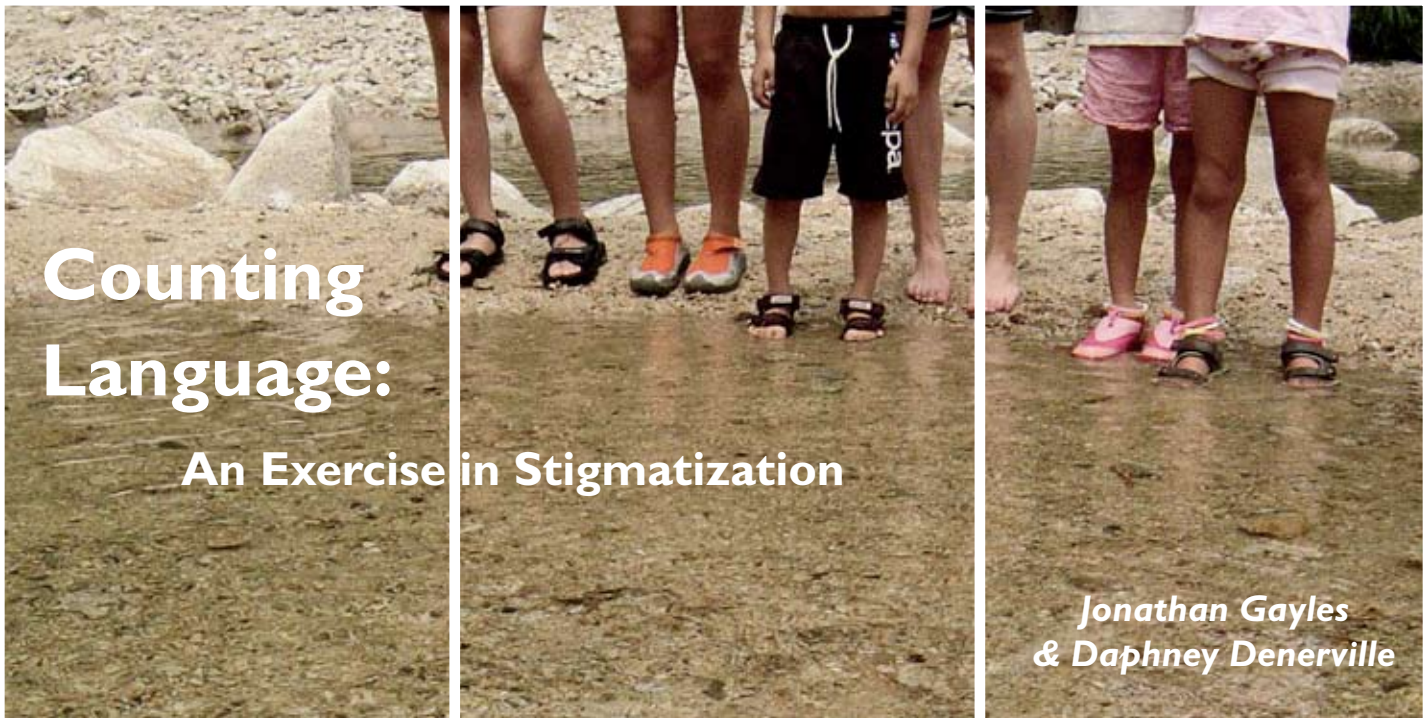

Counting Language:

An Exercise in Stigmatization

Jonathan Gayles & Daphney Denerville

The argument concerning the use, or the status, or the reality, of Black English is rooted in American history and has absolutely nothing to do with the question the argument supposes itself to be posing. The argument has nothing to do with language itself but with the role of language. Language, inconstestably, reveals the speaker. (From *If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell me, What Is?* by James Baldwin)

Introduction

Since the Oakland Unified School District passed its resolution on Ebonics in 1998 (Oakland Unified School District, 1998), Ebonics has been a lightning rod for controversy of all sorts. The intense response to the resolution reflected more than a critical response to one school district's interest in "vindicating [students'] equal protection of the law" (Oakland Unified School District, 1998). The utilitarian intent of the original resolution was lost as the debate on Ebonics became intensely political and, to a great extent, marred by existing patterns of racial hierarchy and stigmatization (Coleman & Means, 2000; O'Neil, 1998, Wright, 1998; Ronkin & Karn, 1999; Scott 1998).

