

FORGING NEW WAYS OF HEARING DIVERSITY

The Politics of Linguistic Heterogeneity in the Work of John R. Rickford

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Introduction

This chapter explores the reciprocal relationship between Rickford's scholarship within and outside of the academy and the political ramifications this work has in the field and beyond. In discussing his contributions to theoretical and applied linguistics, we recognize two significant themes in Rickford's work. The first theme emphasizes Rickford's ability to demonstrate diverse constructions of Blackness, while also legitimizing African American (Vernacular) English (AAVE) to counter assumptions of deficiency. Studying Rickford's approach to the politics of sociolinguistic diversity in terms of intra-community heterogeneity, intra-speaker heterogeneity, intra-racial heterogeneity, interracial heterogeneity, and analytic heterogeneity, we observe his attention to the wide range of sociolinguistic practices among Black speakers and the implications of how these practices are interpreted. While John R. Rickford's expansive body of published work has made profound contributions to sociolinguistic theory, his research is just one component of his scholarly and broader public engagement. Thus, the second theme highlights his dissemination of scholarly work beyond the written page, advocating for marginalized communities through his teaching, mentoring, interdisciplinary collaboration, and community partnerships. In honoring Rickford's brilliant ability to advance both sociolinguistic theory and social justice efforts on behalf of AAVE-speaking communities, we prompt other scholars to consider how they might model his engaged scholarship.

Exploring Heterogeneity

Intra-Community Heterogeneity

As sociolinguists carefully consider the boundaries of the African American speech community, a challenge since the study of AAVE began (Labov et al. 1968; Morgan 1994): certain African Americans and their linguistic practices tend to be overrepresented in sociolinguistic studies, while others are erased. Researchers have been critical of who we choose as subjects and how these choices erase the experiences of other African Americans (Smitherman-Donaldson 1988; Morgan 1994; Wolfram 2011, 2012). This erasure, whether intended or not, can perpetuate negative stereotypes of African American speakers (Smitherman-Donaldson 1988; Morgan 1994). Smitherman-Donaldson, for example, has

argued that we reproduce racism via the propagation of negative, gendered stereotypes, where African American speech is viewed as solely belonging to drug dealers, criminals, hoodlums, and so forth (1998: 162). Morgan echoes these sentiments in her work, criticizing the ways in which working class men become overrepresented in studies on African American speech communities (1994: 84).

Rickford joins Smitherman-Donaldson (1988) and Morgan (1994) in challenging stigmatizing, often male-centered sociolinguistic portrayals of African American communities by stating: ‘the ways African Americans are portrayed in linguistics publications is paralleled by the concern which has been expressed recently about the ways that women are under-represented, or represented in terms of negative stereotypes’ (Rickford 1997b: 172). Emphasizing the need for linguists to contribute more to African American speech communities, Rickford challenges the field to do so through careful representation of African American heterogeneity in our work. By centering underrepresented speakers, like Black women, in his analyses, he complicates singular narratives of Black life and language. Politically, this refusal to reproduce stigmatizing narratives about Africans Americans pushes linguists to move from narrowly recognizing the legitimacy of marginalized language varieties to asserting the legitimacy of the communities in which those practices are used.

Especially via his exploration of grammatical variation across the speech of African Americans from East Palo Alto, California, Rickford’s (1992a) inclusion of underrepresented demographics speakers has enriched our conceptions of the ‘typical’ AAVE speaker. Rickford’s comparisons of young speakers from Harlem and East Palo Alto revealed that the vernacular did not just belong to inner-city young men (Rickford and Price 2013b): two young women, Tinky and Foxy, were using AAVE features like *copula* absence and *third singular present tense*—*s* absence at even greater rates than teenage men from Harlem (Labov et al. 1968) and Detroit (Wolfram 1969), despite the fact that women were purported to be more conservative in their production of morphosyntactic features (Wolfram 1969). This work was innovative for positioning these women as the primary subjects of analysis at a time when Black women were not viewed as archetypal AAVE speakers. Tinky and Foxy’s data have gone a long way in providing theoretical developments in studies of divergence that will be discussed later in this chapter.

