

2022

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Recommended Citation

Smith, D. & Johnson, K. (2022). Melody and memory: Black language in the Low Country. *South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal*, 109-115.

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Published online: 1 March 2022

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Melody and Memory: Black Language in the Low Country

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Abstract: Black Language has historically been marginalized as a broken form of Standard English forcing the speakers of this language to conform and devalue their native tongue. This impact has led to a negative stigma on Black Language and forced Black people to relinquish their cultural literacies. This study reflects on understanding why Black Language must be recognized as a legitimate language. It also illustrates why Black Language should be welcomed into the classroom as it provides a pathway to self-actualization affording Black students the opportunity to self-define and self-validate their existence. Special emphasis is placed on how language impacts adolescent identity development.

Keywords: Black Language, English/language arts instruction, adolescents, classroom practice, language and literacies.

Introduction

This manuscript is a confluence of voices: Two Black university professors at a Historically Black University in the Southeast, two middle-level adolescent students and their familial support network. Using Black Language served as a catalyst for transformative healing; allowing three generations to discuss their intersecting identities and bear witness to each other's memories. To resist racist linguistic representations, students must confront the colonizing ideology by developing a linguistic critical consciousness. In short, we must confront linguisticism by fully loving and embracing our Blackness. The study elucidates how Black Language can cultivate healing while promoting academic success. The paper begins by discussing Black Language as an act of love, we then share interview excerpts to demonstrate the vulnerability needed to analyze wounds inflicted by linguisticism. We conclude by sharing pedagogical insights for English/language arts educators.

There is an inherent power and majesty in language.

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"I never realized I say, "fetch" because my grandmother said it or that my great grandparents would never say "yesterday," but instead "ye-stidy." I guess that's why I make a point to say I love you before I hang up the phone. 'Cause it would seem that if I heard it said to me, I would remember."

It began with a simple task: interview a student, their parent or guardian and community member to learn their perceptions on language. We chose to focus on Cree (*pseudonym*), an 8th grader affectionately called *Miracle* because she is a cancer survivor. Cree is blessed to have a strong support network including her mother, Sabrina; her godparents, Deacon James D., and his wife Patrice; and her cousins Deacon Cliff, his wife Carrie, and their daughter Sinclair (*pseudonyms*). We asked questions and carefully listened to their stories, realizing that by delving into their language memories, we simultaneously explored the intricacies of our mother tongue Black Language. Their revelations helped us to fully conceptualize the beauty and complexity of language and to better understand key concepts in the study of language for young adolescents and its connection to their identity and development.

There is an inherent power and majesty in language. Whether it is in the whispered phrase, "I love you," or the lingering remnants of words such as "ye-stidy," or "fetch," language shapes our identity (Baker-Bell, 2017; Boutte, 2012; Hudley & Mallinson, 2013; Kinloch, 2005). Language allows us to negotiate space and is the cornerstone of relationships. Flowing within everyone, language is fluid and visceral (Boutte & Johnson, 2012; Delpit & Dowdy, 2008; Hutcheson, 2005; Ana, 2004). The nuances of language, heard or seen, shape our memories and tint our perception of the world (Fu, 2009; Hutcheson, 2005; Ogulnick et al., 2000). But what happens when language is marginalized? Our language, Black Language, has historically held this unpleasant distinction.

Though linguists long ago designated Black Language as a rule-governed, literary-oriented, historically constructed language (Boutte, 2012; Haddix, 2016; Kinloch, 2010), many in society, including educators, still advocate a monolingual literacy approach explicitly devaluing Black Language as improper English (Baker-Bell, 2019, 2020; Kinloch, 2005 & 2010; McMurtry, 2021; Smitherman, 2006). This paper outlines the dangers of unilaterally adopting such an attitude.

The stories of these participants are critical in understanding why Black Language must be recognized as a legitimate language. In particular, young adolescents, who are proficient in the language, should be granted the freedom to express themselves freely through language that is relevant to them.

