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To 'Noob or Not to 'Noob, That is the Question

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INTRODUCTION

After watching a documentary entitled *Black on White*, by Robert MacNeil, we realized that many people still tend to make a distinction between white and black English. Since the documentary was rather dated, we decided to pursue this topic to further investigate whether or not the views expressed in the film are still the general consensus of the population. Some of the people we interviewed for this project did indeed express the belief that white and black English differ very much one from the other. In fact, as we began to investigate this topic, we realized that it is even more controversial than ever before. The people interviewed for the film seemed far more open to discuss differences between blacks and whites than the people that we interviewed. Perhaps incidents such as Don Imus' being fired for calling the Rutgers women's basketball players 'nappy headed-hoes' has made people paranoid about expressing how they feel. After completing this project, we ended up with some interesting data that will ideally help us conclude what white and black college students linguistically feel about black and white English dialects in the American South.

METHODOLOGY

In order to make sure that the survey was fair and balanced (like Fox News), we asked an equal number of men and women, both white and black, the same eight questions. Also, we limited our respondents to 18-25 year old college students. Most of the people that we interviewed we knew beforehand, to a certain extent, but we felt that this was the only way to get them to answer the questions honestly. This mitigated to a great extent what Labov refers to as the 'observer's paradox'; a situation in which "the aim of linguis-

tic research is to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed, but the data are available only through systematic observation” Wardhaugh 19).

For this project, we interviewed 16 people (8 men: 4 white, 4 black and 8 women: 4 white, 4 black) and asked them the same 8 questions regarding their opinions on the differences between white and black spoken discourse. When referring to specific responses, black males will be denoted BM, white males, WM, black females BF, and white females WF. In order to prevent our biases from skewing the data, we only asked if the participants were willing to fill out a survey and gave them no further instructions other than those listed on the questionnaire. We gave everyone the opportunity to take the survey home with them to ensure the most accurate responses, but only a few participants acquiesced. If anyone asked anything about what a certain question meant we would only respond by telling them to answer it as best they could.

We tried to follow Labov’s principle of accountability which states that “all expressions of the variable, both occurrences and non occurrences (instances of its absence where it might occur but does not), must be included among the data” (qtd in Curzan et al 371). Linguistically speaking, everything expressed and not expressed has to be brought up. For example, certain answers were very ambiguous (perhaps due our intentionally vague questions), so we must factor in to what extent our own preconceptions go to filling in the gaps of people’s answers. So on the first question, we ask, “Is there a difference between white and black English?” The fact that we put the word ‘white’ before black may change people’s opinions about us and the survey. (Though the thoughts may not be explicitly stated, we can see from the emotionally charged responses how strongly people feel about this issue.)

Question 1:

Is there a difference in white and black English? If so, what is it?

For the first question, thirteen people said there was a difference between white and black English, while only three said no and two people carefully dodged the question. Of the three who said no, two were black males (as was one of the question dodgers). Each seemed to make the distinction that they considered ‘English’ to be the written word, whereas slang is obviously spoken. One black male said, “I believe English is English. There is only good English and bad English, and people from both races fall into each cat-

egory" (BM). Some of the answers carefully disguised the fact that the respondents felt this way. The black respondents tended to answer the question in this cautious way. One example of this is a black male who felt that, "the difference [between white and black English] is in word choice/diction." He further defended his arguments by explaining under the *General Thoughts* section "distinctions in speech are used to signify a person's class/intelligence" (BM). Some of the answers were fairly vague, but people who actually went a little more in depth tended to view white English as more 'proper.' While some would try to avoid the question, like one who answered the question vaguely by limiting her response to just "pronunciation and meaning," (WF), others would share their true feelings. One such person wrote that "white people speak more grammatically correct" English (WM). The irony of this statement is that in fact this is an incorrectly written statement. Since correct modifies the verb speak it is an adverb and thus requires the -ly suffix. This was actually a fairly common phenomenon; every time one was derogatory towards slang they would end up using it themselves.