Beyond increasing gender representation in AAVE studies, Rickford has also contributed to our conceptions of class. Specifically, his fieldwork in a sugar-estate community reveals the local stratification of social class in Cane Walk, Guyana (Rickford 1986c). This serves as a lens through which to observe class structure beyond the North American landscape. Over the course of Rickford’s ethnographic observations, he learned of two prevalent occupation groups, the Estate class and the Non-estate class. The Estate class were the field-workers of the sugar estate, while the Non-estate class had little to do with sugarcane work, and were, instead, skilled tradesmen, clergy, shop owners, and so forth. The Non-estate class produced more standard English pronoun variants than the Estate class, suggesting that the Estate class’ speech is more Creole than their counterparts. A functionalist perspective would have suggested that members of the Estate class used the Creole variable, because they did not have access to standard features as a result of limited contact and education (Rickford 1986c). However, Rickford situates their linguistic behavior in relation to their ideologies of language use, economic mobility, and agency. Whereas the members of the Non-estate class characteristically viewed the use of standard features as a means to accrue more political and economic power, members of the Estate class typically believed that language use does not affect the rigidity of the sugar estate hierarchy (Rickford 1986c: 218).

This intra-community study contributes to sociolinguistic theory on class structure and language use focusing on a community with a different socioeconomic structure. Rickford’s attention to a community like Cane Walk advances the study of language and Blackness in a global context, something Rickford has gone on to do in other contexts beyond the United States, including Jamaica and Barbados (Rickford 1986c, 1996d; Rickford and Rickford 1976c; Rickford and Melnick 2014f). Extending analyses of heterogeneity to these places involves a complex, but also crucial, project of documenting community-specific sociolinguistic patterns, while also recognizing the context-specific

nature of those patterns. Rickford shows that being sensitive to socially meaningful differences across different types of Black communities can yield new insights into the nature of linguistic variation, while challenging presumptions about linguistic homogeneity.

Intra-Speaker Heterogeneity

In Rickford's studies of intra-community heterogeneity, he engages with issues of underrepresentation by highlighting African American women's linguistic practices, while also engaging in discussions of class structure outside of the North American context. Through Rickford's intra-speaker analyses, he continues to challenge the homogenization of AAVE and prompt us to consider the construction of Blackness beyond narrowly conceived African American contexts. Specifically, his choice to discuss topics beyond those associated with negative stereotypes about African Americans avoids the reproduction of stigmatizing narratives. Rickford (1997b: 172) notes, 'When Rickford and McNair-Knox (1994a) was in preparation, we had to make a real effort to avoid the stereotypic examples that had gone before. Our paper still includes examples that discuss gang murders and "slamming partners" but we excised references to "bitches" and other misogynistic posturing which we had originally included in line with sociolinguistic tradition.'

In addition to contributing diverse depictions of Blackness, Rickford's work on intra-speaker analyses engage with important theoretical debates in sociolinguistics. Revisiting the speaker, Foxy, from earlier work, Rickford and McNair-Knox's study is one of few that has investigated stylistic morpho-syntactic variation among Black speakers (Rickford and King 2016e; Alim 2002; Alim and Smitherman 2012). Particularly, Rickford and McNair-Knox (1994a) illuminate the sensitivity of language use to both topic and addressee attributes, expanding on theories of style and audience design (Bell 1984). In their most recent study of Foxy and Tinky, Rickford and Price's (2013b) intra-speaker analyses bring into focus questions of stability and change in real and apparent time. Having collected longitudinal data over the course of 20 years, Rickford and Price to evaluate changes in morphosyntactic and vocalic patterns. Both speakers seemed to have reduced their frequency of AAVE features, having outgrown the lifestyle they lived in their teenage years. However, this work shows that both speakers pattern differently with respect to their stylistic repertoires. Particularly, Foxy is viewed as more of a stylistic chameleon, varying her linguistic patterns across different presentations of self (Rickford and Price 2013b: 166). The work from both Rickford and McNair-Knox (1994a) and Rickford and Price (2013b) reflect the fluidity of language and identity and compel us to continue exploring synchronic and diachronic language change.

More recently, the scope of Rickford's work on intra-speaker heterogeneity has brought traditional sociolinguistic methods to bear on more public discourses. Rickford and King (2016e) investigate the speech of Rachel Jeantel, the key witness in the George Zimmerman trial, who—as a native and fluent speaker of AAVE—was publicly criticized for her use of stigmatized features of this variety. The disregard of her testimony prompted Rickford and King (2016e) to study the systematicity and intelligibility of her speech, while identifying the structural biases vernacular speakers face in the courtroom. Consistent with Rickford's commitment to social justice, they use their linguistic expertise to bring attention to the mistreatment of AAVE speakers, encouraging more linguists to do the same.

In addition to its sociopolitical contributions, this research continues to engage sociolinguistic theory regarding the influence of other language varieties on Jeantel's speech. Jeantel's language background is unique considering her fluency in AAVE, Haitian Kweyol, and Dominican Spanish. Rickford and King's paper shows Caribbean influences in Jeantel's speech, for example, her use of *for* behaves like Haitian Kweyol's *pou* syntactically and semantically. In another example, her use of a phrase like 'live up under my mother,' possibly deriving from Haitian *viv anba kay X* 'live under roof [of] X,' has not been observed in AAVE speakers before. In addition to these syntactic, semantic, and lexical patterns, parallels between her speech and Caribbean Creoles were found in her vocalic system.

