on rhythm, an essential element of human pronunciatio. This dependence on rhythm is properly identified by Janheinz Jahn as nommo, the generative quality of vocal expression. In such forceful presentations as were given by Malcolm X or Martin Luther King in the 1960's nommo is developed by the paraphernalia of the occasions so that music and speech invoke the cohesion of the audiences. To speak forcefully is to speak poetically, and the speaker who fails to realize that fact, black or white, will not be effective as an orator within the community.

Assumption 3

Spoken discourse by Afro-Americans suggest specific criteria for evaluation.

All spoken discourse ushers forth from some social, political or hereditary context. In other words, what we do when we speak publicly is determined in part by some context, which is definitionally a constraint. Yet this fact does exist and influence spoken discourse. The observable elements of a black communicative situation suggest, and they have been further confirmed in the literature, that indirection, imagination, styling, rhythm, and the emotional play upon reason or the intertwining of reason with emotion, constitute evaluation factors. ~~Questions such as~~ What are the dimensions of rhythm employed? How does the speaker establish internal rhythm? How is indirection utilized to influence audience acceptance of the speech? Is the communicator's imagination capable of leading the audience toward intellectual and emotional fulfillment? These and other questions are important to the discovery of a prototypical black public speaker.

III

Diachronic-Synchronic Critical Research demonstrates, historically and comparatively, whether public speeches by Africans and Afro-Americans possess any similarity in structure, argument, tone, and expressive sense (which is the sum total of a speaker's physical and vocal movement during a

given public utterance). But its primary objective, unlike that of linguistic continuity research, is not to isolate a lineal relationship between Africa and Afro-American through investigation of the spoken word, and its final product, therefore, is not a justificatory statement concerning linguistic lineality, although that is conceivably a proper and perhaps valid by-product of an intensive diachronic-synchronic critical design. As a frontier of communication research among blacks, it shows how all historical information producing research is comparative. For a particular examination of African communication behavior (Chaka's war speech to his sub-Chiefs, say, or Ogotomelli's three day recitation of Dogon philosophy) it draws conclusions about that situation by comparison with similar events in history. What it shows is whether or not African communicators, or Afro-American communicators, act or react differently to given rhetorical purposes and themes. If, in fact, there are divergencies, discovered by diachronic-synchronic critical research, those disparities must be examined because possibly they suggest new norms for certain kinds of rhetorical behavior, and new norms establish a base for a whole new body of knowledge.

IV

Descriptive Field Studies describe investigations that seek to discover "what it is like" in black communicative situations, or "what is going on" when the black communicator speaks. Perhaps it is only when we have adequately described black communicative behavior will we know whether traditional theories take account of the phenomenon or not. At such time, it will be possible to offer new theories or hypotheses to explain the phenomenon of black communication. As Charles Redding points out, descriptive field studies that employ neither manipulation nor quantification, may make risky generalizations, but cannot be "dismissed as possessing no significant scientific value."⁸ In fact, Katz contends that "this type of study provides a great deal of information about a community or a culture with an economy of effort."⁹ A descriptive field study might seek to validate or invalidate theories given as applicable to communication

among blacks. So long as the field researcher can perform his research and the subjects perceive no deviations from everyday routines or if perceiving deviations do not see them as research induced, the study may be labeled as a field study.¹⁰ Such studies can be made of various situations and the method of exploratory case study can be applied. The student of black communication then, seeks social, religious, and political situations for study, and would endeavor, where possible, to apply what Webb calls unobtrusive measures in order to do nonreactive research.

V

Kinesic Taxonomy

A group of researchers are now interested in developing an extensive notational system of Afro-American non-verbal behavior. Most of the research will probably be descriptive initially in an attempt to settle on the important factors which constitute norms for black behavior. As is now becoming evident in medical science, people of one group do not necessarily conform to the norms established for another. Thus, it is possible that the kinesic norms of blacks will differ from those of whites.

Conceivably, researchers interested in exploring this field will begin with gestural patterns and then move to more complex behavioral systems. Actually, this area of movement research is more closely related to speech communication and is therefore one of the most fruitful for a study of Afro-American communication. By establishing the norms of kinesic behavior, we will be able to develop a more complete communication theory or at least a more systematic view of the total area.

The student of black kinesics will raise questions about certain platform mannerisms, gestures, and mass physical movement. In fact, such studies would not merely note the "victory walk" but attempt to assign meaning to it based upon contextual considerations as well as group behavior. Description

must be followed by interpretation, and it is conceivable that many interpretations will lead us to sociology and psychology.

VI

Bidialectal Research which would explore the use of contrastive approaches in teaching speakers of Black English is of pedagogical significance. Not only will research in this area teach us how to improve the student's comprehension of English, but it should also help us know how to clarify for the learner those structures and uses being heard at home. I am not suggesting that the speech communication scholar, however, whose primary concern is the process of verbal interaction, get involved in producing like Garvey and McFarlane studies of sentences using fifteen different syntactic and morphologic features which differed between Black English and English. Our research has to be more substantive in terms of how people communicate with others. Certainly the work of Orlando Taylor, Beryl Bailey, Edith Folb, and Walt Wolfram are important to bidialectal research, but speech communication scholars must ask questions about the relative value of people being able to make a statement, answer a question, or define an issue in different languages. Already we know that black children labeled slow learners are frequently trying to capture the language as well as the content of classroom discussions. In this sense the classroom is a foreign situation to a black child and he reacts much like the student who speaks only English in the so-called standard version in a classroom where the only language spoken or understood by the teacher is Geechee. If the instructor asked "How sky stun?" the student, though perhaps bright, would not know how to respond. His experiences at home, on the playground, at the beach, in the mountains, and at the museums have not prepared him for this language. How is he to know that "How sky stun?" is to be translated "What color is the sky?" So for lack of knowledge he remains silent and the teacher labels him educable mentally retarded. Thus the direction in research in this area should not be strictly confined to the use of the conjugated forms of be, the use of the invariable be for the habitual present, or investigations of the past-perfect-past

exchange; alternative ways of saying something in the classroom in order to facilitate comprehension must be explored.