Middle-level educators must ask themselves: How will I engage my students' thinking about language power, language privilege (entitlement) and linguisticism in my classroom (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Muhammad, 2018)? By removing Black Language negative connotation, society will affirm the positive identities of Black Language speakers as well support the art of translation between Black Language and Mainstream English (ME). Blending linguistic and language acquisition theory with their heartfelt words, what follows are concepts learned from listening to our participants' voices. Each participant adds a layer of insight. Each story weaves new wisdom. Simply put, it is the story of three generations, discussing a language denied.

More than Words: Black Language is a Complex Linguistic Melody

I am from language as a melody.
words movin' so fast,
they weave a tapestry of music...
I am from a language many deem broken.
It was never fragmented for me.
To me, it was harmony.
It was our rhythm.
(Smith, 2012).

Music and melody have always been a component of Black Language (Hudley & Mallinson, 2013; Rickford & Rickford, 2000; Smitherman, 2006) and an essential component of life in South Carolina's Low Country. Whether it is the pulse of the spoken language, the church hymns evoking shouts and tears or the pounding baseline of rap, music has always laced our language. This can be especially seen as Cree introduces herself because almost every descriptor is connected to that music and melody.

Music is not simply a way to introduce herself; it is a means of "articulating the pleasures and problems of her life [while allowing her to] speak with the voice of personal experience, taking on the identity of the observer or narrator" (Rose, 1992, p. 4). Using words and gestures, she explains the pace of her language by saying: "My language is a slow vibe. But when I'm on the computer trying to make a rap song, it's like a fast vibe, you know. It's like that instrumental beat." Cree acknowledges that language is more complex than weaving words; it can also involve pace, pitch and tone and gestures (Baker-Bell, 2019, 2020; Ogulnick et al., 2000; Ana, 2004; Smitherman, 2006). It is through experimenting with this repertoire that Cree is able to express various facets of her identity. She notes, "When I'm in a crunk mood. I just be crumpin'. I jus' go wild like I'm at a party."

It is clear to see that that Hip Hop speaks to Cree's burgeoning adolescent identity and allows her to express realities that using ME may not (Baker-Bell, 2019, 2020; Love, 2016). This is one of the many powers of Black Language. It has a "life, voice and clarity" (Jordan, 1982) that ME simply cannot successfully emulate. Busta Rhymes' stirring words describing Hip Hop, also aptly describe Black Language: "It is poetry,

storytelling, and rhythm. It reflects the truth . . . It's a platform to offer information but it is also an escape."

Language is a Currency of Power: An Internal Conflict Leading to Dual Selves

Black Language is not exactly a linguistic buffalo; as children, most of the thirty-five million Afro-Americans living here depending on this language for our discovery of the world . . . we should understand its status as an endangered species, as a perishing, irreplaceable system of community intelligence, or we should expect its extinction, and along with that, the extinguishment of much that constitutes our own proud and singular identity (Jordan, 1985, p.160).

Humans do not simply speak language to communicate; we are our language (Gonzalez, 2006). This dynamic process affords the opportunity to view ourselves as cultural beings and as participants in a larger society. If language, such Black Language, is marginalized in middle-level ELA classrooms it creates a distorted image of reality or dueling or fractured identities. June Jordan (1985) eloquently uses the metaphor of the distorted mirror to illustrate this principle. She notes:

We begin to group up in a house where every true mirror shows us the face of somebody who does not belong there, whose walk and whose talk will never look or sound "right," because that house was meant to shelter a family that is alien and hostile to us. (p.161)

Proficiency in the current language of power (ME) - while certainly not self-affirming for all people because it represents a second language, a language divorced from the sounds and structures of the language of their communities and heritage - can offer access to institutions of power. Language scholars are clear that Mainstream English (ME) proficiency is essential because of its inherent ties to social status and upward mobility (Baker-Bell, 2019, 2020; Boutte, 2012; Kinloch, 2005; McMurtry, 2021), a reality that also leads to the conflicting dual self. We must resist revering polarizing dichotomies and realize that our students need home language and ME versus having to choose between home language or ME.