Lost in this debate is the fact that numerous scholars have entered their support of Ebonics as a rule-governed linguistic system (Baugh, 1983, 1999; 2000; Dillard, 1972; Ewars, 1996; Poplack, 2000; Rickford, 1977,1997,1999; Stewart, 1967; DeFrantz, 1979; Ewers, n.d.; Honda, 2001; Palacas, 2001). Other researchers assert, consistent with the original intent of the resolution, that the use of Ebonics in the classroom has practical value for improving the educational outcomes of students (Bartley & Politzer, 1972; Bohn, 2003; Hoover et al., 1986; Hoover, 1992; Marback, 2001; Perez, 2000; Smitherman & Cunningham, 1997; Thompson, 2000).

Others bemoan the potentially tragic consequences of interaction between teachers that are unaware of Ebonics and students that speak it (Baugh, 1999, 2000; Margaret 2001; Sulentic, 2001). The use of Ebonics by African-American students is fluid and kinetic, allowing them to engage their worlds in ways that the use of "standard" English will not necessarily allow (Heath, 1983; Goodwin, 1990; Hale-Benson, 1982; Labov, 1972).

Furthermore, the use of Ebonics by students does not necessarily represent an inability to speak "standard" English but rather a conscious choice by students to refuse "to be defined by a language that has never been able to recognize" them (Baldwin, 1998, p. 1). For many African American students, such speech is important to their expressions of their identity (Fordham, 1999; Milroy & Milroy, 1991; Ogbu, 1999; Rickford, 2000). Considering the long and continuing salience of race in the United States of America, this is not surprising.

Despite the immense and variegated body of literature examining Ebonics that is far too substantial to cite completely here, few authors have developed strategies to engage the "Ebonics debate" constructively within the university classroom. It is important to pursue meaningful understanding of the possible latent functions of the Ebonics debate in the classroom. In doing so, we hope to pursue what Perry and Delpit call "the Real Ebonics Debate" (1998).

The purpose of this exercise is not a debate of the merits of Ebonics as a language but rather the larger social processes that frame the manner in which Ebonics and other modes of speech are regarded. As a means of communication, Ebonics is demeaned with unreserved harshness (Barnes, 2003; Ronklin & Karn, 1999; Scott, 1998). Tucker Carlson, conservative pundit, offered a description of Ebonics that characterized its portrayal in the media: "'OK, don't speak intelligible En-English. You'll never get a job.' I mean this is—this is a language where nobody knows how to conjugate the verbs. I mean it's ridiculous" (O'Neil, 1998).

Todd's (1997) description of Ebonics includes "abnormal, defective, dysfunctional;" "unfortunate;" "group reinforced speech pathology;" "a major language disorder;" and "poor language habits learned on the streets." It is not a subtle point he makes. Such is the antipathy towards Ebonics that Birch argues that "the Ebonics de-

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bate" never happened because "America's prescriptive attitude towards Ebonics does not allow fair and objective consideration of the issue" (1999, p.44).

This negative regard is consistent with the degree to which other "non-standard" modes of speech are stigmatized (Bedolla, 2003; Carli et al., 2003; Ladegaard, 1998; Watt, 2002). Although Ebonics is the focus of this article, this exercise is by no means limited to the discussion of Ebonics. Rather, this exercise encourages students to consider *why* certain modes of speaking (MOS) are favored while others are stigmatized. In doing so, broader societal contexts beyond language emerge. These broader contexts provide the facilitator with numerous "teaching moments" to reveal the fact that certain MOS are not inherently better or worse than others except *and only* to the degree to which we make them so.