The authors describe Jeantel's /i/ vowels as being produced more peripherally and backed in the mouth, as observed in Haitian Kweyol (Rickford and King 2016e: 964; Wassink 2017).

Intra-Racial Heterogeneity

A great deal of research focused on language and society has sought to denaturalize so-called Herderian language ideologies of one language-one nation-one people (Bauman and Briggs 2003). As alluded to in discussions of intra-community heterogeneity, the goal of such work is to undermine simplistic representations of racial groups as communicating in a singular way. When the populations in question are racially stigmatized groups, the stakes of such presumptions are heightened. Much of Rickford's work demonstrates in great detail rich intra-racial heterogeneity.

Writing with his son, Russell, Rickford and Rickford (2000a) details the historical circumstances that have led to the development of linguistically distinctive patterns among African Americans, namely the transatlantic slave trade, subsequent slave codes, *de jure* and *de facto* segregation, and ongoing marginalization, exclusion, and abjection across societal domains. Importantly, Rickford and Rickford (2000a) note that distinctive and oppositional relationships between Blackness and Whiteness are not simply a question of the relationship between Standard English and Nonstandard English, since there are African Americans who speak Standard English, in what has been referred to as Standard Black English or African American Standard English (Spears 2015). Rickford and Rickford challenge the stereotype that Standard English is a specifically White linguistic category and Nonstandard English is a specifically Black linguistic category. As a gloss for Black English, the notion of 'spoken soul' captures racially distinctive language practices that cannot simply be reduced to Standard or Nonstandard English. Moreover, as Rickford and Rickford explain, these practices are used among African Americans across gender, socioeconomic class, and generational cohorts.

In their characterization of intra-racial linguistic heterogeneity among African Americans, Rickford and Rickford distinguish between Vernacular and Standard Black English. They suggest that Standard Black English involves practices 'in which the speaker uses standard grammar but still sounds Black, primarily because of Black rhetorical strategies and selected Black pronunciations, among them intonation and emphasis' (2000a: 224). This distinction makes it possible to understand how African Americans could simultaneously support the use of Standard Black English in settings such as school and the workplace 'and for reading and writing,' and AAVE 'in informal spoken interaction at home and in the community, especially with Black family members and friends' (2000a: 225). Because of the meaningfulness of the categories of Standard and Vernacular Black English, practices associated with these categories represent distinctive intra-racial ways of engaging in spoken soul. Rickford and Rickford argue that for African Americans, these intra-racial language practices play a crucial 'role in the preservation of their distinctive history, worldview, and culture—their soul' (2000a: 225).

Interracial Heterogeneity

Rickford's work on intra-racial linguistic heterogeneity can be productively situated in relation to his analyses of interracial linguistic heterogeneity. Rickford (1985b) compares the speech of a White and Black speaker living in the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. His analysis demonstrates striking similarities in these speakers' phonology and differences in their morphosyntax. This simultaneous attention to similarity and difference is a crucial component of Rickford's work. It involves recognizing the benefit of analyzing patterns among language users from within and across groups, rather than simply assuming that racial, ethnic, and linguistic boundaries correspond to one another. The presumption of such shared boundaries obscures significant differences among language users within certain groups and similarities across groups, and vice versa.

In considering the nature of these similarities and differences between Black and White speakers, Rickford seeks to account for the finding that ‘major Black-White differences persist even when socioeconomic status, education, and geography are relatively well-controlled’ (1985b: 110). Rickford notes the need to explain not only the basic existence of Black-White linguistic differences, but also their persistence in particular contexts. In this specific case of Black-White phonological similarity and morphosyntactic difference, Rickford considers the possibility ‘that non-standard phonological features diffuse more readily across ethnic lines than nonstandard grammatical features’ (1985b: 112–113). While on the surface these data would seem to support such a conclusion, Rickford engages in comparative analysis to demonstrate various contexts in which such patterns do not hold. Looking beyond linguistic structure, Rickford considers historical and institutional contexts of interaction and socialization that could inform the patterns he observed. In a striking argument for a careful analysis of language and identity, Rickford suggests that ‘nonstandard phonological features are part of a regional Sea Island identity in which both Blacks and Whites participate, but nonstandard morphosyntactic features are more heavily marked as Creole and serve as ethnic markers’ (1985b: 117). Thus, there is a fascinating interplay between language ideology and linguistic differentiation (Irvine and Gal 2000) in this site, such that phonology comes to index a shared regional identity, while morphosyntax indexes ethno-racial difference. Rickford’s careful analysis of interracial language patterns and boundaries in many ways prefigures subsequent sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological theorizations of language ideologies, differentiation, and identity.

