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Book Review: *Talking Back, Talking Black: Truths About America's Lingua Franca.*

Reviewed by Nicholas Francis Havey

Language is regularly at the forefront of the American consciousness, though we rarely discuss it explicitly. During the Obama administration, the president was frequently lauded for being articulate while Black (Alim & Smitherman, 2012); in contrast, the current president is lambasted for failing to speak coherently nearly every day. Trump is also praised for speaking straight and with accessible-to-the-masses vocabulary. President Obama, on the other hand, was guided by advisors to speak differently to the various publics; yet as he moved between Standard English and Black English, he was both chastised and celebrated. The underlying, tacit critique of Black English embedded in critiques of Obama is absent in critiques of Trump, likely due in part to perceptions of the speaker and not the language spoken.

Black English, the topic of John McWhorter's book, *Talking Back, Talking Black,* is "like ultraviolet light" (p. 2). It is an occasional aberration that challenges Standard English and hegemonic, white assumptions about what English should be, but rejected as a cultural mainstay. Black English, McWhorter argues, is mischaracterized as replete with and defined by errors, though it is anything but. Black English is treated like other languages in America—wished away in the hopes that its speakers assimilate into hegemonized Standard English to the comfort of the white masses.

The main argument advanced by McWhorter, an associate professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University and regular talking head and popular writer on race and language, is that there is a Black English worthy of discussion. Like other languages, Black English has a sound, slang, clear sentence structure, and grammar system. The impression that Black English is simply a collection of slang without accent and grammar, or that its sound is merely a Southern affectation, yields limiting and incomplete analyses of Black English couched mostly in a paternalistic and, frankly, white supremacist framing that situates correcting Black English to Standard English as the right thing to do. McWhorter identifies several barriers to understanding Black English as a legitimate language, one of which is that Black English is viewed as a bastardization of Standard English. Acknowledging Black English can easily be framed as racist—its commonplace understanding as a bastardization of Standard English becomes linked with Black people who are thus chastised as not speaking correctly—and the language climate in the United States almost guarantees monolingualism.

This portrayal of Black English is largely the fault of linguists failing to connect to the public, McWhorter argues. The idea that people speak differently "feels fake to most people" (p. 30), and many often assume that if something sounds wrong or differs from their accepted and daily language practices, it is wrong. In turn, McWhorter frames Black English as more complex than Standard English, and consequently, he dispels the myth that Black English is just bad English. McWhorter does a great job of explaining Black English as contrary to the stereotypes associated with it (e.g., sounding stupid, bad grammar, and more) and provides numerous examples of people being able to identify whether someone "sounds Black," including explanations about regional variations (dialects) of Black English that result from different communities. By substantiating his argument with analyses of multiple linguistic components—vowel use, sound, "smoking out the meaning" of a sentence, tense markers, mutability—McWhorter defines a Black English that is both clear and displaces responsibility for ignorance of its existence from anyone, a theme throughout the text.

Chastising folks as immoral if they fail to acknowledge or be aware of something is rarely productive. Although *Talking Back, Talking Black* has an opportunity to place Black English into the greater conversation on raciolinguistics (Alim, Rickford, & Ball, 2016), it ultimately does not. Presenting a very "both sides" and apolitical argument, McWhorter positions his writing for a mainstream audience by obscuring just who Black English feels fake to, and he gives too much room for white paternalism without adequately negotiating the impact of whiteness on language creation and use. As he describes how acknowledging Black English can be framed as racist, McWhorter misses the opportunity to decry this logic as inherently and linguistically flawed; instead, he inadvertently advances a problematic colorblind ideology that maintains white supremacy. Further, linguists certainly are not solely responsible for the United States's monolingual culture or consistent mainstream misuses of language in film and television.

McWhorter's chapter on *minstrelese* sharpens the otherwise uncritical narrative of the book. Here, McWhorter calls out the problematic nature of white folks appropriating Black English in cultural venues, noting that countless American historical movies include ahistorical, distorted, and incorrect language. This is the result of both the mutability of language and the difficulty associated with talking about Black English. Without a clear and consistent label, Black English suffers from a conceptually amorphous identity that hinders its identification and recognition—Ebonics, he notes, is primarily associated with sound; African American Vernacular English is largely conflated with slang. This, McWhorter argues, is an American—not just white—problem.

The difficulty in identifying Black English has significant implications, which McWhorter soundly attends to throughout *Talking Back, Talking Black*. Who can—and who cannot—say the n-word is a frequent topic of public discourse, McWhorter argues, but there is no single n-word under discussion, making it difficult to draw lines of permission. For example, the hard -er pronunciation is Standard English and a clear and harmful slur, while the soft -a is Black English and has been used for decades, if not centuries, as a term of endearment within Black communities. If nothing else, McWhorter asserts, Black English must be integrated into the American linguistic canon if only to (a) render visible the differences between Standard English and Black English, and (b) resolve some part of the discourse that results from our American desire to derogate it to error. *Talking Back, Talking Black* is an excellent primer to introduce Black English to white masses most in need of understanding its existence, as well as anyone looking to empirically support the clear linguistic differences they speak, hear, interpret, and experience.

References

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