The Exercise

The origins of this exercise are found in our desire to more constructively respond to the intense antipathy that students' frequently express towards what is commonly referred to as Ebonics in discussions of the social context of language. Although many scholars now use the designator "Black English Vernacular" (BEV), the term "Ebonics" is used in this article because it stands at the genesis of efforts to study the origins of African-American speech (Williams, 1975) as well as the fact that it has proven to be more a part of student lexicon.

In engaging language in the social sciences, students in our classes were frequently interested in "discussing" Ebonics. In fact, this is often the only reference point that the students have for considering the social and cultural context of language use. Unfortunately, "discussion" essentially meant that the students, without regard to ethnicity, generally wanted to assail Ebonics and, despite their attempts to avoid this, those that speak it. It was difficult for us to get students to place their feelings about Ebonics in a broader social, political and historical context.

Although this exercise places language use in a social and cultural context, it does not require scholarly knowledge of the broad field of sociolinguistics on the part of the participants or the facilitator because language is simply the reference point for the exercise. That is, this exercise is about what student *think of* specific productions of language rather than language in a technical sense. Consequently, modes of speech (MOS) is used here to represent languages, accents, dialects, pidgins, and other modes of verbal communication produced by the students.

Although such broad stokes may disturb some, it is important to avoid the potential implicit subordination involved in focusing on such labels for the successful administration of the exercise. Pandey (2000, pp. 28-29) offers interesting discussion of "the power of labeling" and "lexical denigration" in the Ebonics debate on the internet. By treating each MOS equally, students are more easily forced to confront the patterns of stigma and favor that emerge. Consequently, part of the strength of this exercise is that it is not inextricably bound to linguistics. This exercise is potentially useful in a variety of courses including anthropology, sociology, race and racism, social inequality and ethnic studies.

Prior to creating this exercise, we had some success in discussing the value that is assigned to different MOS and what might be the reasons for regarding someone that speaks with what students identify as a "British accent" as intelligent while someone that speaks in a way that identifies them as a resident of Appalachia as backwards and less intelligent, for example. Few students had any real contact with England and even fewer had any experience in Appalachia.

In order to fully engage potential explanations for why students feel a certain way about specific MOS, it is important to encourage students to consider the manner in which they draw conclusions about individuals and groups of people based on speech. We came to believe that this required a more concrete reference point that could not be avoided by any of the rationalizing niceties of political correctness. This exercise provides such a reference point.

Materials

◆ Adhesive (tape or sticky gum will due although you should make sure that your adhesive of choice does not damage your selected surface)

◆ 3 inch by 2 inch (approximately) rectangles squares of red (negative rating) and green (positive rating) construction paper (the size here does not have to be exact nor is it critically necessary to have colored squares although this provides for a much more impressive effect).

◆ Several strips of white paper (8 ½ by 11 paper cut into three equal vertical strips—not critical but preferred).

◆ A thick sharpie marker (not critical but preferred).

The materials selected here are inexpensive and very accessible. If the appropriate classroom technology is available (computer and projector/monitor) an alternative is to create a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and display the results electronically. However, doing it the "old-fashioned way" involves more students and is less labor-intensive for the instructor.

Methodology

The floor is first opened for students to suggest MOS. In order for a MOS to be included, a clear majority of the students must have either used it themselves or heard others use it. For example, while some students may know that Farsi is a language, if the majority of the students have never used Farsi or heard Farsi spoken, Farsi would be an inappropriate choice.

