6 Language, racialization, and racism

No MSG

In 1968, Dr. Robert Ho Man Kwok wrote a letter to the prestigious *New England Journal of Medicine* to describe what he believed to be a new illness he dubbed *Chinese restaurant syndrome* (Kwok 1968). He reported that, unlike food he had eaten in China, the food at American Chinese restaurants made his neck go numb and caused heart palpitations. The journal soon began receiving more reports from individuals reporting their own experiences of a variety of symptoms that were attributed to Chinese restaurant syndrome. Although the disorder was first described by a Chinese immigrant, the overwhelming majority of those who suffered from Chinese restaurant syndrome were white. A study the following year in *Science* purported to have found the cause of this illness – monosodium L-glutamate, or MSG (Olney 1969). Soon people were avoiding Chinese food or demanding that restaurants prepare their food without MSG, and restaurants began to advertise as "No MSG" establishments. The idea that MSG was a dangerous chemical that could make one sick soon became widely accepted. But there were several problems with this idea.

The human tongue is sensitive to five distinct tastes: sweet, salty, sour, bitter, and umami (which is roughly similar to *savory* in English and might best describe something like cheese). Unlike "salty" or "sour," however, the majority of people who were not Asian were unfamiliar with the notion of umami and thus did not understand the purpose of MSG. Because of its ability to enhance taste, MSG is widely used in many commonplace processed foods like crackers, potato chips, and corn chips. However, nobody ever complained of experiencing "post-Doritos syndrome." Somehow, MSG only made people sick when used in Chinese cuisine.

In the half century since Chinese restaurant syndrome was first "described," there have been many scientific studies of the illness, yet there is still no conclusive evidence that MSG causes any of the symptoms commonly associated with the illness (Freeman 2006; Tracy 2016). It turns out that MSG is no more harmful than salt, and the symptoms associated with Chinese restaurant syndrome are entirely psychosomatic. Chinese restaurant syndrome is not a medical condition but rather a psychological expectation based within a history of racist stereotyping. So the cause of Chinese restaurant syndrome is not MSG but racist stereotypes of Chinese people as being dirty and having poor hygiene that leads to the spread of disease. The source of Chinese restaurant syndrome is the fear that one's food was prepared by Asians with poor hygiene and dirty kitchens. Racism can make you physically ill.

Compare sodium chloride (or salt) to monosodium L-glutamate (MSG). Salt has a long history of associations in European culture, and English contains many expressions that

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Figure 6.1 Chinese restaurants still promote "No MSG" food
Source: photo by Richard Masoner

convey indexical associations to salt (*salt of the earth, salt in the wound, take it with a grain of salt, salt and pepper hair*). One can think of MSG in the 1960s as a sign that is relatively "empty" of indexical associations, especially for those unfamiliar with Asian cuisine or umami. When faced with a new concept, individuals seek to fill in indexical associations in order to understand that concept. Without experiences to draw on, people tend to fill in missing indexical meanings using stereotypes that are already familiar to them. In American society, the most familiar social stereotypes tend to be those that have histories rooted in racism. In the case of MSG, people unfamiliar with the seasoning interpreted MSG in terms of racist stereotypes of Chinese Americans as unclean, living in crowded spaces, and likely to spread disease.

Contradictions in stereotypes

The use of blatant racist stereotypes of Asians, Native Americans, and African Americans to market soap often relied on contradictory stereotypes of minorities as "dirty" yet also particularly skilled at jobs cleaning for other people. This contradictory racism is also present in contemporary representations of Latinxs. In the late 1800s, the idea of the "Chinese laundry" was widespread, and Chinese Americans were seen as being especially skilled at cleaning clothing and linens. Ads for laundry soap often portrayed

