



Colorism and Linguistic Perception in the African American Community

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Abstract

Colorism is a well-known phenomenon in the African American and Latino communities. It refers to the effect that an individual's complexion can have on every aspect of their social interaction as well as their self-concept. Research (Wilder, 2010) has shown that African American Vernacular English (AAVE), or "ebonics" and its speakers are perceived more negatively than non-AAVE and its speakers (Wilder, 2010). Researchers investigated whether the use of AAVE by light-skinned African Americans was viewed more positively than use of AAVE by dark-skinned African Americans by having students at a mid-sized public institution view one of four videos and evaluate their reaction to the speaker. The race of the subject and the gender of the speaker was also explored as factors.

The purpose of this research was to understand the use of AAVE or ebonics by both light-skinned African Americans and dark-skinned African Americans. In addition to that, investigate the role of how colorism and gender impacts the perception of a speaker of African American Vernacular. Wilder (2010) suggested that colorism affects black women more than black men in areas of physical appearance, relationships, and self-esteem. She further suggested that even in times of slavery, lighter-skinned slaves were more favored and given preferential treatment. In comparison to dark-skinned slaves, they were conscripted to more labor-intensive and outdoor tasks. What Wilder (2010) made sure to highlight were the effects of colorism and the history associated with the term i.e. Jim Crow laws, White privilege, oppression, and enslavement among African Americans.

Wilder (2010) used black women as a focus of the study, studying the correlation of black women's everyday life and the associated 'color names' given to them based on their skin tone, be it dark-skinned, light-skinned, or brown-skin. Wilder (2010) used her research as a developmental piece to expose, explore, and highlight the language, whether positive or negative affiliated with black women. Wilder (2010) in her findings,



mentioned that the effects of colorism were more of a tri-fold system, rather than a binary. Her research, suggested that placing the idea of colorism as a binary rejects experiences of black women, who do not necessarily fit into the light or dark color spectrum. Wilder (2010) based her research on a study conducted by Charles Parrish (1964) he originally tested the effects of colorism and the names given to black Americans based on their skin color. “Although Parrish’s work was conducted more than 60 years ago, it is nonetheless an appropriate starting point for reexamining the prevalence of skin tone bias and discrimination among young black Americans in the 21st century.” (Wilder, 2010) Wilder revisited this study to find that through the changing generations, these ‘color names and notions’ have not yet disappeared—continuing the rhetoric of linguistic discrimination and color blindness.

McGee (2013) conducted a similar study to that of Wilder (2010). McGee examined colorism in a classroom setting among young black women and even young black men. McGee (2013) hypothesized that lighter-skinned students would be treated better. McGee’s study also highlighted that dark-skinned and brown-skinned students experienced educational challenges based on negative stereotypes. McGee’s study surveyed 36 black female high school students; 8 out of the 16 students surveyed self-identified themselves as brown-skinned or dark-skinned. McGee observed that as far as lighter-skinned females were concerned, they had an elevated social status within school, i.e. prom queens, social leadership positions, seen as more attractive, positive teacher feedback, and a higher chance of romantic relationships from young black and Latino men. McGee (2013) did mention to focus on one particular student, a young dark-skinned female and her personal experiences. The young dark-skinned female Tasha, discussed her discomfort due to the pressures of being darker-skinned—which would maximize her marginalization among her peers. “They went on to express the desire for lighter skin because the lighter skinned girls seemed to her to achieve academic and social advantages.” (McGee, 2013) McGee, (2013) rather than investigate student-level interaction due to colorism, made it necessary to look at the effects of race as a concept and teacher involvement. McGee stressed that teacher involvement was a necessary factor in advocating for proper, equitable treatment



amongst students. She further elaborates that teachers should be aware of their privilege; recognizing the widespread effects of racism, discrimination and prejudice. McGee (2013) urges that since students of color and white teachers have polarized views, it may be harder for them to relate on experiences that are affecting students of color. “Accordingly, educators, and for the purposes of this discussion, teachers, who do not view themselves as racist individuals, can have difficulty recognizing how racism works and how it can manifest in broader, systematic, and institutionalized structures and forms to prevent certain groups of students from succeeding in the classroom and beyond.” (McGee, 2013) As an institution of education, McGee extends insight on how teachers should be aware of how students are becoming more conscious of their complexion and color—in turn teachers should offer a salient space for students to feel comfortable.

Relative to both McGee (2013) and Wilder (2010), this study went to suggest two hypotheses, based on observing colorism and the implications of linguistics. Hypothesis one stated that Darker-skinned African American AAVE speakers are significantly more likely to be perceived negatively in comparison to lighter-skinned African American AAVE speakers. Hypothesis two stated that Darker-skinned females AAVE speakers will be perceived significantly more negatively in comparison that darker-skinned male AAVE speakers.