Question 2:

Why is there this distinction?

The data for this question was relatively homogenous in that all the answers fell under four categories. Five people said the distinction was due to culture, four due to location, two due to society, and three people responded with no distinction. The answer of "society" uses it is an umbrella term that includes culture and one's origin—which could be interpreted as family—grouping these respondents into the majority of the data for this question. Many of the responses mirrored the informant's answers on the first question. Only a few people went into detail about what they meant. One person said, "This distinction dates back to early slaves who were forced to learn English and forget their culture. However, slaves often mixed African words in their speech or pronounced words differently b[ecause] certain syllables didn't exist in their language" (BF). Another interviewee echoed this sentiment by saying that the distinction between the two was, "Probably due to cultural evolution." He continued with, "Whites are more educated and therefore use more standardized language." He then defended his comment in the *General Thoughts* section by pointing to an historical context based on slavery in America. He said, "In slavery, blacks were not educated and therefore mor-

phed English, by adapting it into their everyday life culturally....This, along with 150 years of *de facto* segregation, contributed to a different starting point for [the] evolution of the blacks' use of English" (WM). And this was true historically; slavery initially segregated us as a society. But what other factors continue to separate (or bring together) these seemingly disparate races in 21st-century America? One major factor seems to be language.

Question 3:

Is there a difference between white and black slang? What is it?

In answer to this question, we received eleven positive responses, one negative response, and the largest number of question dodgers yet, four. Of those who answered 'yes,' most said something along the lines of what one respondent said: "The difference is what the slang refers to and the difference in everyday conversation" (WF). The general consensus among the respondents who said 'yes' was that the actual words are different and not merely contextual—something that will later be challenged by question number seven. As for the people who said no, they accused us (in a roundabout way) of stereotyping 'all' white or black people as using the same slang. As one person put it, "there may be certain words or phrases that a culture group may use more than another, but that does not mean all people of that group use those words. Ex. Hip-hop slang predominately [is] 'black'" (WM). The idea that not all black people speak the same (just as all white people don't) was rejected in the responses of many of the people who said 'yes' as well. So, if slang cannot be decided upon by basis of race, then what are the criteria which define this incredibly prolific linguistic tool?

Question 4:

What is slang?

Our respondent's answers fell into three main categories. The first took a prescriptivist approach by saying that slang is defined as "the words that people use that aren't in the dictionary" (WF). This group of people tended to be white; out of the three people that felt this way, two were white. The second group felt as though slang was a "derivation from standard English" (WM) and usually attributed such properties as shortening and shifting to slang. They focused more on the actual development of slang, rather than the people who speak it. Four whites and two blacks felt this way about slang,

leading us to the third and largest category of people. Seven respondents, five black and two white, said something to the effect that slang is “vernacular you use around friends and family” (BF). This group thought of slang as including anything from medical terms to surfer terms. Slang could even be ‘standard’ as long as it was used by a select group of people. So, are you among the ‘select’? Do you, or the in-group to which you belong, use slang?

Question 5:

Do you use slang?

Out of the sixteen people we interviewed, only two said that they did not use slang; but ironically both of these respondents listed a slang word under question seven. Interestingly enough, both of these people did not list a distinction between white and black slang. We would conclude that these people are prescriptivists (those who support the identification of correct and incorrect grammar) because of these answers as well as others. Both of the respondents indicated that slang existed, meaning there is a ‘proper’ and ‘improper’ way to speak English, but they merely felt that they spoke that perfect form – actually, a rather arrogant statement if you think about it. One of these respondents said under question eight (*General Thoughts*) “Slang is used as a shortcut to actual conversations” (BM2). The other answered question one with “‘White’ English is generally considered to be more literate than ‘black’ English” (WF1). We would conclude that she feels “white” English to be more formal than ‘black’ English; therefore, the English language has a singular correct usage. The general consensus among those who use slang was that there is a right way to speak but that they don’t always meet the ‘standards,’ whatever they might be.