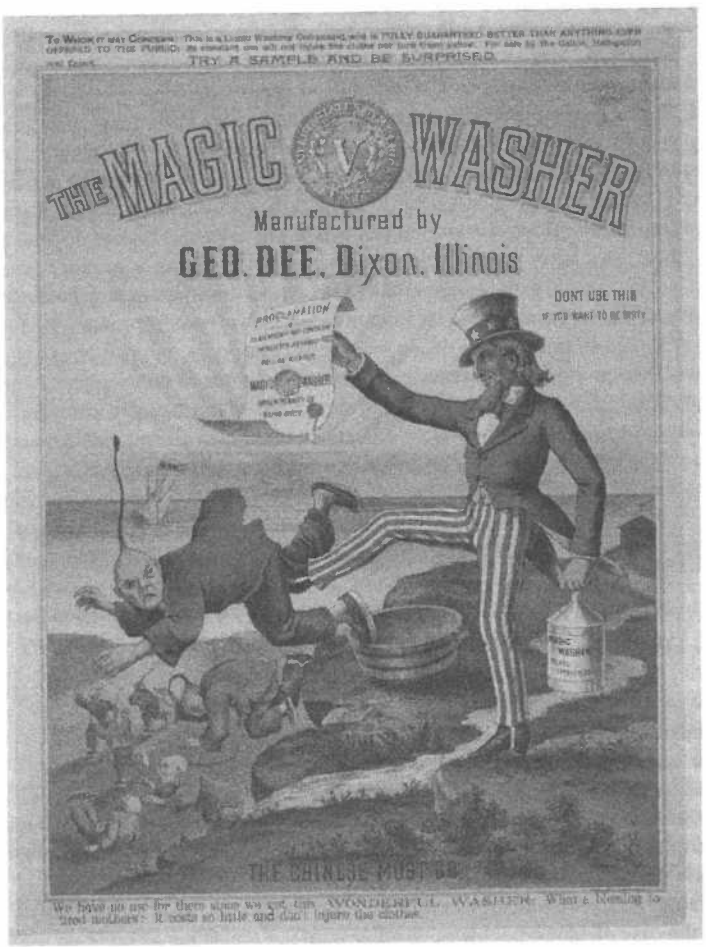

Figure 6.2 Magic Washer advertisement
Source: archived by the Library of Congress

Asians as preferring a particular brand to suggest that the brand is the choice of professionals. However, Asians were simultaneously portrayed as "dirty." Representations of African Americans were similar with dish soap advertisements using recommendations from Black housekeepers, while bath soap was marketed as somehow unfamiliar to Black people. These contradictory stereotypes are apparent in the Magic Washer ad in Figure 6.2.

The ad appeared shortly after the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed in 1882. The proclamation Uncle Sam is holding reads "under penalty for being dirty," implying that the Chinese were being kicked out of the country because they are "dirty." However, the caption reads, "we have no use for them now that we got this wonderful washer," implying that Magic Washer gets your clothes as clean as the local Chinese-run laundry, so Uncle Sam can kick Chinese immigrants out of the country. In discourse structural racism, such illogical contradictions can easily co-exist because racism, like most forms of hatred, depends on creating visceral responses that defy logic.

Of course, people who believed they had suffered from Chinese restaurant syndrome were not necessarily racists, and most probably never made a conscious connection between their experiences with MSG and racist stereotypes concerning Asians. Often, discourses that reproduce racist stereotypes are so pervasive that people might not even be aware when they evoke them. Saying that Chinese food tends to make you sick is not typically interpreted as a racist statement even though it evokes (and buttresses) centuries of negative representations of Asians. Such racist representations have been repeated often enough that they become second nature. Discourse structural racism often displaces racist tropes so that they come to be linked to issues unrelated to race (e.g., health, hygiene, politeness norms, grammar). Chinese restaurant syndrome typically went unrecognized as a form of racism because it is "about" MSG, not "about" race itself. Yet with the spread of Chinese restaurant syndrome, MSG entered into the broader discourse promoting racism toward Asians.

One can say that MSG has undergone *racialization*, the process by which objects, ideas, individuals, or social practices come to be drawn into racial discourses. In other words, an inanimate object (MSG) marked a point of presumed difference between the cooking practices of two cultures, and the actual reasons for that difference were largely unknown. This made it fairly easy for MSG to become indexically linked to pre-existing racist stereotypes associated with food, health, and hygiene. Through the repetition of indexical links between Chinese cuisine and illness, MSG and Chinese restaurant syndrome become part of discourse structural racism, the broad set of social Discourses that uphold racial division and social inequality.

