

A short introduction to some of the injustices faced by speakers of African American English.



KEY CONCEPTS



Linguistic Profiling Linguistic profiling occurs when a listener hears (but does not see) someone speaking and makes inferences about the speaker's social characteristics (such as race or social class) based on their accent, dialect, or other speech patterns and then acts – consciously or unconsciously – in discriminatory ways. (“Racial profiling” is additionally based on visual cues) Linguist John Baugh, who features in the Talking Black in America series coined the term in his 2000 article, “[Racial Identification by Speech](#).”

Watch Baugh's TED Talk on linguistic profiling [here](#).

How does a listener identify a speaker?

The nuances of what leads listeners to be able to identify characteristics of a person based on their voice are still a topic of research. However, every voice is a rich signal that offers many acoustic cues that listeners may draw on, including pitch, intonation, vowel quality, and other voice aspects (nasality, breathiness, creak, etc.). Research finds that listeners can do identification tasks even when some of these cues are removed, so it seems that social categorization based on voice is something we are quite adept at.



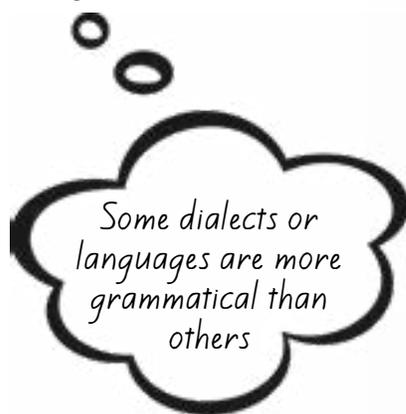
Check out a video clip from the 2014 book, *Talkin' Tarheel*: [What an Accent Tells You](#)



One thing that I want the public to think about is, when you evaluate somebody's speech and you hear them and you say, "Hmm, that's a Black person," what ideologies and stereotypes are coming with that? Can that be a neutral observation, or does all of the racist history of this country have to come along with it?
-Nicole Holliday, linguist

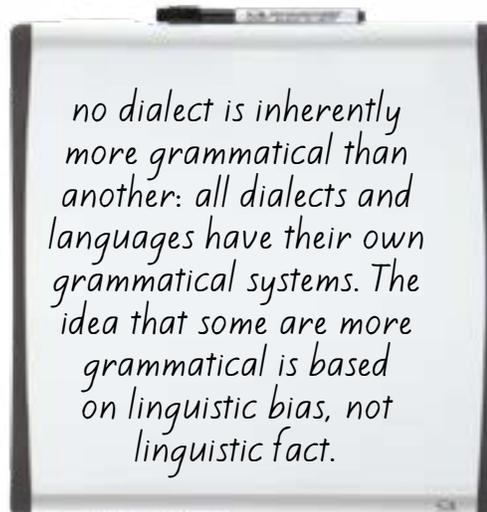
COMMON MISCONCEPTION

people may think



Video: [What are Dialects?](#)

the truth is



LINGUISTIC CONSENSUS: African American English (AAE) is a unique variety of English that is regular and grammatical, like every language. Speakers in the United States have been socialized to perceive AAE as inferior.

EXTRA STUFF



James Baldwin (1924-1987) was a writer and civil rights activist whose words continue to inspire us today. In the Social Justice episode, interviewee Henry Louis Gates mentions the impact that reading Baldwin's [opinion piece](#) in a 1979 issue of the *New York Times* had on him. The archival video of Baldwin seen in the documentary is from a brief and insightful [lecture](#) scrutinizing the continued existence of oppression despite the perceived success of the civil rights movement. To hear more from Baldwin, check out this [YouTube playlist](#).

Dialect or Language?

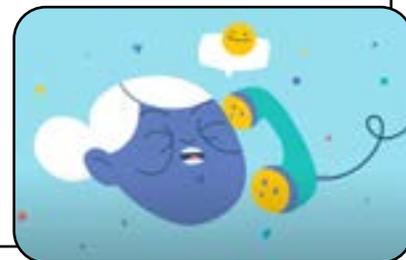
In the opinion piece mentioned above, Baldwin criticizes classifying Black English as a dialect rather than a language. It is commonly thought that a language is "greater" or "more important" than a dialect.

Partly that's because most of us think of dialects as mutually intelligible variations within the same language (in other words, speakers/listeners can understand each other without much effort).

On the other hand, two speakers of different languages wouldn't be able to understand each other, right? That's often true, but not always. For example, most Danish (Denmark) and Norwegian (Norway) speakers can understand each other pretty well.

The truth is that the designation of a communication system as a language versus a dialect relies on a sociopolitical framework more than a purely linguistic one.

For more, check out this animated [TED Ed video](#)



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-VIEWING

1. Do you think you have an accent? Why or why not?
2. Imagine you are speaking to someone you don't know on the phone. How accurately do you think you could guess their race, ethnicity, gender, or age? How are you able to do so?
3. What do you think your voice gives away about you? Do you think people make assumptions about you based on how you sound?

POST-VIEWING

1. What are some of the ways that speakers of Black English may be discriminated against?
2. Is there anything wrong with making inferences about who is speaking when you can't see them?
3. How does linguistic profiling differ from racial profiling? In what ways are they similar?
4. Have you experienced any judgement based on the way that you speak?

Additional Resources

More information about the Language & Life Project and their work on language diversity can be found on the website, languageandlife.org

This article by Patricia Rice from Washington University at St. Louis highlights John Baugh's work: [Linguistic profiling: The sound of your voice may determine if you get that apartment or not](#)

Read about [how employment law handles linguistic profiling](#).

Here is an article that considers some of the reasons why African American English is misunderstood, written by JSTOR Daily's resident linguist, Chi Luu: [Black English Matters](#)