Method

Participants

The participants selected were a convenience sample. Fifty-five participants from Millersville University, a mid-sized public institution in Central Pennsylvania. Four African American males and Fifteen African American females. Two European American males and Thirty-one European American females. One female and one male chose other for race and one individual chose other for gender.



Instruments

The instruments used for this study were a consent form, to ensure participation and obtain permission from the participants by way of the researcher. A linguistic study demographic form was used to indicate race, gender, and class standing. A survey was used to rank the speakers on their speech. A video of each of the speakers was also used to accompany the survey given to the participants. The video was made sure to include specific AAVE characteristics such as the double modal, double negative, “if” clause construction, and habitual “be.” The speech used, was transcribed from a script based on How to survive as a Freshman in College. Our speakers themselves, were one dark-skinned female, one dark-skinned male, one light-skinned female, and one light-skinned male.

Measurements

Speakers were measured by the participants to see if the speakers delivered an adequate speech. Each of the speeches given by the speakers measured vocal expression and paralanguage, effective nonverbal behavior, and adapting presentation to audience. The survey used four criteria to rank the speech 4 being advanced, 3 being proficient, 3 being basic, 2 being minimal, 1 being not evident, and 0 being deficient.



Consent Form

I am fully aware that my participation is optional. At any time, I can remove myself from the study and ask that my results are not included.

I am fully aware that any responses that I have provided will not be used without my given consent.

I am fully aware that a summary of the results from the experiment will be posted in Byerly Hall on the second floor when near the end of semester. If I have any pending questions, I will contact Shianne Hargrove & Eugene Thomas or Professor Rita Smith-Wade-El at the Millersville University Psychology Department.

My Signature

Date

My Printed Name

For further information, please contact:

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Script

‘How To Survive as a Freshman in College.’

Good Morning,

My name is (Speaker’s Name) and I will be giving a speech on ‘How To Survive as a Freshmen in College.’ Now, I’ve never had serious problems coming in as a Freshmen except the pressures of being unprepared, trying to find my classes, and keeping my lanyard on my neck for all the upperclassmen to see. Every day I would be wondering if people knew I was a freshman , but I felt it was kind of obvious. You walk around campus, smiling at every new building you enter. To you, college is the most fun you probably will have. On the first day of class, you walk in, sit in your seat, and wait for instruction. So while waiting, you be thinking how exciting this class might could be. You try to be cool, but you be too excited. As a Freshmen you got no issues; your life is just starting. Things might happen that you not gone be prepared for. But, if you follow these steps, you’ll be fine and will survive.

1. Be sure to call your parents, when you get chance. Make sure they know you’re alive. Ain’t nothing worse than your parents calling you everyday because you don’t be answering the phone.
2. Don’t wear your lanyard, that’s a dead giveaway; you gotta be cool and keep your keys and ID in your pocket. You have to walk around looking like a Sophomore at least.
3. If you gon be lost, don’t look lost! If you got to go and ask someone if they know a certain building or room then do so.
4. Don’t expect to not get homework on the first day. Ain’t none of these professors gonna hold your hand once you get started.
5. Make sure you read over the syllabus and talk to the professor before you buy any textbooks. Most of the time you ain’t really need ‘em.

To survive as a college freshman, you gotta be willing to take risks. You gotta not be scared to walk around campus. Be aware at all times. Make sure as a Freshman you check your emails, you gotta be ready to know that your class is cancelled. Your mom and dad are not here to hold your hand, you gotta make your own decisions when it comes to your education.

Thank You.



Linguistic Study Demographic Form

Linguistic Study Demographic:

Please indicate your gender

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary/Transgender
- Prefer to self-describe _____
- Prefer not to say

Please indicate your race

- Black/African (non-Hispanic)
- Asian/Pacific Islanders
- Caucasian (non-Hispanic)
- Latino or Hispanic
- Native American
- More than one_____
- Other_____

