

# VIEWERS' DISCUSSION GUIDE TO TALKING BLACK IN AMERICA

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*with*

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## INTRODUCTION

Talking Black in America explores the role of language in the lives of African Americans. Filmed in locations from the Caribbean and the South Carolina Sea Islands to the rural South, metropolitan areas of the North and West Coast, it examines the historical roots of African American Language (AAL), its contemporary status in society, its essential role in everyday life, and its important functions in verbal performance. The documentary is built around the comments and activities of everyday speakers and performers reflecting real world experiences, as well as the observations of linguists, historians, and educators. It showcases the historical development and changing role of language, as well as the remarkable impact AAL has had on the speech and culture of the United States and beyond. The documentary confronts the persistent stereotypes and prejudices about the speech of AAL and firmly positions it as an integral part of the cultural legacy of all Americans.

The education goals addressed in the film include (a) understanding and appreciating the sociocultural role of language in community life; (b) understanding the historical roots and orderly development of African American speech; (c) raising awareness about the systematic language patterning in African American Language, and (d) raising awareness about language prejudice and stereotypes that have often been associated with the speech of African Americans.

The documentary is organized into different chapters based on themes: Talking Black, Access, Exclusion, The Imprint of History, Migration, Skills, and Transformation. Following a section in which we define some of the key terminology used in the film and discussion, we summarize the key points in each chapter, discuss misconceptions, offer fun facts, and provide some discussion questions for viewers. We conclude the guide with brief biographies of the linguistic experts in the film and the documentary's producers.



## WHERE ARE WE?



Filming took place in the following locations: Harlem and New York City, New York; Sea Islands and Charleston, South Carolina; Atlanta, Georgia; rural Mississippi; Detroit, Michigan; Chicago, Illinois; Oakland and Palo Alto, California; and Nassau as well as Cat Island, The Bahamas. Sites were chosen to represent diversity in region, status, everyday activities, individual speakers, and performative contexts.

# KEY TERMINOLOGY

## What is linguistics?

Linguistics is the scientific study of language and its structures. There are many subfields within linguistics including phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, dialectology, psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics, computational linguistics, historical linguistics, and applied linguistics.

## What is a linguist?

A linguist is a person who studies the structure of language.

## What is a dialect or language variety?

A dialect or language variety is a particular form of a language that is specific to or associated with a region or social group (e.g., Southern American English, Chicano/a English). Linguists and professional students of language use these terms as neutral labels, devoid of positive or negative connotations. This documentary looks at a continuum of language varieties that are spoken by or associated with Black communities. These language varieties are referred to primarily as African American Language (AAL) throughout this guide; a number of other labels are employed throughout the documentary, including Black English, African American English, Black Vernacular, and Ebonics. While linguists often have specific reasons for using one term over another, for the purposes of this guide and the documentary, all of these labels can be thought of as describing the range of dialects and styles that collectively constitute talking Black in America.