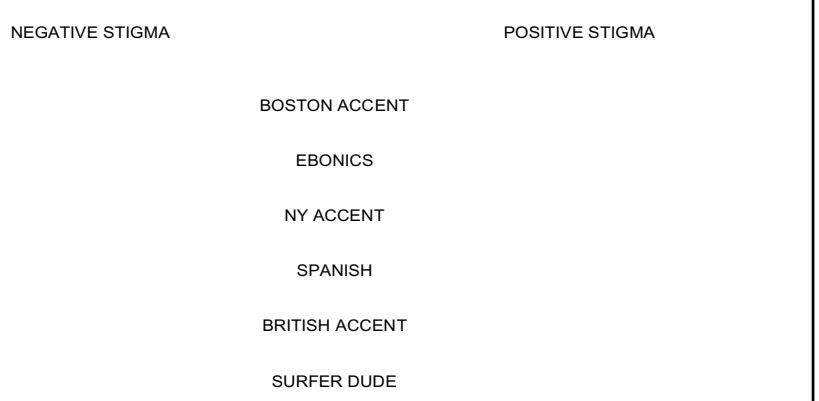
By meeting these criteria, the resultant list better represents student experience rather than a list that is imposed on the students by the facilitator. Additionally, the list represents some general consensus of MOS of which most students are aware. The facilitator writes each suggestion on the board, clarifying and excluding (according to the aforementioned criteria) when necessary.

Although the facilitator can write each item ("Ebonics," "French," "British accent") on the board, writing each item on strips of white paper with a broad-tipped pen and affixing them to a surface in clear view of all of the students achieves two purposes that are useful to the success of the exercise: (1) It provides a visual contrast that many blackboards do not; (2) a new and different space is created for the activity that more symbolically represents student product. We often use a wall to display the items. This provides more space and inserts some novelty into the class experience.

With the items in place, the facilitator should ask if there is any item that is confusing or inappropriate. It is critically important that the items should be placed in the middle of whatever space is selected by the facilitator so that positive and negative ratings can be placed on opposite sides of each MOS. Once resolved, the exercise can continue.

The colored squares should be provided to the students with each student receiving at least three squares of each color. Students should then be instructed to take a moment and (1) *individually* reflect on the list; (2) then on each red square, write the name of one item from the list that, in the student's mind, has a *negative* stigma so that if they have been given three squares in each color, each student should produce three squares with the name of *one* MOS from the list written on EACH square.

Figure 1: Sample Representation of "Data" Display



The critical point here is that students should not write more than one name of a MOS on one square. One square—one name. In our most recent administration, we allowed students to write adjectives on each square. This greatly improved the value of the exercise and we now regard it as an indispensable component of the exercise. This will be discussed in greater detail in our discussion of the results.

The same instructions should be provided for the green squares except that the each student should place the names of MOS that they *positively* regard. If students feel strongly about a particular MOS (positively or negatively), they may write the name of that particular MOS on more than one square. Consequently, one student may submit two squares indicating a negative perception of Ebonics, one square indicating a negative perception of English and three squares indicating a positive regard for the British accent, for example. Figure one provides a rough representation of the result.

This is an individual exercise and should reflect *individual students'* conceptions of a portion of the sociolinguistic landscape of the United States. Students should not collaborate as this diminishes the impact of emerging patterns of stigma. Once it is clear that the class has completed the exercise, students can pass their squares forward. Student facilitators can be selected to assist in the next portion of this exercise.

The red squares should be placed to the immediate left or right of the appropriate speech style (depending on the preference of the facilitator). Green squares should then be similarly placed on the opposite side of the speech style. The result should be a color-coded representation of negative and positive stigma of the MOS on display. If there are clear patterns apparent, this provides a concrete point of reference for discussion since it reflects "data" provided by the students themselves.

This exercise can be successfully conducted with up to fifty students. Administrations to classes of larger than fifty may create a considerable delay as the display develops, although additional student facilitators may be solicited from the class to assist. While fifty-minute classes have not been a problem, more time will allow a more complete discussion of each of the MOS provided by the students and what student data indicate about each.

Caveats

This exercise, like many that encourage reflection among students, is not without its challenges. One of the most apparent challenges is the tendency to homogenize MOS and deny the intense variations within each. For example, students identify speech styles such as "Ebonics," "Country Accent," "British Accent," "Creole," and "New York Accent." *Within* each of these MOS there is great variation. Still, the "product" provides the facilitator with a meaningful reference point to critically examine this variation.