This central theme - the necessity of learning ME as a language currency of power while struggling with the conflict of the dual self - was reiterated by several participants in this study. For example, Cliff explained that he and his wife, Carrie, intentionally taught their children to gain proficiency in a speech pattern different from their own so they could "advance more than what we are." He talked about his children's exposure to school fieldtrips and interacting with people outside of the Black race as factors in this development. In addition, he and his wife emphasized using ME within the home setting. He explained:

Da whole thing was dat you be better . . . that ya'll would be better than what, what . . . advance more than what we are...than our two....We wanted that you would be able to master English

and move on to better things than what we have or what we did.

Agreeing with her husband, Carrie's memories delved further into why she modeled using ME for her children. Her reasoning was tightly interwoven with memories of being ostracized or being treated as an "*other*" throughout her life. She recollected her childhood memories of growing up in the rural south in the 1950s:

Well, you sorta got looked down on or laughed at. So, then that's one reason, I think we probably spoke one way at home and then when we got in public we tried to sorta blend in with everyone else and because of that...we did lose the beauty of our family language.

Because they both spoke Black Language with ease as they shared these thoughts with me, it was clear that Cliff and Carrie had not renounced their mother tongue, yet they both felt that learning ME was an entry point to a better life, hence the dual self and conflicts inherent in that reality. Carrie regretfully acknowledged that employing this practice in a society that does not yet understand how these two languages can co-exist in the educational lives of our children, tainted memories and jeopardized the sustainability of her home language.

James D. also mentioned the conflict of only being taught the importance of becoming proficient in ME as the language currency of power. His memories centered on being taught ME in grade school. He reminisced about how tough his teachers were in correcting what he called, "improper speech" or "country talk." When he was queried about his teacher's strict ME guidelines, James shared insights that reveal his own internal contradictions – on one hand perceiving ME as "the right way," "the proper way", the "educated" way; and on the other hand recognizing that outside of school, the language of his community was equally legitimate:

James:
Ms. McCray use to be on us hardest about the way we speak...the children... She was hard on the children about certain things about speaking and the way you carry yourself and certain things like that. I think she played the biggest part in getting' us to speak the right way.

Authors:
Then why do you think Ms. McCray tried to teach you something different?

James:
You know, she had the education and stuff like that...and she knew that a lot of times we were gonna be coming into contact with other people that were different from us ...different areas and stuff like that and she was tryin' to get us to learn the proper way to talk to these people but once we leave the school...it was right back to the country!

While James realized that he possesses two different ways of speaking, he did not consider himself bilingual. He simply observed how one language garnered him success within school and in life, and the other language helped him to negotiate his home environment. It is obvious with the designation of "proper way to talk," that he felt that there was one language that held the key to his future success, but this also indicated that he viewed his home language as improper at least in particular contexts.

For Sabrina, mother of participant Cree, one measure of success is managing a career. Although she appreciates and values her home language, she recognizes that it alone is not enough to provide security for her family. In her interview, she directly correlates proficiency in English with finding and maintaining employment. When asked to discuss whether she was bilingual, Selena at first stated she was not, but when reminded of her bilingual abilities, she reconsidered her previous answer and said:

You are right about that. I am going to correct myself with that Ebonics ...Everybody got a little Ebonics in them... I know that for a fact! So, yes, I can say that I am bilingual. It's just the bilingual that I have is just not the one that they are looking for on applications.

In truth, obtaining ME proficiency allows a sense of security. Yet this security often comes at great cost. These participants bear witness to the harsh reality of reconciling two warring ideals: "Black folk loving, embracing, using Black talk, while simultaneously rejecting and hatin' on it" (Smitherman, 2006, p. 6). Essentially, denying a mother tongue can create dual consciousness (Boutte, 2012; Delpit & Dowdy, 2008) which can create gravesites of regret and roadmaps of pain. Although ME proficiency is necessary for success, it alone cannot help people of Color to negotiate their lives and communities.