Analytic Heterogeneity

An important theme we introduced as emergent in Rickford’s work is his ability to challenge the homogenization of Black language and identity, while also countering deficit-based perspectives of stigmatized varieties. His ability to do so stems from his use of multiple perspectives and analytic tools within his work. A commitment to investigating the politics of linguistic heterogeneity necessitates the use of various research methodologies, as well as multiple modes of analyzing and disseminating research findings, including the collection of quantitative and qualitative empirical data, historical considerations, applied efforts, and engagement with multiple publics. John R. Rickford has combined all of these approaches in the service of exploring the broadest possible intellectual and political implications of his research.

Rickford (1997b) provides an account of how his interest in the field of sociolinguistics in the late 1960s was prompted by his discovery of the finding that dramatically high rates of fellow speakers of Caribbean Creoles failed standardized English language exams. Rickford was struck by the ways such assessments misrepresented differences between Creole and Standard English as linguistic deficiencies on the part of Creole speakers. In many ways, this marked the beginning of Rickford’s long-standing efforts to challenge deficit-based perspectives on linguistic variation. Rickford (1987d) questions such stigmatizing views by arguing for a reconsideration of approaches to the assessment of linguistic competence. Specifically, he suggests that the convention of using a single sociolinguistic interview to assess speaker competence is inadequate and that such assessments need ‘to be supplemented with repeated recordings of the speaker in interaction with other interlocutors besides the original interviewer, and with systematic attempts to elicit his or her intuitions’ (1987d: 151). Rickford is concerned not simply with the ‘observer’s paradox’—where the analyst’s presence influences a speaker’s linguistic production (Labov 1972)—as a sociolinguistic challenge, but also as an institutionally consequential phenomenon. Since assessments of linguistic proficiency can serve as institutional gatekeeping mechanisms, it is important to interrogate the ways in which such assessments systematically stigmatize particular populations and language practices (Simpkins and Simpkins 1981; Godley et al. 2006; Sweetland 2006).

Returning to Rickford's work in *Cane Walk*, this research highlights the significance of speakers' ideologies in assessments of linguistic proficiency and social categories more broadly. In his analysis of the relevance of speakers' ideologies in the treatment of social class, Rickford points to the troublesome privileging of analysts' definitions of social class 'and the absence of any reference to the class consciousness and analysis of the members of the community themselves' (1987h: 282). By positioning community members as analysts themselves rather than objects of analysis, Rickford (1986c: 216) seeks to avoid using research models that 'are usually not tailored to the local speech community, and might miss or misrepresent the realities of social stratification therein' (Geertz 1973). Thus, what might appear as homogeneous populations and practices from out-group perspectives, can in fact be experienced as significantly differentiated or even stratified from local points of view. Research participants' theories and analyses can provide key insights into linguistic form and function.

Rickford's efforts to challenge linguistic and broader societal stigmatization were perhaps most visibly on display in his public engagement with the so-called Ebonics debate that achieved national and international notoriety following the Oakland School Board's 1996 language resolutions. Rickford (1997a) sought to highlight the systematicity of African American Vernacular English, the educational benefits of understanding AAVE patterns in efforts to teach Standard English, and the broader historical and political context in which the Oakland debate can be productively understood. While Rickford notes the ways sociolinguistic perspectives have been misrepresented, disregarded, or derided in mainstream media representations, he forcefully asserts that 'sociolinguists should be involved in the great language debates of our times' (1999d: 274). In his writing for fellow sociolinguists, Rickford (1999d) articulates lessons learned from and strategies for future participation in public language debates. In the case of the Ebonics debate, this involves grappling with the racist vitriol directed at proponents of valuing and building on AAVE in K–12 classrooms. For Rickford, this racism is a reminder that 'if we don't take the "socio" part of sociolinguistics seriously, we won't be prepared to understand or respond to such attitudes effectively' (1999d: 272).