Secondly, in generating the list, the facilitator should avoid potentially demeaning labels such as "redneck" and encourage the students to provide another less offensive term that captures the intended style of speech (i.e., Southern Twang, Southern, down home, etc.). Finally, students must not leave this exercise thinking that all members of a group associated with a particular MOS use that particular MOS. Just as the stigmas associated with particular MOS are learned, so is language itself.

Results

The most recent administration occurred in a section of Introduction to African American Studies. Forty-four students participated. Of the forty-four, thirty-five were African-American women and six were African-American men. Two White females and one White male participated.

In this administration of this exercise, Ebonics is the most negatively rated MOS and British Accent is the most positively rated (se Table 1). The complete tabular summary of the results is included in the appendix. Consider the students' comments regarding each.

These two MOS are clearly at opposite poles in terms of stigma. The students indicated that few had ever been to Great Britain while the overwhelming majority interact with people that they think speak Ebonics or think of themselves as at least occasional Ebonics speakers. The distance between these two MOS provides the class with a powerful reference for exploring the processes involved in the construction of this difference.

The students in the most recent administration were particularly surprised by the fact that Ebonics was so negatively rated. The fact that only three of the students in the class were White while the rest were Black made the negative rating even more puzzling for the students. Two of the responses to the open-ended portion

Table 1: Ebonics/British MOS Comparison

	Negative Comments	***Positive Comments***
British Accent Negative Rating=1 Positive Rating=22	Imperialism	intelligent(5), educated(4), elegant (2), proper(3), friendly(2), smart, articulate, sophisticated, trustworthy, funny, literate, witty
Ebonics Negative Rating=20 Positive Rating=3	ignorant(5), ghetto(3), stupid (2), poor, niggerish, uneducated(5), violent, hood, mislead, lazy, loud, country	well educated, strong

of the post-exercise survey are indicative of this:

> I liked the exercise a lot because it showed us how people in general, or at least the people in our class viewed the different types of speech. It was very interesting to see that although most of us are black and speak Ebonics on a daily basis, no one said anything positive about it, almost as if we're ashamed of the way we speak in informal environments.
>
> I thought the exercise was helpful in understanding how African Americans viewed Ebonics and that was surprising.

Such "teachable moments" reveals the degree to which students are similarly socialized in relation to the stigmatization of MOS. Furthermore, one's racial group membership does not exempt one from this socialization.

Clear patterns of positive and negative ratings should emerge despite the fact that this is an individual exercise. Of course, none of the MOS displayed are inherently better or worse than any of the others except to the degree that they are deemed such. This is a critical point. Their patterns do not represent validation of the place of each MOS on some objectively- defined continuum of "best" to worst" speech. Rather, these patterns represent shared knowledge about the MOS and their place on a socially-constructed continuum of best to worst.

The facilitator should pursue discussion of the process(es) that would produce the displayed patterns of stigma and favor (Wright, 1998). The facilitator should also engage the participants in a discussion of whether the MOS that are identified as least favorable belong to those groups that generally occupy the least favorable position in society. The more positively identified MOS should be engaged in a similar fashion. Issues including race, class, region, religion and nationality may become apparent here. The facilitator should be prepared to discuss each of the emerging contexts that are relevant.

The "data" that this exercise produces provide the facilitator with a rich reference point for meaningful discussion of what the data represent. The initial response of my students to the data is "Some of them just *sound* better or worse than others!" Clearly, the question here is "Why?" It is critically important that the facilitator reveal the arbitrary and most importantly *learned* nature of stigma assigned to certain MOS that sound "better" or "worse" than others. What are the students' reference points for such judgments? That these judgments are learned is without question. Indeed

> It is the case that SAE is not inherently more melodious than a working class Bostonian variation; it is not more logical than Gullah, and it is not more beautiful than Cajun. Our norms, attitudes, and expectations are based merely on perceived privilege: languages and dialects share the same prestige as their speakers do in society. (Birch, 1999, p. 47)

Through this exercise, the process by which these judgments are learned can be graphically examined in the classroom as well as the degree to which these processes parallel distinctions framed by societal inequality. The purpose of this exercise is not to deny the existence of stigma or, more ambitiously, to remove stigma or favor for that matter. No one class exercise can hope to do this. The purpose of the exercise is to reveal and then critically examine stigma and favor and to move it from the realm of the natural to the realm of the learned and arbitrary.