Patterns of language variation often undergo this process of racialization. We have already seen that variation and change are intrinsic and functional aspects of language. Just as patterns of variation may cluster in particular regions, they may also cluster within communities that share other aspects of identity, including ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, class, and so on. Consider the distinction between *she working* and *she be working* in the Englishes of many African American communities. Prescriptivist criticisms of African American speech

"~~Corona~~ Chinese Virus"

In times of crisis, it is common for marginalized groups to become scapegoats, where they are wrongly blamed for acts of nature. For example, the 1918 "Spanish Influenza" epidemic was blamed on Spaniards even though the disease first emerged in Kansas. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019 saw a rise in racial harassment and hate crimes against Asian Americans. Obviously, Asian Americans were no more connected to the virus than any other groups of Americans. However, the rise in racism was linked to the fact that the virus first emerged in China. As with MSG, the racism associated with COVID-19 drew upon long-standing stereotypes of Asians as living in unsanitary conditions and eating bizarre foods. Rather than discussing the fact that viruses can mutate and move from species to species, popular discourse about COVID-19 often attempted to explain the virus through racist portrayals of Chinese people in crowded dirty markets eating bats, snakes, or pangolins.

In March of 2020, the President of the United States gave a speech in which the phrase "corona virus" had been marked out and replaced with "Chinese virus." When critics suggested that using the phrase "Chinese virus" was racist, the President said he was simply referring to the place where the virus originated. This was also his explanation for using the term kung flu, which many found even more insulting.

rarely recognize the meaning and purpose of this distinction (marking progressive vs. habitual aspect) and simply interpret both forms as "bad English." For many white people, such variations in grammar are understood largely in terms of racial bias. Rather than indicating aspectual meanings unavailable in "standard" English (like *be working*), such forms are simply described as "wrong" – they are examples of "bad English." Understandings of what "bad English" might imply simply repeat long-standing racist stereotypes; it is the language of the poor, inner city, uneducated, and so on. Basic patterns of linguistic variation get swept up into the storm of pre-existing Discourses of race. However, just as Chinese restaurant syndrome is supposedly "about" MSG (and not race), the racism of prescriptive grammar is typically viewed as being "about" language (and not race). Here, language ideologies not only help racist ideas propagate; they also serve as racist gatekeepers restricting access to employment and education for speakers of undervalued Englishes.

As we saw in Chapter 2, race is a belief system rather than a biological reality. Because of this, the idea of racial differences survives through Discourse. Language is therefore central to the process of racialization. In addition to the formation and persistence of social categories (as also discussed in Chapter 2), racialization refers to the process by which different ways of speaking and interacting come to be linked to racial categories and to serve as indexical markers of racial and ethnic identities. Next, we will look at the linguistic variation associated with different racial/ethnic groups and consider how that variation comes to index aspects of racial stereotypes. We will then examine the role of this variation in upholding discourse structural racism, including how beliefs about variation reproduce racial differences and support forms of social inequality.

Race, ethnicity, and linguistic variation

In Chapter 2 we saw how social categorizations are constructed through language. Although the concept has no biological basis, *race* is typically presumed to be an innate set of physical traits. In contrast, ethnicity refers to a person's cultural heritage without implying some connection to the imagined biological similarity between members of a given group. Members of the same "race" may have different "ethnicities," so that the terms are sometimes used in a hierarchical fashion with "ethnicities" (Jamaican American, Irish American) being subsets of "races" (Black, white, etc.). Such hierarchies contribute to Discourse structural racism by reinforcing the categorization of individuals on the basis of physical attributes like skin color. In this chapter, our usage attempts to reflect current social norms for treating particular categories as "races" or "ethnicities" but is sometimes left ambiguous to highlight the fact that such distinctions are linguistic (and not biological) constructions.