Question 6:

What is the biggest influence on your slang?

For question six, of all the people who said they use slang, only two people reported that they were not influenced by those around them. These extremist answers indicated that media outlets such as music and television influenced them more highly. Even though these people’s responses hinged around their environment, the answers varied from region to peers to family. With such a limited survey, it was impossible to ‘connect all the dots’ influencing the uses of slang; this is one area in which we would like to continue this

exploration. Below, we continue our discussion with something people are always interested in: their 'favorite things' (to paraphrase Judy Garland).

Question 7:

What is your favorite slang word? Why?

We received a wide variety of answers for this question, but there did not seem to be too big of a difference between the white and black slang given. The only exception to this, and probably the only word that some variation could not be found in a dictionary, would be 'cakin' (BM). We have our suspicions that perhaps some of the black participants were unwilling to release certain slang phrases on white America; however, because of such remarks of one black male participant: "white slang seems to be more readily seen in the mainstream, while black slang takes years to catch on, and by then it is already stale in the black community (see, for instance, 'bling' in the appendix below) (BM). He references the word 'bling,' which was once a term many blacks used to describe gold, diamonds, etc. but now that it is known by the white community the word is shunned by most blacks as 'uncool.' It is possible that this fear of use by the 'wrong' people or in the wrong contexts prevented completely honest answers of a person's favorite slang word. Also, many of the thirteen respondent's answers as to why these were their favorite slang words indicated that it was either easy to use, and/or fit their personality. A few people ironically responded with slang phrases; for example a white male said he uses the word 'noob' "because it rules" (WM).

Question 8:

General Thoughts.

Overall, this question proved to be fruitless, except for a few people who defended other areas of the paper in this section. Ideally we hoped people would bring up other questions or responses because of the survey's content. Unfortunately, on occasion this section elicited negative responses such as, "This survey officially made me feel retarded" (WF).

CONCLUSION

The informants' responses indicate that noting the differences between the races of black and white has become an even more controversial topic

over the last two decades. The respondents were reluctant to answer the questions candidly; their responses were either intentionally short and/or carefully constructed. Many people failed to include explanations behind their answers; they only included yes and no answers. When we compared our survey to the documentary we watched in class, we noticed that people seemed less willing to answer the same type of questions when we posed them. Linguistically, the white persons we interviewed were hesitant to answer the questions, which were only related to communication – perhaps because they could only see the race relation implications behind the questions. A major significance that we found in our data was that people do not see the distinction between black and white English as a linguistic question, but rather a racial issue. For this reason, race relations between black and white people seem to have become socially charged and a taboo conversation topic. A follow up survey with more in-depth questions, along with a larger sample size, and financial rewards for the informants would possibly produce more truthful answers and therefore a better study of this racially pertinent topic in America.

APPENDIX

TABLE 1

	White Male		Black Male		White Female		Black Female		Total
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	
Q1	# 4 % 25	0	2 12.5	2 12.5	4 25	0	4 25	0	#16 %100
Q3	# 4 % 25	0	2 12.5	2 12.5	2 12.5	2 12.5	4 25	0	#16 %100
Q5	# 4 % 25	0	3 18.8	1 6.2	4 25	0	4 25	0	#16 %100

DATA

Black Male

What up – greeting

Cool – relaxed, easy going

Be easy – similar to ‘cool’

Cakin’ – courting a female

White Male

Noob - a person who is new, usually in video games—from newbie (combing/hindclipping)

Yo - greeting

Douchebag – derogatory term for someone (metaphorical extension)

Let’s rock this sh*t - let’s get going

Black Female

Ain’t sh*t ___ - insult, someone who is not worth anything

Vato - similar to ‘dude’ in Spanish. (borrowing)

What’s up - a greeting.

White Female

Y’all - you all (contraction)

Ain’t - is not, are not, am not (contraction)

Congratu-f**king-lations - (infixing of congratulations)

Sweet - awesome

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