However, the realities of the dual self might not lead to such tensions in adolescent identity development *if* schools and society recognized Black Language as a legitimate, rule governed, historically based language and as a literary and academic tool by the most renowned novelists (Baldwin, 1953; Hurston, 1937; Morrison, 1987; Walker, 1982), poets (Angelou, 1994; Dunbar, 2021; Johnson et al., 2008), and academics (Smitherman, 2006). Teaching in this manner displays the inherent power of Black Language and connects it to a long and robust Black literary heritage. This could enable healing and affirm dual cultural and linguistic identities in positive ways as educators employ dual-language approaches that "value the student's home languages equally as much as English, society's dominant language in schools" (Fu, 2009, p.11).

We could create more positive dualities by building on the advice of language and equity scholars who urge the teaching of ME while ensuring that home languages are not denigrated but are utilized because of their linguistic, academic, and literary value (Boutte, 2012; Fu, 2009; Hudley & Mallinson, 2013; Kinloch, 2005& 2010; Smitherman, 2006). In this way,

all students would come to appreciate the multiplicity of languages around them while gaining proficiency in the language of power, an acknowledged gateway to success.

Language is a Collective and Shared Memory That Can Be Lost

Listening to the participants' words and memories resembled walking through a cultural graveyard. This is because language is more than a mere collection of words. Instead, the roots of our present-day language are deeply entrenched in the past (Boutte, 2012; Kinloch, 2010; Rickford & Rickford, 2000). Smitherman (2006) notes that Black Language derives, "from the experience of the U.S. Slave descendants. This shared experience has result in common speaking styles, systematic patterns of grammar, and common language practices in the Black Community" (p. 3). The unique words and stylistic phrasings add a "flava" and flair to Black Language that is remarkably distinctive. Nonetheless, the "flava" of a language can only last as long as its memory. In their interviews, Carrie and Sinclair discuss the challenge that occurs when language begins to fade from memory; when words that once lingered on the lips seem foreign to the ear and unfamiliar to the tongue.

"On'na bet' get ou' of da road! On'na bet' get ou' of da road!" Sinclair reminisces about her Great-grandmother, Ma Stella, standing on her front porch and yelling across the yard to her grandchildren:

If the children were playing in the road and she wanted them to move or come out, she wouldn't say, "You all come out of the road," she would say, On'na bet' get ou' of da road." What she was saying is she wanted all of the children to come out of the road.

Although the meaning of the phrase still holds true, Sinclair readily admits that is rarely used or heard today. This, she argued, is why she believes her home language, Black Language, should be preserved and protected:

It's a part of your history and your heritage. I think that we have gotten to the point where we feel ...that it shouldn't be valued until it is lost and you think to yourself, 'You know that is part of who I am that is gone now.' I think sometimes now, especially younger generations, they don't even question how their speech patterns became the way that it is or why they use certain terms.

This was certainly the case for the authors. The word "fetch" has always been a part of our speaking repertoire. It was not uncommon for us to ask the students in my class if they would "fetch" the graded papers from out of the box or "fetch" a student from another teacher's class. As she laughed and reminisced with her husband, Cliff, she reminded him of a language memory he'd long since forgotten. "Your mother didn't say bring me this or go get this. She would always say, 'Fetch, and I wasn't familiar with it. I never heard dat word.'"

Carrie recollected another word that has diminished in our memory: "ye-stidy." Used instead of yesterday, "ye-stidy" was a method noting time. Unlike, fetch, however Carrie admits that she did not use "ye-stidy" because she feared people would not understand her. She recalls:

I was reared by my grandparents and um...lot of things they said, a lot of words they used, I don't use. For example, my grandfather would say "We did that ye-stidy," and that would be yesterday... somebody coming from ...ah...let's say another state or maybe even the upper part of SC, they probably wouldn't understand what they were talking about.

