

## CHAPTER 2: ACCESS (5:48-9:16)

*This section highlights ways in which speaking African American Language (AAL) can work to promote and prohibit access. Speakers discuss feelings of expressivity and solidarity as well as self-consciousness and marginalization.*



### KEY POINTS



#### Access

In some contexts, language can provide access and foster inclusion. AAL can build solidarity among its speakers because it signals shared aspects of their identity and marks them as in-group members. Hearing someone speak in a familiar language or dialect often produces feelings of comfort and acceptance.

#### Barriers

On the other hand, language can be a barrier, particularly when society stigmatizes and rejects it. This stigmatization restricts access by building barriers. These barriers can range from hurt feelings to serious material consequences related to inclusion and exclusion. Speakers in the film describe feelings of self-consciousness and instances of being mocked for the way they talk. Systemic barriers related to language include limitations on opportunities for education, jobs, and housing.

#### Code-switching

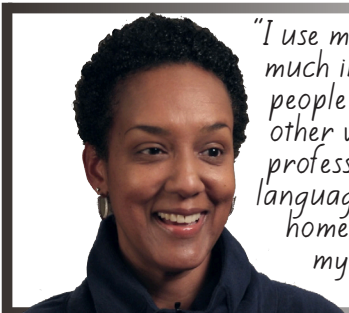
Linguists use the term 'code-switching' (also commonly called 'code-shifting') to refer to the alternating use of two or more languages or dialects by an individual. Speakers of AAL often code-switch in different settings and around different people in order to minimize negative consequences and maximize positive outcomes. In this section, we hear linguist Tracy Weldon code-switches between a mainstream dialect in her professional interview setting while using AAL in voice recordings with friends and family.



See if you can hear the code-switch by U.S. President Barack Obama in this video clip



Listen to comedians Key & Peele discuss the concept of code-switching



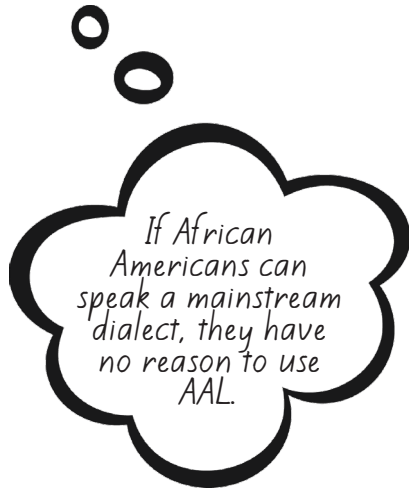
*"I use mainstream ways of talking so much in my professional life that a lot of people doubt that I actually speak any other way, but when I'm outside of that professional setting it really is sort of my language of comfort, it's my language of home, it's my language of family, it's my language of friendship." -Tracy Weldon, linguist*

*"You have this kind of complex push which on the one hand, the language is vibrant, it's fulfilling, it's expressive, it's enjoyable, and on the other hand, you have African Americans dealing with the larger society. Getting pushback, getting misunderstanding." -John Rickford, linguist*

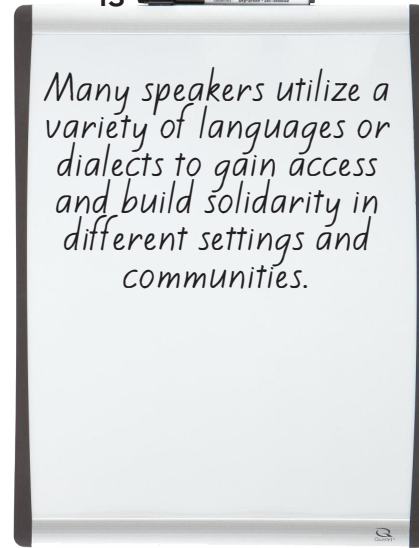


## COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

non-linguists may think



the linguistic consensus is



## FUN FACTS

Nicky Sunshine is a stand-up comedian in New York City who has starred in and produced several comedy shows in major NYC venues like Times Square Arts Center, Broadway Comedy Club, Stand-Up NY, and New York Comedy Club.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### PRE-VIEWING

1. Have you ever felt an immediate sense of camaraderie with a person just from hearing the way that they talk? Why? Did it remind you of home? Did it make you feel like that person might have a similar background or some shared aspects of identity? Has anyone ever commented on the way that you speak? What did they say? Was it positive, negative, or neutral? If so, how did it make you feel? How did you respond?
2. Have you ever been made fun of for the way that you speak? What was said? How did it make you feel (e.g., angry, embarrassed, self-conscious)? How did you respond?
3. Do you think you speak differently around different people or in different settings? How does your speech change? What are some of the reasons that people might change the way they talk with different groups? Can you recall a time when you tried to manipulate the way you sounded for a specific purpose? For example, giving a school presentation, talking with your grandmother, working at a job, etc.

## ACTIVE VIEWING

1. What are some ways that language can give you access and some ways in which it can be a barrier? Listen for some of the personal experiences mentioned by Jasmine Williams, Tracey Weldon, and Nicky Sunshine.
2. In this section, linguist Tracey Weldon gives examples of how she speaks in a professional setting, with a friend, and with her mother. What differences do you hear across the three speech styles? Does she use different words or pronunciations? Or both?

## POST-VIEWING

1. Tracey Weldon describes AAL as her language of comfort, home, family, and friendship. Think about the way that you talk with your family and friends. How does it bring you closer together? How would you feel if someone told you it was wrong? What if they told you that you should learn to speak a different dialect?
2. Nicky Sunshine says, "Unless you have your own company or you're a rapper or you're an athlete, with vernacular you are going to be pushed out of opportunities and marginalized." Why do you think that is? Should people be denied opportunities because of the dialect they speak? How does this relate to other issues of racial marginalization in U.S. society?
3. What are some ways that language relates to identity? Do you think that language should be included alongside other diversity qualities such as gender, race, class, sexuality, and religion?
4. Consider these quotes by Nicky Sunshine: 1) "I am from an African American background but I went to a predominantly White school and even when I was younger my Black family members would make fun of me and call me White girl." 2) "For economic survival, I'm going to have to do that song and dance." Do you think it's possible that some African Americans might face negative consequences whether they 'sound White' or 'sound Black'?

## Additional Resources

Lippi-Green, R. L. (2012). *English with an accent: Language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States*, 2nd ed. London, UK: Routledge.

This captivating text explores the ways in which social attitudes and ideologies about accents are perpetuated in the media and institutionalized. It explores how people with non-standard and non-prestigious accents face discrimination and decreased access to opportunities

Young, V.A., Barrett, R., Young-Rivera, Y., & Lovejoy, K.B. (2013) *Other people's English: Code-meshing, code-switching, and African American Literacy*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

This book explores the potential role of code-meshing and code-switching in the classroom as pedagogical methods which would allow African American Language to exist alongside the Standard English of the classroom.