VII

Symbolic Engineering Research is concerned with how cultural symbols, linguistic and historical, can be manipulated to effect multi-ethnic social pluralism; it is, in its essence, research into the philosophy of symbols, researchers in this area as it pertains to black communication patterns will want to ascertain the impact of European cultural symbols on African sociation and the extent to which linguistic symbols are indications of social reality. I do not expect this to be done within traditional speech departments but speech departments or communication departments are the logical places for such a study. Questions such as what are the bases behind the symbols employed? How is invention a part of the symbolic process? - are all integral in the formula to understand symbolic engineering. One may start with the Whorfian hypothesis and explore the relationship of language to society, but beyond that it should be possible to suggest, without presumption, what small steps can be taken to assure that Grace Episcopal Church in San Francisco will not assume that by putting the profiles of ten white men on its windows that it has in fact memorialized the "ten greatest men in world history." Communication theorists must expose such ethnocentric messages as deliberate attempts, often in the name of religion, to inculcate racism.

VIII

The preceding discussion should help to clarify the theoretical directions confronting scholars interested in black communication. In a narrower sense, perhaps, there has been a focussing of the spotlight on possible indices for evaluating black communication behavior, platform and interpersonal.

In the first instance the theoretical problems have really not been surmounted. There is a frustration with all of this - there always is when new paths are being charted and new formulations sought. The whole discussion of black communication hinges upon our acceptance of the position that what is descriptively true of white speech and speakers is not necessarily true of black speech and speakers. Such a position does not entail a further position that what is theoretically true of white speech and speakers is untrue of black speech and speakers. A theory in its simplest form is an analysis of a set of facts in relation to one another. Thus descriptive facts of white speech and black speech may differ while the same theoretical principle may hold.

The minimum prerequisite for communicating our ideas about descriptive facts is acceptance of rules regulating the relations among facts. Isolation of facts by observation and experiment constitutes the first round of theory construction. As we isolate more facts we will be able to explain more readily how they fit into the whole. The immediate task, then, for us is to clarify the issues of facts that distinguish black communication behavior.

We know, for instance, that there is something in a traditional black sermon that moves rhythmically as the speaker progresses toward the end of his speech. What distinguishes this unique singing or chanting from other speech behaviors has not been made clear. Apart from the fact that it is a special way of producing sound, we must examine its psychological and sociological bases.

Clearly there are diverse directions to be taken in communication research among blacks. I have not intended, by encouraging wariness, to suggest that no historical-critical research be done. Certainly scholars interested in black communication behavior might examine classical schemes with attention to how innovations accompanied public speaking. Examinations of this type serve to provide the scholar with breadth when investigating contemporary events. Thus, the relationship of history architecture, politics, economics

to communication provide us with a view of how the communicative process changes in the face of other phenomena.

Furthermore, the scholar will want to compare and contrast classical schemes with non-western cultures. If an architectonic concept for rhetoric is to be found, speech communication scholars will have to attend to and explore several fertile directions. I am certain to have omitted something going on somewhere, there are lots of parts that do not yet fit together. Take, for instance, the connection between black aesthetic and black communication. The folk literature would suggest that art, particularly music, is closely allied to speech. Thus another path leads off and we have yet to venture beyond the suggestive note. I am now convinced that those of us in this area of research must use all available methods, perhaps devise new ones, face our theoretical and procedural difficulties, not stoically but with flexibility, learning to mix our intuitive rumination with empirical data, though never being slaves to empiricism, but understanding its place in the acquisition of knowledge as we understand the humanism of the people whose communication we hope to clarify.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ See for example Wayne Brockriede and Robert L. Scott, The Rhetoric of Black Power, (New York, 1968); Arthur L. Smith, Rhetoric of Black Revolution, (Boston, 1969); and numerous articles including Parke Burgess "The Rhetoric of Black Power: A Moral Demand?" Quarterly Journal of Speech Vol. LIV, (April, 1968), pp. 122-133. Charles U. Larson, "The Trust Establishing Function of the Rhetoric of Black Power," Central States Speech Journal Spring 1970, pp. 111-119; and Arthur L. Smith, "Socio-historical perspectives of Black Oratory," Quarterly Journal of Speech (October 1970) pp. 264-269.
- ² Mervyn C. Alleyne, "Linguistic Continuity of Africa in the Caribbean," in Topics in Afro-American Studies, (Buffalo, 1971), p. 120.
- ³ See Melville Herskovits, The Myth of the Negro Past, (Boston, 1969)
- ⁴ Lorenzo Turner, Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect (New York 1969)
- ⁵ Martin Steinmann, Jr. New Rhetoric's (New York, 1967) p. 25
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Charles Redding, "Research Setting: Field Studies," in Philip Emmert and William Brooks, Methods of Research in Communication (New York) p. 148
- ⁹ D. Katz, "Field Studies," in Leon Festinger and D. Katz, Research Methods in the Behavioral Sciences, (New York, 1953), p. 64.
- ¹⁰ Redding, op, cit., p. 151