People who see themselves as belonging to a shared social identity typically come to share rules of grammar, ways of interacting in conversations, and ways of telling stories or jokes. Just as variation clusters into regional dialects (see Chapter 5), forms of variation may cluster within ethnic groups, particularly when members of the groups are in close, regular contact with one another. Because language is always changing, there are always changes that come to index different social groups. Forms of racial segregation and integration can contribute to the emergence of racial/ethnic varieties. An example is American Sign Language (ASL) in the South, where schools for the deaf were segregated by race. A distinct dialect known as Black American Sign Language developed during this time. Now that education for the deaf is no longer racially segregated, the use of Black ASL has declined (McCaskill et al. 2011). A very similar pattern occurred in Ireland where a unique dialect spoken by women emerged in schools that were segregated according to gender. Just as with Black ASL, the use of Women's Irish Sign Language declined after the schools became gender integrated (LeMaster 2006). Such patterns of integration and segregation influence the development and persistence of variation that indexes racial and ethnic identities.

One common pattern in the United States is for variation associated with ethnic identities to develop from contact between English and other languages. It is common for immigrant communities to shift to English across generations. The first generation of immigrants may not be fluent in English, but their children are typically bilingual, speaking both English and their parents' language. The third generation (the grandchildren of the original immigrants) is typically monolingual in English, but they may retain some forms from their grandparents' language. For this third generation, there may only be a few words that index ethnic identity. So, for example, an Italian American might call a colander a *scolapasta* or a Filipino American might know a good recipe for *lumpia*, but knowledge of a few words in your grandparents' language is quite different from speaking a unique ethnic dialect.

Of course, there are also many communities who maintain a language other than English over long periods and multiple generations. Examples include many Native American languages, Spanish, and Yiddish. In such communities with long histories of bilingualism, there are often unique ethnic varieties of English resulting from contact between English and the other language. In such cases of sustained bilingualism, ethnic dialects of English are likely to contain more borrowings from the other language. Sustained bilingualism also increases the likelihood that elements of grammar will reflect a history of language contact. For example, the English of Jewish Americans may include borrowings from Yiddish, like *yutz* (clueless person), while monolingual Latinx speakers of English may regularly use words that originated in Spanish, such as *chancla* (flip-flop), *to pica* (to be spicy, to prick, or to sting),

or *pedo* (fart). But the varieties of English in Latinx communities may also show patterns of grammar that overlap with patterns found in Spanish. An example would be the following sentence from Chicanx English in Texas:

1.

Chicanx English (Texas)	**Spanish**
He's not doing you nothing.	Él no te hace nada. (literally) He not you doing nothing.

This example demonstrates two grammatical patterns that overlap between Chicanx English and Spanish. The first pattern is multiple negation (also called negative concord), a pattern in many languages in which negation can be marked in multiple places in a sentence. As noted in Chapter 5, the presence of negative concord is common in many undervalued Englishes (e.g., *I don't want no help*, *He don't like nobody*, *She didn't say nothing*). The other pattern involves the placement of the indirect object *you*. In both English and Spanish, indirect objects may appear next to the main verb or in a prepositional phrase following the verb:

2.

"standard" English	**Spanish**
a. She didn't give me anything.	Ella no me dio nada. (literally) She no me gave nothing.
b. She didn't give anything to me.	Ella no dio nada a mí. (literally) She no gave nothing to me.

In both languages, some verbs allow both patterns, and other verbs only allow one or the other. For example, in many varieties of English, the verb *to say* is only grammatical when the indirect object is in a prepositional phrase: *He didn't say anything to me* vs. **He didn't say me anything*. In example 1, the verb *to do* allows both types of indirect object (where "standard" English would require a prepositional phrase – *do anything to me*).

Although these two features of Chicanx English overlap with Spanish, they also reflect common patterns of language change. As noted in Chapter 5, negative concord is one of the most common features across undervalued Englishes. The other pattern (using the dative indirect object with a verb like *to do*) is an example of regularizing a pattern that differs across verbs. This is similar to the merger between past tense forms and past participles also discussed in Chapter 5, such as in *(has) broken* > *(has) broke*. Whether they emerge from contact or due to regular patterns of language change, it is important to recognize that patterns of linguistic variation have unique histories and follow regular rules of grammar.

