Following the previous segment focused on education, this segment considers ways that language differences affect people's right to fair treatment in the areas of criminal justice and healthcare. At the end, one expert discusses how one type of social media has been used as a tool to address injustice.

KEY CONCEPTS

Trial of George Zimmerman Trayvon Martin, a 17 year old African American boy, was walking back from a 7-Eleven to his father's fiancée's townhouse in Sanford, Florida, on a rainy night in 2012. His appearance drew the suspicion of neighborhood watch leader George Zimmerman— sparking events that led to Martin's death and a landmark trial that ignited national debates on gun laws and racial profiling. Trayvon spent more than 20 minutes leading up to his murder on the phone with a friend named Rachel Jeantel, who was thus expected to be the prosecution's star witness. Jeantel speaks African American (Vernacular) English in addition to Haitian Creole and Spanish. The public's response to her language at the time of the trial offered numerous revealing examples of linguistic prejudice.

The **Black Lives Matter** movement was created in 2013 by three female Black organizers — Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi — following the aquittal of George Zimmerman. Black Lives Matter began with a social media hashtag, #BlackLivesMatter. Most recently, #Black Lives Matter has spearheaded demonstrations worldwide protesting police brutality and systematic racism that overwhelmingly effects the Black community.
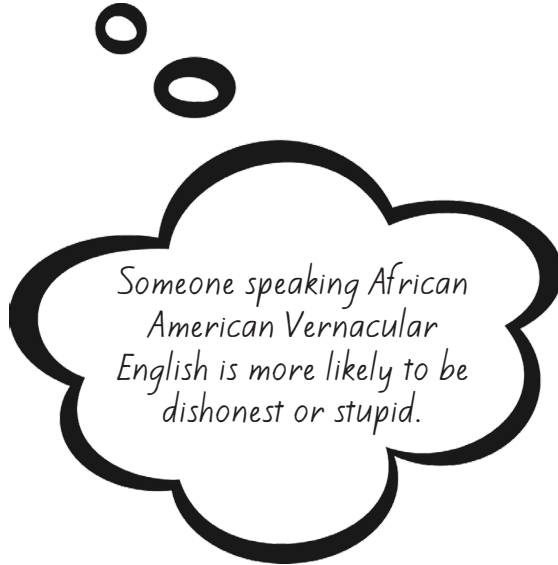

"I was just at the doctor last week and I will intentionally speak in standard English and as eloquently as possible, because that's somewhere where I know from personal experience that they're gonna look at you as less intelligent, and that's just a place where I don't want to gamble with that."
-Cierra Harris, student

"It's important to remember that linguistic profiling is always at play. So every case, every time someone goes into a courtroom, how they're using language determines how trustworthy they are, how much we believe what they're saying to us and it can affect their perception of criminality. So someone might come in with an accent, tell the full truth and get a heavier sentence because of how they sound, not necessarily what they've done or what they've said."
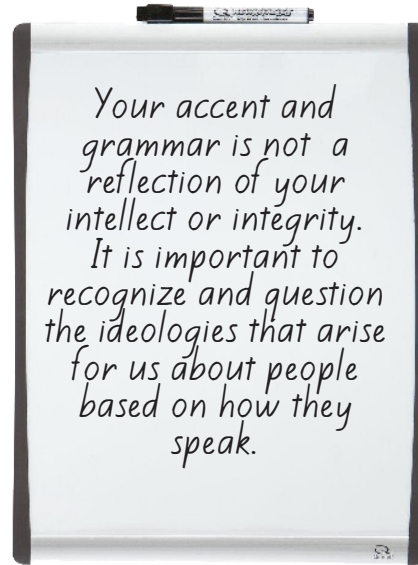-Kelly Elizabeth Wright, linguist

COMMON MISCONCEPTION

the truth is

people may think

Someone speaking African American Vernacular English is more likely to be dishonest or stupid.

Your accent and grammar is not a reflection of your intellect or integrity. It is important to recognize and question the ideologies that arise for us about people based on how they speak.

LINGUISTIC CONCENSUS: People have been socialized to believe that African American Vernacular English is an inferior or uneducated way to speak and this, in turn, influences how much they value and trust someone speaking it.

EXTRA STUFF

TRANSCRIPTION of TESTIMONY

The film introduced a famous example of a witness' testimony being deemed incredible by the jury, in a large part due to the way the witness spoke. An additional issue can arise when court stenographers create the official transcript during court proceedings. Over the decades, sociolinguists have discovered numerous examples of inaccuracies in transcription resulting in a misleading record of someone's sworn statement, and a miscarriage of justice.

For more recent research about this, see this article.

"We stay on ready..."
Dr. Meredith Clark speaks about Black Twitter's essential role in the Black Lives Matter movement in the Social Justice film. She weighed in on that topic and more in the film Black Twitter: A People's History. You can watch the trailer here.
Dr. Clark is also a Research Lead with Archiving the Black Web

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-VIEWING

1. Do you think that the way people speak can affect how trustworthy they seem?

2. Could language bias affect how suspects are treated within the criminal justice system? How?

POST-VIEWING

1. What are some of the ways language can play a role in criminal justice?

2. Which of the following roles in the criminal justice system do you think it is most important to have some knowledge of language/dialect differences; police officer, lawyer, judge, court transcribers? Why?

3. Imagine you have a different cultural background than your doctor. How might it affect the care you receive?

4. Can you think of other contexts in which language bias can play a critical role in terms of someone's health and safety?

Additional Resources

Check out this article by John Baugh on Linguistic diversity and disparate health outcomes.

Interrogating Justice is a non-profit, non-partisan think tank. Read the article Black English Exacerbates Racist Practices in Justice System and see some examples of errors in court transcription due to language differences.

From the Philadelphia Enquirer: Study Says Court Reporters Not Accurate with Dialect

An article from the New York Times: Why are Black Students Punished So Often? Minnesota Confronts a National Quandary