

## **You People: Racial Classification of African-Americans in Sociolinguistic Analysis**

There has been extensive documentation of the relationship between African-American Vernacular English and American English in the Sociolinguistics literature. The racial characterization of speakers is most often binary; with few exceptions, people are either defined as African-American or White.

Many past discussions concerning the African-American speech community have centered on who speaks African-American English. In this analysis, I focus on what it means to be African-American. I first examine working definitions of what it means to be classified as African-American in Sociolinguistic and Variationist frameworks. In larger quantitative studies of linguistic variables, the absence or presence of certain linguistic features empirically aligns with broad definitions of race. Examinations that include more discrete analysis of individuals and their social worlds suggest that the social histories of individuals are much more complicated than gross racial categories allow for. Given the complicated socio-historical reality regarding racial contact and classification in America, I address theoretical concerns faced when discerning who is African-American who is White and who is speaking what?

In keeping with the interdisciplinary theme of the conference, I draw from contemporary work in Sociology, Demography, and History. I outline the history and motivations for racial categories in the United States as they pertain to linguistic classification. I focus on the specific historical and cultural situation regarding people with African ancestry in the United States and the racial classifications systems implemented at the time of Reconstruction and at the time of Jim Crow, that for the most part, the United States still follow now. I argue that notions of race and ethnicity in current linguistic theory generally align with essentialist descriptions of race rather than historical fact or introspective ideology. This is not always the fault of the researcher; as such cultural distinctions have often been muted or lost in everyday discourse. I draw examples from the vowel systems of speakers in Philadelphia who self identify as both African-American and White to show the linguistic and social complexity of racial patterning within speakers.

I conclude with an examination of what our responsibilities are as researchers to characterize internal and external representations of race even when our data could tell a more intricate story. Such findings represent new approaches to the African-American English /White American English divergence /convergence debate.