Linguists often talk about ethnic/racial dialects as if they were distinct entities like African American English, Chicanx English, or Jewish English. Of course, there is no direct correlation between linguistic structures and race or ethnicity. There are white speakers of African American English, just as there are many African Americans who do not speak the variety. In this book, terms like "African American English" refer to a set of linguistic forms that have the *potential* to index aspects of African American identity. For example, Navajo English is not a label that describes how *all* Navajo speak English. Rather, it is a set of grammatical forms that potentially index Navajo identity. Because ethnicity may be foregrounded in certain situations, individual speakers may utilize such features to very different degrees across contexts. Some speakers may use an ethnic variety across all contexts while others may show variation depending on factors such as who one is talking to or what one is talking about.

One way of thinking about variation across contexts is to view speakers as having a "repertoire" of ethnic-associated forms that may be used to convey ethnicity in different situations. Sarah Benor (2010) uses this model to discuss the ways that Jewish Americans use language variation across situations. For example, Jewish English has numerous borrowings from Yiddish that may not be familiar to gentiles. In situations where Jewish identity is highlighted, speakers are likely to use Yiddish borrowings at a higher frequency. White suburban teenage boys may use elements of African American English in an attempt to index aspects of their masculinity. However, they typically have a much narrower repertoire of African American English forms compared to speakers who are actually from African American communities.

As we'll see, the types of linguistic variation that index ethnic identities, as is the case with regional dialects, occur at all levels of grammar, including what words one uses, how particular words are pronounced, how words and sentences are put together, and ways to convey subtle distinctions in meaning.

Ethnicity-indexing variation: words and sounds

Like all languages, ethnic varieties have sets of words (lexicons) and regular, rule-governed grammars. In ethnic dialects, distinct words may involve things borrowed from another language, such as the presence of Spanish borrowings in varieties of Latinx Englishes or Hebrew and Yiddish borrowings in Jewish English. These borrowings are words used by monolingual speakers of English and sometimes spread beyond their usage as markers of ethnicity. For example, there are large Yiddish-speaking Orthodox Jewish communities in Brooklyn. In these communities, Yiddish is used for religious (Talmudic) study so that speaking Yiddish may index being especially religious (Fader 2009). Given the strong indexical link between Yiddish and Jewish identity, English speakers who do not speak Yiddish may still use borrowings from the language to index Jewish identity. However, because of the large concentration of Yiddish speakers in New York City, some speakers who are not Jewish appropriate those Yiddish borrowings to index regional identity as a New Yorker. When a word comes to be used to index New Yorker rather than Jewish, the original indexical meaning begins to be lost. A number of Yiddish words have traveled this path on the way to becoming part of mainstream varieties of English with no connection to New York or Jewish identity. When an ethnic-indexing form falls into widespread use among outsiders, it will naturally begin to lose its original indexical meaning. When the association between a form and indexical meaning become weaker, linguists say that the form has undergone *indexical bleaching* (Squires 2014). Indexical bleaching is not restricted to forms appropriated from ethnic dialects. Any form that expands from being restricted to specific local contexts to occurring in widespread usage will undergo indexical bleaching as it loses associations with its original local context.

Table 6.1 shows some borrowings from Yiddish that have undergone different amounts of indexical bleaching. Different words have different histories, so the potential for different words to index Jewish (or New York) identity will vary widely. Some words (like *bubbe* for "grandmother") may maintain a strong connection to Jewishness, while others (like *schlep*) may come to index New Yorkness, and still others (like *glitch*) may have been completely bleached so that it has lost all indexical associations.

