

CHAPTER 6: SKILLS (38:16-49:08)

This section discusses several types of verbal skills that are significant in various Black communities. It explores communicative practices such as verbal sparring, improvisation, and call-and-response refrains in the church, and the rhetorical power of Black activists such as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King



KEY POINTS



Verbal skills

Many African Americans place a high value on the spoken word. Both African cultures and the U.S. slave history have contributed to a strong oral tradition in the Black community which values an individual's abilities to speak spontaneously, creatively, and authoritatively. As linguist Arthur Spears explains in the film, "Why do kids growing up in the Black community have to become skilled at language use? The community requires it; the culture requires it. If you can't defend yourself verbally growing up in a Black community, a traditional Black community, then everybody else picks on you. So you're forced to develop, you can think of them as verbal defenses, I prefer to think of them as verbal skills."

Community discourse practices

When people think about language variation, they often think of vocabulary, pronunciation, or grammar differences. However, there is also variation at the discourse level and narrative level. Different dialect and language communities can have different communicative norms and practices. This section depicts some discourse practices of African American communities such as verbal play and the call-and-response routine of Black church services.

Verbal sparring

The types of verbal sparring and one-upmanship depicted in the film have many names—'shooting', 'snapping', 'bagging', 'capping', 'the Dozens', 'sounding', 'signifyin'', 'woofing', 'joning', and others. Some refer to specific types of verbal combat such as insulting the adversary's mother. These practices consist of ritualistic insults and skilled verbal creativity. Both the content and the delivery are important aspects of the practice. Within these battles, participants can make highly negative comments but they are not considered genuinely offensive.



See some examples of 'the dozens' in a segment from the 90s sketch comedy show *In Living Color*



Hip Hop

Hip Hop is a musical genre and subculture developed in the 1970s by African Americans. Some early pioneers of the genre include the Sugarhill Gang, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, and DJ Kool Herc. Foundational stylistic elements of the genre include deejaying/scratching, graffiti painting, B-boying, and MCing/rapping. MCing was influenced by the African American

discourse practices of verbal combat (capping, shooting, bagging, etc.). Hip Hop is a genre that requires a high level of skill in verbal play. As rapper Quest M.C.O.D.Y. observes "There are probably more people that would have been English majors or writers in Hip Hop than there is in any other genre. Just the usage of words, like metaphors, similes, double entendres, triple entendres." Hip Hop has now spread globally and, as linguist John Baugh explains, "is actually often used by young people in various parts of the world that wish to express defiance to authority."



Listen to "The Message" by Grandmaster Flash



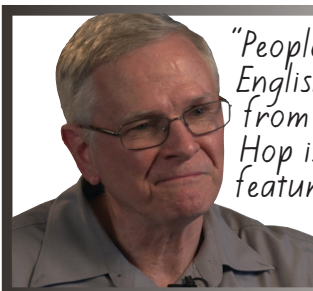
Oral tradition and the Black church

African Americans have a history of oral tradition rooted in African cultures. Furthermore, because African Americans were denied access to literacy and education, oral communication was the primary mode of cultural preservation for hundreds of years. The communicative practices of Black church congregations are illustrative of the significance of this oral tradition in the Black community. Oral improvisation, freestyle, and call and response dialogue are important aspects of many Black congregations.

The transcendent rhetoric of Martin Luther King Jr.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is regarded as one of the most powerful speakers of all time with his "I Have a Dream" speech frequently ranked as one of the greatest and most well-known speeches in history. Though King avoided some of the most heavily stigmatized linguistic features, he consistently used features that marked his African American and Southern urban identity. In the film, linguist Walt Wolfram explains that "What stands out from King is his rhetorical power and his social and political voice, and the fact that it was framed in African American identity and Southern identity is one of the great lessons about that authority and the authenticity of speaking Black in America."