Please select your class

- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior



Survey

<p>4. Locates, synthesizes and employs compelling supporting materials</p>	<p>All key points are well supported with a variety of credible materials (e.g. facts, stats, quotes, etc.); sources provide excellent support for thesis; all sources clearly cited</p>	<p>Main points were supported with appropriate material; sources correspond suitably to thesis; nearly all sources cited</p>	<p>Points were generally supported using an adequate mix of materials; some evidence supports thesis; source citations need to be clarified</p>	<p>Some points were not supported; a greater quantity/quality of material needed; some sources of very poor quality</p>	<p>Supporting materials are non-existent or are not cited</p>
<p>5. Develops a conclusion that reinforces the thesis and provides psychological closure</p>	<p>Provides a clear and memorable summary of points; refers back to thesis /big picture; ends with strong clincher or call to action</p>	<p>Appropriate summary of points; some reference back to thesis; clear clincher or call to action</p>	<p>Provides some summary of points; no clear reference back to thesis; closing technique can be strengthened</p>	<p>Conclusion lacks clarity; trails off; ends in a tone at odds with the rest of the speech</p>	<p>No conclusion; speech ends abruptly and without closure</p>
<p>6. Demonstrates a careful choice of words</p>	<p>Language is exceptionally clear, imaginative and vivid; completely free from bias, grammar errors and inappropriate usage</p>	<p>Language appropriate to the goals of the presentation; no conspicuous errors in grammar; no evidence of bias</p>	<p>Language selection adequate; some errors in grammar; language at times misused (e.g. jargon, slang, awkward structure)</p>	<p>Grammar and syntax need to be improved as can level of language sophistication; occasionally biased</p>	<p>Many errors in grammar and syntax; extensive use of jargon, slang, sexist/racist terms or mispronunciations</p>
<p>7. Effectively uses vocal expression and paralanguage to engage the audience</p>	<p>Excellent use of vocal variation, intensity and pacing; vocal expression natural and enthusiastic; avoids fillers</p>	<p>Good vocal variation and pace; vocal expression suited to assignment; few if any fillers</p>	<p>Demonstrates some vocal variation; enunciates clearly and speaks audibly; generally avoids fillers (e.g. um, uh, like)</p>	<p>Sometimes uses a voice too soft or articulation too indistinct for listeners to comfortably hear; often uses fillers</p>	<p>Speaks mundily; enunciates poorly; speaks in monotone; poor pacing; distracts listeners with fillers</p>



Procedure

College student participants, who were of a mixed demographic were asked to complete an informed consent form. They then were asked to complete a linguistic study demographic sheet. The video they were asked to watch was a 2-minute video relaying the message of “How to Survive as a Freshman in College.” After or during the video, the participant was instructed to complete a survey which took 5-10 minutes to complete.

Results

Hypothesis 1 indicated that there was a significant effect for the speaker. The hypothesis prediction was not confirmed, instead the data yielded the results in an opposite way. That being the case, the darker-skinned speakers were rated higher than lighter-skinned speakers. Hypothesis 2 indicated that neither gender nor race of the speaker was a significant factor within the study.

ANOVA

total

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	160.821	3	53.607	3.163	.032
Within Groups	847.272	50	16.945		
Total	1008.093	53			



Descriptives

total

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
					1	12		
2	19	24.3158	3.41651	.78380	22.6691	25.9625	18.00	31.00
3	12	20.7500	4.73142	1.36584	17.7438	23.7562	13.00	30.00
4	11	21.0000	4.64758	1.40130	17.8777	24.1223	11.00	28.00
Total	54	22.8704	4.36126	.59349	21.6800	24.0608	11.00	31.00

Discussion

The research put the ideas of colorism, perception, and gender into perspective. The dark-skinned speakers had a more inviting and enthusiastic performance than that of their light-skinned counterparts. The darker-skinned speaker's use of syntax was more clear even when using AAVE. The enunciation of the words the dark-skinned speakers used was more distinct—which ultimately made the darker-skinned speakers more personable to the participant audience. In turn, as far as the ranking of speakers are concerned—the darker-skinned female was ranked the highest.



Limitations

Considering the number of participants for the research, making sure the number of participants is larger, would yield better results. Fifty-five participants compared to a convenience sample size of One-hundred would be more beneficial for the data. Also to that end, demographically—having an equal proportion of gender and race would be better suited to analyze the data for the study. Speaker wise, making sure to have the proper skin tone when testing the differences between light-skinned and dark-skinned would result in stronger reactions from the participants and in turn generate more adequate survey results.

Further Research

For the future, being able to have a proper space to showcase the video of the speakers would be more beneficial—technical difficulties were a common theme during the study. If the study is to be revisited, testing more participants would help to see if the results will change over time. Moreover, being able to run the experiment with ample time would be considerably more useful—providing more time to gather a larger number of participants and increase the demographic both in gender and in race.

References

McGee, E. O., Alvarez, A., & Milner, H. R. (2016). Colorism as a Salient Space for Understanding in Teacher Preparation. *Theory Into Practice*, 55(1), 69-79. doi:10.1080/00405841.2016.1116882

Wilder, J. (2010). Revisiting "Color Names and Color Notions": A Contemporary Examination of the Language and Attitudes of Skin Color Among Young Black Women. *Journal of Black Studies*, 41(1), 184-206. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25704101>