A Final Caveat

While allowing the students to include adjectives provides additional clarity for our analysis of the exercise, caution is warranted in relation to including these adjectives in the discussion of the exercise in the classroom. The adjectives provide a more descriptive frame of reference within which we can interpret the results.

As offensive as some of the adjectives are (i.e., "Niggerish"), we assume that they represent the students' honest perception of the MOS to which these adjectives are assigned. There is value in such honesty, although the offensive nature of the language may be too distracting to be of use in the discussion. Considering this, the facilitator should be cautious in using these adjectives during class discussion.

Exercise Assessment

A post-exercise survey following the most recent administration demonstrated that the exercise had the desired effect. The survey consisted of the following six prompts:

1. Before the exercise, I was interested in the Ebonics debate.
2. After the exercise, I was interested in the Ebonics debate.
3. Before the exercise, I knew that the value assigned to different types of speech does not reflect the inherent value of this speech.
4. After the exercise, I knew that the value assigned to different types of speech does not reflect the inherent value of this speech.
5. The exercise contributed meaningfully to my understanding of the context of the Ebonics debate.
6. Please provide any additional comments that will improve the administration of this exercise in the future.

For the questions measuring student interest (questions 1 and 2) and student understanding (questions 3 and 4), the average "After" response is more oriented towards "Strongly Agree" than the average "Before" response.

In order to determine the statistical significance of these differences, the Wilcoxon signed rank sum test was administered to the survey responses using SPSS statistical software.

The exercise had a positive impact on student interest in the Ebonics debate. These results are statistically significant. More specifically, there were twenty-six

Figure 2: Post-Exercise Response Means

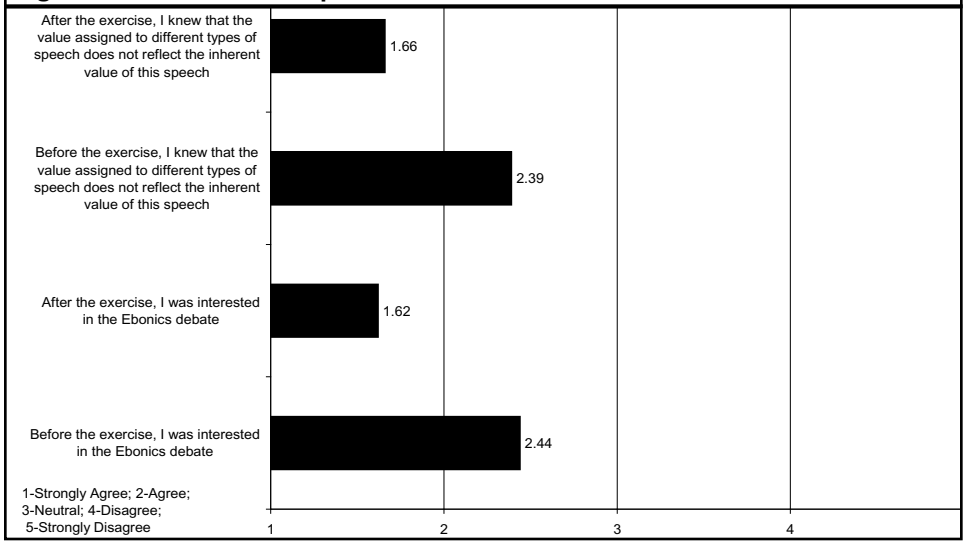


Table 2: Before/After the Exercise, I Was Interested in the Ebonics Debate		
Negative Differences (After<Before)	26	z=-4.089
Positive Differences (Before<After)	1	
Ties	17	p<.001
Total	44	

Table 3: Before/After the Exercise, I Knew That the Value Assigned to Different Types of Speech Does Not Reflect the Inherent Value of This Speech		
Negative Differences (AFTER<BEFORE)	19	z=-3.649
Positive Differences (BEFORE<AFTER)	2	
Ties(BEFORE=AFTER)	23	p<.001
Total	44	

instances where the "After" response was less than (more oriented towards "Strongly Agree") than the "Before" response.