Carrie too, put forth a solid argument for preserving Black Language. She argued, "We are losing so much. We don't even realize until an art form ...and language is an art form... has been lost. Then we wish... we had something or some kind of reminder from the past." Critics would argue that, as these words fade, other words can easily be used to replace them; but others argue that to dismiss their value is to overlook the heart of Black Language (Boutte, 2012). Why do these participants mourn the loss of their language?

Because it came naturally; because it was authentic; because it resonated for them, touching some timbre within, and capturing a vital core of experience that had to be expressed *just so*; because it reached the heart and mind and soul of the addressee or audience in a way no other variety quite did. (Rickford & Rickford, 2002, p. 222)

Since language is an integral part of our identity, when we lose our language we lose a part of ourselves, but we also lose much more. If it is commonly accepted that language is a currency of power, by losing a language, a student is also unknowingly relinquishing their power. To heal identities long since fractured and promote cultural awareness and pride as well as a balance of power, Black Language must be shift from its relegated position of "other" and moved to the linguistic mainstream (Baker-Bell, 2020; Haddix, 2017).

The stories of these participants are critical in understanding why Black Language must be recognized as a legitimate language.

To Demean My Language is to Demean My Identity

We are all the walking wounded (V. Oglan, personal communication, June 2011). Some scars are visible marring our skin; while others, although present, are invisible and not quite so easily recognized. Such can be said about many language wounds. They lie just below the surface, invisible to the eye, yet still felt by the heart. It is those scars that are often found hard to walk from away because, "when children are

stripped of their cultural literacies, they are forced to believe that the world and all the good things in it were created by others" (Delpit, 2002). Young adolescents are more self-conscious about their evolving identity at this stage, compared to any other stage in life, so developing a clear and stable identity becomes quite difficult when personal factors of their lives are challenged (Verhoeven, Poorthuis, & Volman, 2019). This belief held true for Cree.

Cree remembers it vividly: the teacher, the assignment, and the grade. During her seventh-grade year, she was tasked with writing about an embarrassing incident. Cree chose to write about the day her wig came over in gym class. She recalls, "I wrote on the paper. I been up in the gym and me wig piece had fell out. I just remember it been circled and my teacher writing that it was wrong. How you gonna tell me that my story was wrong? I was so mad! I was so angry!"

So focused on only one language model of grammar and semantics, she did not realize that Cree was using Black Language, a legitimate, rule-governed language as she eloquently "focused on spilling her imagination onto the page" (Pratt, 2004). He or she did not realize that the corrections were viewed as a commentary not only on Cree's paper but also on her life. When we asked Cree to recall how she replied to her teacher, she said, "I didn't say nothing. I didn't know what to say." The teacher had denied Cree's home-language, the teacher thereby rendering Cree voluntary mute (Delpit, 2002; Fu, 2009; Hudley & Mallinson, 2013). Dr. Orlando Taylor (2004) reminds educators that: Language reflects a people... The problem is that Black people are perceived by dominant societies to be inferior, and so their language is perceived in a similar way (quoted in Hamilton, 2005, p. 35). Since language is "a reflection of a people," by rejecting her home language, the teacher simultaneously rejected Cree.

It was not until Sabrina explained to Cree that, when writing for class she should not write as she speaks, that Cree noticed the differences between Black Language and ME. She recalls, "I didn't even realize it was wrong because that's how I use to talk at that moment. I was like... What do you mean that is wrong?" Since Cree never received instruction on the legitimacy of Black Language nor explicitly told rules governing code-switching or choosing a language appropriate for the context, she willingly accepted the notion that her language use was "wrong" and "incorrect." While the teacher might also have provided instruction on the use of Black Language as a literary tool, she choose not to. This is a perfect example of how a "correctionalist model" of language instruction rather than employing a critical and equitable linguistic framework eradicates a student's home language. Linda Christensen (2009) contends:

Whether it's the marking down of essays because of "poor" grammar or the conscious or unconscious way that lack of linguistic dexterity marks a speaker or writer as "unfit" for a position — a job, a college, or a scholarship — language inequality still exists. The power of the standard language is so pervasive and so invisible that students need to uncover what they

take for granted and internalize as personal failure. (p. 210)

Black Language is just as linguistically civilized as classical Greek or Latin, and as linguistically sophisticated as French or Italian. Black Language is a natural way of speaking; therefore, young adolescents should not be forced to conform to systems and practices that do not understand or embrace the value and legitimacy of Black Language.