In some ways, the forms of stigmatization articulated in public debates are reproduced in academic research. Rickford (1997b) addresses the tendency of the field of sociolinguistics to glean key theoretical insights from the study of African Americans' linguistic practices—including variable rules, tense–aspect markers, and patterns in social class, race, ethnicity, network, and style—without cultivating solidarity with African Americans' practical and political struggles. That is, sociolinguistic research often positions African Americans as exemplars of sociolinguistic distinctiveness without considering the ways that this attributed distinctiveness serves as a rationalization for or key mechanism in reproducing African American marginalization across societal domains. Rickford (1997b: 161) problematizes research practices that focus exclusively on the observation and theorization of African American language patterns, while ignoring African Americans' material experiences. The goal of this critique is not simply to chastise linguists for the sake of pointing out the field's shortcomings. Instead, Rickford implicates himself in the field's problematic orientation to applied work, and identifies concrete strategies for building reciprocal relationships with communities. Part of this reciprocity involves providing service in return to communities on their own terms rather than simply seeking to 'empower' them through providing access to sociolinguistic knowledge (Rampton et al. 2015). Recalling sociolinguistic research he conducted in the South Carolina Sea Islands, Rickford notes, 'if I had sought to "empower" them only by sharing what I knew and found interesting, I might have missed the more comprehensive "empowering" which doing their bidding afforded' (1993b: 130). Rickford and the team he was a member of performed tasks like ditch-digging and fence-building in service to the community members they were interviewing. This service reflects his efforts to co-conceptualize empowerment with marginalized communities, rather than defining it for them.

Modeling Engaged Scholarship

In addition to expanding sociolinguistic theory, Rickford has empowered and defended the communities from which his research draws. Following Labov's (1982) 'principle of debt incurred' and Wolfram's (1993) 'principle of gratuity,' Rickford has used his role as linguist to serve community members who speak stigmatized dialects. His service to speakers of African American (Vernacular) English and Caribbean Creoles manifests not only in his scholarship, but also in his mentoring and community engagement. We join Rickford in carefully considering how we can continue to work on behalf of the communities in which we study, while simultaneously pushing social and linguistic theory forward. Following are suggestions for continuing Rickford's rich legacy for engaged scholarship.

One of the ways in which scholars can model Rickford's social justice efforts is through the mentorship of linguists from marginalized communities. Rickford has sought to mentor linguists of color in their undergraduate, graduate, and tenure-track journeys; indeed, as scholars of color influenced by the contributions Rickford has made to the field, we have been beneficiaries of these efforts since we were undergraduate Linguistics majors. For Rickford, linguists of color must play a key role in theoretical and applied work that speaks to the patterns and experiences in the communities in which this work is situated. The underrepresentation of linguists of color is not happenstance. Instead, Rickford explains that 'committees on admissions, appointments, and promotions in our field suffer from the institutional racism endemic in American society more generally' (1997b: 170). Rickford notes that efforts to produce and recruit sociolinguists of color, and African American sociolinguists in particular, are not simply acts of benevolence, but rather are an ethical responsibility in a field that is deeply indebted to African American communities for so many of its key insights.

Understanding that not all African Americans are AAVE speakers, we should avoid the implication that speaking this dialect denotes authentic membership in this racial category (Benor 2010; Alim and Reyes 2011; King 2016). As a means of challenging singular narratives of Black language and identity (Smitherman-Donaldson 1988; Morgan 1994), we must identify the diverse constructions of Blackness and language practices across Black communities, making legible meaningful differences within racial groups. As Rickford has shown, this can be done by broadening participation of underrepresented African American participants and the kinds of topics we examine in our data (Rickford 1997a). Further, work on heterogeneity in AAVE has been gaining more traction in sociolinguistics with emphases on regional identity (Wolfram 2007; Yaeger-Dror and Thomas 2010), stance-taking (Grieser 2015; Podesva 2016), and persona constructions (King 2016; Kortenhoven 2016).

We must maintain consistent and accessible dialogue with the public domain to ensure that our work contributes to broader social movements and efforts toward institutional transformation (Rickford 1999d; Charity Hudley 2008; Wolfram 2012; Rickford and King 2016e). Part of doing so acknowledges that these larger social goals are shared by contiguous fields in which scholars are also working on behalf of marginalized communities. John R. Rickford's work with fellow scholars in fields such as linguistics, anthropology, education, psychology, history, political science, sociology, communication, speech pathology, English, and Black studies is not simply an abstract intellectual project, but rather the expression of a political commitment to understanding the broadest possible implications of linguistic heterogeneity.

To further the field's social activism, linguists should continue to interrogate the ways in which language becomes a means to penalize speakers stereotypically associated with stigmatized varieties in classrooms, courtrooms, and beyond (see Siegel, this volume). This would be keeping in the rich tradition of Rickford's work (Rickford 1997b; Rickford and King 2016e), as well as the work of many other sociolinguists working for social justice on behalf of Black communities (Labov 1982; Wolfram 1993; Baugh 2000, 2019; Charity Hudley 2008).

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