Comparatively speaking, as shown in Table 2, there was only one instance where the reverse was the case. The exercise also had a positive effect on student awareness of the social construction of stigma assigned to different types of speech. These results were significant as well.

Again, as shown in Table 3, there many more instances where the "After" response was more oriented towards "Strongly Agree" than the "Before" response (19 and 2, respectively). Overall, the students report a very meaningful experience (see Figure 3).

There was much positive feedback in response to the exercise, as the following examples indicate:

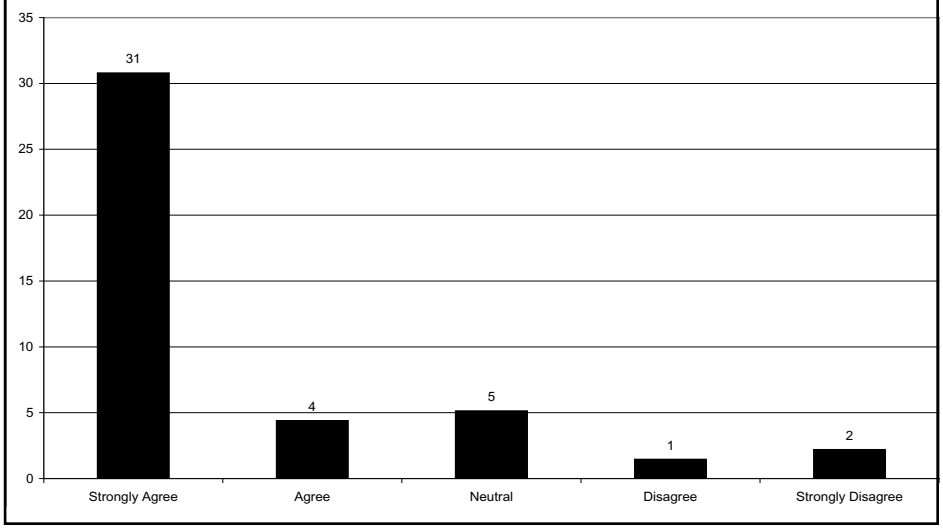
- the exercise really makes you think about Ebonics, and where, why, it is being used.
- I liked the language exercise. It gave me and I'm sure a lot of others the opportunity to see what everyone thought about Ebonics.
- I enjoyed the exercise because it provides an anonymous survey that explained a lot just based upon patterns. It was neat to see and interpret.
- I thought that the exercise was informative. I realized that there is nothing wrong with Ebonics. It's just when you use it that matters.

While there were many positive comments about the exercise, focus is placed on constructive comments as the positive impact of the exercise is established in the post-exercise assessment. Although constructive comments were few, there was an emergent theme:

- If we had more time to evaluate each language and its comments the exercise would have had a little more meaning.
- Maybe if there was more time to do the exercise than we could have had different results but I really think the exercise was done fine.
- Just the fact that it took to long to put all our comments on the board and I thought that we would go over all the comments, but it was ok.

It is clear that the facilitator must be cognizant of limitations of class duration. As the number of items increases, the time required to facilitate this exercise increases as well. To reduce the amount of time required for the entire exercise, the instructor can collect the names of MOS at the end of one class and immediately begin the remainder of the exercise in the following class. Doing so should not negatively impact the coherence and impact of the exercise.

Figure 3: I Have an Increased Understanding of the Ebonics Debate as a Result of This Exercise



Conclusion

Language is the primary transmitter of culture. As such, the way that we regard language is bound by the same cultural processes involved in all types of discrimination between and against people and groups. Considering patterns of stigmatization of and favor for particular MOS provides a valuable reference point for discussions of the pervasiveness of systems of inequality.