Conclusion

The battle over using Black Language is one mired in issues of race and class (Boutte, 2012; Kinloch, 2010; Rickford & Rickford, 2000; Smitherman, 2006). Yet, we speak who we are. To deny a student their language is to limit their identity development and deny self-actualization. Linguists advocate for both Black Language and ME as necessary and effective in multiple contexts; recognizing both languages for their potential as we develop a more equitable society and come to better view ourselves, each other, and our world. Valuing, trusting, and acknowledging students' language is a right for everyone (Ana, 2004; Baker-Bell, 2020; Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Delpit, 2002; Fu, 2009; Haddix, 2016). Doing so builds on students' funds of knowledge while helping them to develop and hone useful linguistic tools. In short, the strength and knowledge of home languages are used not only to create proficiency in a new language, but to bring multiple rich languages into the curriculum and the classroom thereby enhancing possibilities for expression and for broadened world views and healthy identity development.

If educators do not embrace this approach and drastically alter the curricular paradigm, we are consciously choosing to create walking wounds that continuously inflict pain. Baker-Bell (2017) offers these questions for teachers to nurture curricular and pedagogical transformation: (1) Are your assignments and pedagogy using ME as the standard?; (2) Are your students learning about the historical, cultural, politic, and racial-linguistic aspects of Black Language?; (3) Are your students learning that Black Language is a rule-governed language?; (4) Are your students learning about how language and race intersect?; (5) Are you teaching students Black Language is only used in informal settings? These questions cannot be used in conjunction with a culturally relevant and sustaining curriculum. It is as one of our participants, Sinclair, said: "Mainstream English is a WAY of speaking but there are other ways of speaking too. Just because my language is different from your language doesn't mean that I am wrong, or you are right...It just means we are speaking differently."

Sinclair poignantly argues that all languages should be appreciated and that every person has a right to their own language. This stance implies trust and collaboration because to see me is to hear my story. To hear my story is to witness my language. To witness my language means you that truly see and validate my person. Is that not what we all desire in this world?

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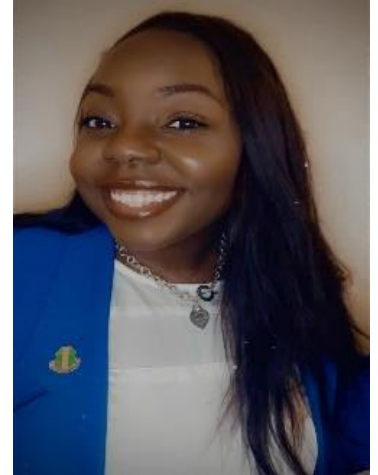
Young adolescents should not be forced to conform to systems and practices that do not understand or embrace the value and legitimacy of Black Language.

About the Authors



Dywanna Smith is an Assistant Professor in the School of Education at Claflin University. As a scholar-educator, Dywanna's research examines the intersections of race, literacies, and education and equipping teachers with equity pedagogies to successfully teach linguistically and culturally diverse students. She has presented nationally and internationally on these subjects.

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Recommended Citation (APA 7th ed.)

Smith, D. & Johnson, K. (2022). Melody and memory: Black language in the Low Country. *South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal*, 109-115.

This article is open access by the South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education (SCAMLE). It has undergone a double blind peer review process and was accepted for inclusion in the SCAMLE Journal.

Published online: 1 March 2022

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