

## Q&A: Geneva Smitherman, Michigan State professor emerita of English, on the study of African American English

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Geneva Smitherman (Courtesy of <http://msutoday.msu.edu/>)

*A D.C. dialect?*

*It doesn't sound likely in a city known for its transience. But linguists at Georgetown University, who have been [studying the way people speak as part of the Language and Communication in Washington DC \(LCDC\) project](#), have identified certain words and some other features of speech common among communities who have lived in DC for a long time — particularly among African Americans.*

*Geneva Smitherman, a professor emerita of English and former director of the African American Language and Literacy Program at Michigan State University, who has devoted her career to understanding the intersection of language, culture and race, brought us up to date on the study of African American English and what impact linguists' work has had on popular attitudes.*

*Smitherman is co-author with Stanford's H. Samy Alim of “Articulate While Black: Barack Obama, Language, and Race in the U.S” (Oxford University Press).*

**Q: How long have people been studying African American English?**

**Smitherman:** Scholarly work demonstrating the systematic nature of what in 19th-century America was called “Negro English” dates to the decades-old research of the first African American linguist, Lorenzo Dow Turner (1949). His work was followed in the 1960s by the

research of White linguists such as William Stewart, J.L. Dillard and William Labov. This body of work established that Black speech is not “baby-talk,” nor speech produced by “lazy lips” and “jungle tongues” — stereotypical racist terms that had historically been used by everyday folks, writers and even some early language scholars to describe the variety of English spoken by African slave descendants. Further, linguistic analyses of the rules governing African American Language countered the claims of “cognitive deficiency” in Blacks put forth by several White psychologists in the 1960s. This work was critical in *King v. Ann Arbor* (the “Black English” court case, 1977-79) in convincing Federal Judge Joiner that the Ann Arbor School District had violated Black children’s right to equal educational opportunity by mislabeling them “learning disabled” and failing to “take into account” their Black English in teaching them to read. Other important advances resulting from this work by linguists include terminology, such as “African American English” and “African American Language,” rather than “Negro English” and the label “variety,” rather than “dialect.”

**Q: Has this scholarly work had any broader impact?**

The work of linguists has had some impact on lessening the stigmatization of African American Language. For instance, states no longer require that prospective teachers pass a speech test in pronouncing English in the Language of Wider Communication (aka Standard English) as I had to do back when I was studying to become a teacher. (As a speaker of African American Language, I failed the speech test and was assigned to take speech therapy before retaking the test.) However, demonstrating the systematic, rule-governed nature of African American Language has not eradicated the stigma, as evidenced, for example, by reaction to the Oakland, California School Board’s Resolution on Ebonics in 1996; as evidenced by teachers — and students — in the recent research of Dr. April Baker-Bell at some high schools in Detroit as she sought to teach students about the rules and history of African American Language; as evidenced in my recent experience in a workshop for teachers at a large Midwestern University where most were easily convinced of the benefits of students being able to speak a language other than English, but many were not convinced of the benefits of students being able to speak more than one variety of English, particularly if one of the varieties was African American Language (or

“Spanglish”); and as evidenced by the “well-meaning” teacher we describe in the last chapter of “Articulate While Black,” who says that the African American Language-speaking kids’ parents might let them “get away” with speaking “like that,” but here it’s “unacceptable.”

**Q: You seem to be describing a process of transition in terms of people’s understanding — and acceptance of – non-standard dialects.**

Yes. This is not to say that there hasn’t been progress from the work of linguists on the systematic nature of African American Language (and other marginalized varieties). Particularly in the decades of the 1960s-90s, evidence-based research — for example, my 20-year writing study of African American high school seniors — indicated that the linguists’ work had had some positive impact on teachers’ language attitudes. However, today, in 2014, when it comes to language diversity, there’s been some serious back-slidin—or maybe back to where some folks ain nevah left from! The lesson that many of us linguists have had to learn is that attitudes toward language varieties are, at bottom, attitudes toward the people who speak these varieties. As we argue in “Articulate While Black: “Although little acknowledged in [these] public discussions, what usually lies behind comments like “Black Language is nothing but a lazy, ignorant way of speaking” are racist beliefs about Black people themselves as “lazy” and “ignorant.” (Hatin on a particular language is linked to hating its speakers, straight up.)” . My brilliant, young co-author, Dr. H. Samy Alim, of Stanford, coined the term “linguaging race” to reference this sociolinguistic phenomenon.

**Q: We now have a black president. What affect has he had on the acceptance of different dialects of English – and particularly African American English?**

Folks certainly respect President Obama for his mastery of “standard English,” but he is more often admired as a linguistic role model for his ability to shift in and out of different ways of speaking. He recognizes Black ways of speaking as valued symbols of identity and solidarity for members of the Black community. From the basketball courts to the campaign trail to the pews of Trinity United Church of Christ to the barbershops of South Side Chicago to the White House, Barack regularly switches back and forth between multiple ways of speaking—without devaluing

any of them. In this sense, he serves as a linguistic role model, not just for Black Americans, but for all Americans.

Nonetheless, the work of developing language scholars like Minnie Quartey Annan, a Ph.D. student in Georgetown's Department of Linguistics who is doing research on African American English, is critical to taking up the challenge of bringing this generation of Black youth to man — and womanhood.