This exercise provides a framework for examination of the apparently "natural" preferences for and against certain MOS. Through discussion of the "data," it should become clear that these preferences are not natural but rather part of larger societal processes.

Note

The authors wish to thank Kaniqua L. Robinson for her keen eye and thorough editorial assistance.

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Appendix: Results of Fall 2005 Administration

Speech	*Negative Rating*	*Positive Rating*	*Difference*	*Negative Comments*	*Positive Comments*
Asian accent	2	2	0	difficult to understand	smart, humble, helpful, non-western, hopefully communist
Aussie	1	0	-1	makes me think about Australia (Red Hag)	
Boston	6	2	-4	loser, weakling, coward, cry baby, rude (2), mean, racist	well educated, proper, Ivy League
British accent	1	22	21	imperialism	intelligent(5), educated(4), elegant(2), proper(3), friendly(2), smart, articulate, sophisticated, trustworthy, funny, literate, witty
British English	2	3	1	annoying(2), funny	educated(2), business minded, serious, intelligent
Brooklyn	6	1	-5	no home training, irritating, just don't like it, violent(2), tough, dangerous, arrogant	cocky, confident
Castillian Spanish	1	2	1	uppity	friendly, intelligent
Chicago	3	3	0	low down, grimy	hood, respectful
Compton	2	0	-2	gangs, ridiculous	
Country	19	12	-7		love, original, different, well educated, truthful, sweet(2), simplistic, caring, strong, hospitable, nurturing
Creole	2	0	-2	voodoo, blood in red food	
Dutch	1	0	-1	harsh	
Ebonics	20	3	-17	ignorant(5), ghetto(3), stupid(2), poor, niggerish, uneducated(5), violent, hood, mislead, lazy, loud, country	well educated, strong
French	2	9	7	aggressive, rude	smooth, beautiful, sexy, sophisticated(2), intelligent, confident
French accent	0	3	3		lover, sophisticated, romantic(2), beautiful
Geechie	3	0	-3	hard to understand(2), slow, unclear, bombed out, depleted	
German	4	4	0	anti-semetic, (neo) Nazi, skinhead, harsh	familiar, firm, powerful, smart
Gullah	2	1	-1	Lazy, uneducated(2)	culturally rich
Italian	1	2	1	fighter	intelligent, beautiful people, sexy
Italian accent	0	4	4		educated, creative, artistic, historic, sweet, kind, romantic, close family
Jamaican accent	2	7	5	incomprehensible, hard to understand	nice, Bob Marley, warm, strong, exciting, gregarious, sexy
Jersey	0	2	2		northern
L.A. accent	2	1	-1	ignorant	
Mexican accent	7	0	-7	dumb, illegal immigrants(2), greasy babies, dirty, poor, uneducated	
New York	9	10	1	rude(3), liar, nonchalant, grimy, cocky	sexy(2), love, honest, sophisticated, proper, smooth, real, street wise, northern
Philly Accent	0	1	1		hometown
Pig Latin	5	0	-5	ignorant, confused on meaning, don't know what it is	
Southern	4	17	13	slow, fake, ignorant	nice(2), classy, privileged, friendly, home, homey, comfortable, relaxed, familiar, hospitality, proper, pleasant, sweet, belle
Spanish	2	5	3	difficult to learn, no order	familiar, beautiful(3), educated(2), romantic, lovng
Spanish accent	0	3	3		exotic, sex, Latin lover
Standard English	3	12	9	weak, stiff, dry	proper(2), professional, organized, educated(7), friendly, intelligent(2), mostly white people speak or other races
Texas Accent	6	0	-6	Bush, slow, cowboy lick, racist, "G.W."	
Valley Girl	11	0	-11	annoying(2), superficial, dizzy, airhead(4), slow	
Yiddish	3	0	-3	Jewish, Jesus killers, mixed language	