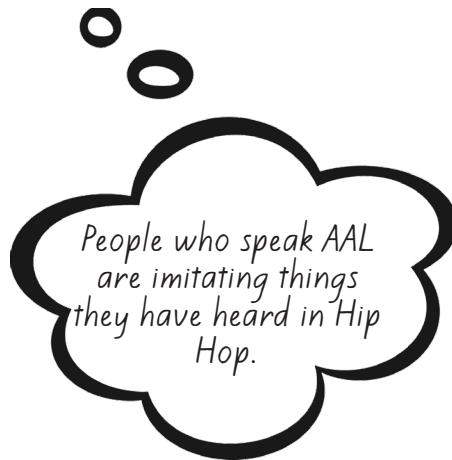
"For our community we come out of an oral culture. And movements that are transformative in our community always have people who are able to communicate with oral power and dexterity and improvisation and communicate head and heart and spirit and allow those words to take life and flight in the hearts of God's people." -Rev. Otis Moss



"People think that African American English is picking up these things from Hip Hop, when in fact Hip Hop is making use of longstanding features of African American English." -John Singler, linguist

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

non-linguists may think



the linguistic consensus is



FUN FACTS



In this section, Professor Griff discusses the metaphorical meaning behind the song "Miuzi Weighs a Ton" from Public Enemy's debut album *Yo! Bum Rush the Stage*. Music writer Cheo H. Coker has cited this in the top three most influential albums in Hip Hop history. The unique song title is often commodified as "My uzi weighs a ton."



It's a big wonder why I haven't gone under
Dodgin' all types of microphone thunder
A fugitive missin' all types of hell

All this because I talk so well
When I
Rock, get up, get down
Miuzi weighs a ton



Trinity United Church of Christ, featured in the film, is the former church of President Barack Obama and the current church of rapper Common. Pastor Jeremiah Wright was the subject of public scrutiny in 2008 when some of his sermons were published in connection to the campaign of President Barack Obama. Rev. Otis Moss III is the current pastor. His father, Otis Moss Jr. worked with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.



Check out this interview with Common about his experience with Trinity United Church of Christ



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-VIEWING

1. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the phrase “language skills”? Do you think about academic qualities, artistic abilities, multilingualism, a particular person? Which skill do you personally value and why?
2. Do you consider Hip Hop to be an art form? Why or why not? If we assume it is an art form, what sorts of things typify it?

ACTIVE VIEWING

1. What are some of the labels given to the practice of verbal sparring or verbal one-upmanship in AAL? Keith Cross lists several.
2. What are some ways that Black versus White church congregations use language differently according to the film?

POST-VIEWING

1. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is remembered as one of the greatest speakers of all time. Throughout his speeches, he maintained a speech style that included linguistic features marking both his Black and Southern identity. Why is this significant? What can we learn from King’s success and his use of AAL and Southern American English features?
2. Do you know of any other countries where Hip Hop has become popular? Why do you think Hip Hop has become so popular globally? Are there any common themes conveyed by international Hip Hop?
3. What types of language skills are valued or privileged by American society in general? By the current education system? Which ones are overlooked? Are there any skills associated with Hip Hop that might be translatable to the classroom?

Additional Resources

Alim, H. S. (2009). *Roc the mic right: The language of Hip Hop culture*. New York, NY: Routledge. This is the first book-length analysis of the role of language in Hip Hop culture and the creative and complex discursive practices which have influenced the Hip Hop genre.

Miller, W. J. (2016). *Origins of the dream: Hughes’s poetry and King’s rhetoric*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.

In this text, Miller analyses the influences of Langston Hughes’s poetry on Martin Luther King Jr.’s speeches and traces the origin of the famous speech.

Smitherman, G. (1977). *Talkin and testifyin: The language of Black America*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press.

This volume contributes to our understanding of Black English by contextualizing it within the greater realms of Black culture and style. Smitherman explores ways in which the rhetorical styles of AAL reflect its African origins.

Wolfram, W., Myrick, C., Forrest, J., and Fox, M.J. (2016, January). Celebrating the linguistics significance of Martin Luther King Jr. Retrieved from: <http://languageblog ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=23517>

In this post, Wolfram et al. break down their analysis of King's speech in four different contexts, revealing how he consistently embodies his Southern and African American identity through language. They draw a connection between language inequality and social justice.