Another pattern is for English words to take on new and distinct meanings in ethnic varieties of the language. This is particularly common in African American English where several everyday words have unique meanings not generally found in "standard" English. An example would be the word *to stay*, which means "to reside (permanently)" in African American

Table 6.1 English borrowings from Yiddish

bubbe – grandma	nosh – to snack
chutzpah – confidence, nerve	putz – a fool
klutz – clumsy person	schmooze – to make small talk
kvetch – to complain, to whine	tchotchke – knick-knack
shmuck – a stupid or obnoxious, annoying person	tuchus – (also tush/tushy) rear end
schlepp – to haul or drag something (a long distance)	glitch – minor malfunction

Table 6.2 Some everyday words with additional meanings in African American English (AAE) (Smitherman 1994)

	Common meaning	*Additional AAE meaning*
ash	the remains of a burned substance	dry skin (especially *ashy*)
crib	special bed/cage for a baby	home
front	part of an object forward facing	(verb), to put on a false persona, especially in order to scam or trick people
kitchen	room where one cooks	lowest hair on the nape of one's neck
relax	to become less tense or anxious	to chemically straighten one's hair
word	lexical item	true, real, sign of agreement

English (e.g., *She stay in that big house on the corner of Oak Street*) but means "to reside (temporarily)" in "standard" English (*When she's in town, she stays with her sister*). In addition, there are many words in "standard" English that also have additional meanings in African American English. Some examples are in Table 6.2.

Ethnic variation in pronunciation follows regular patterns of language contact and language change. Sound patterns emerging from language contact often involve the introduction of patterns and distinctions from another language into English. For example, in Yiddish, the consonants /b, d, g/ become /p, t, k/ (respectively) at the end of words. Some monolingual speakers of Jewish speakers of English show this pattern in their English, like *wrong* pronounced as "wronk" [ɹɔnk] or *beard* pronounced like "beart" [bɪəɹt] (Benor 2009).

Ethnic-indexing variation in pronunciation may also result from regular sound change. One regular pattern involves changes in what counts as a possible syllable. English tends to allow complex strings of consonants at the end of syllables (e.g., *sixths* [sɪksθs]). Numerous dialects of English have restrictions on what can occur in this context. For example, African American and Native American Englishes may prohibit longer strings of consonants at the end of a word so that final /t/s and /d/s may not occur. There are also varieties that don't allow /r/ to end a syllable, a pattern sometimes found in African American English, Italian American English, and Jewish English, in addition to some regional varieties (see Chapter 10). Another common form of variation involves the interdental "th" sounds: [ð] as in *breathe* and [θ] as in *breath*. These sounds are relatively uncommon across the world's languages, so it is not particularly surprising to find dialects that replace them with other sounds. For example, in Latinx Englishes the [θ] sound may be replaced with [t], especially in words like *something*, *nothing*, or *anything*. In African American English, this same [θ] sound occurs at the beginning of words but alternates with [t] between vowels and is often realized as [f] word-finally. Similarly, in a number of ethnic dialects the [ð] sound alternates with [d] (as in *dis* and *dat* for *this* and *that*).

Some of the patterns of variation in ethnic varieties overlap with those found in regional varieties. Thus, for example, the absence of /r/ at the end of a syllable also indexes local regional identity in parts of New York and New England. Because of the influx of Southern African Americans to the North during the Great Migration, there is overlap between general Southern speech (among all ethnicities) and the speech of African Americans in the North. This overlap includes the pin/pen merger and monophthongization of the /ai/ diphthong (both discussed in Chapter 5).

Because indexical meanings depend on context, a pattern like the pin/pen merger may serve to evoke Southernness, Blackness, or both. Ethnic-indexing variation may also emerge through the ways in which minority groups orient toward sound changes associated primarily with white speakers. For example, among Arab American youth in Dearborn, Michigan, adoption of the pronunciations associated with the Northern Cities Shift (see Chapter 5) index distinctions within the local community, such as whether a person is Lebanese (Samant 2010). In comparing the vowel patterns of Chinese Americans in San Francisco and New York, Amy Wong and Lauren Hall-Lew (2014) found that speakers in both cities used patterns that were locally distinctive, but speakers in the two cities had much more in common with their local non-Chinese counterparts than with each other. Thus, it is important to bear in mind that ethnic dialects also show other forms of variation, including variation that indexes region, gender, social class, sexual orientation, and so on.

Ethnicity-indexing variation: sentences and meanings

In addition to their lexicons and sound systems, racial/ethnic dialects show variation both in terms of how words and sentences are put together and in the specific meanings of different verbal constructions. In terms of putting words together, variation often involves regularizing paradigms. One common pattern is the loss of the /+z/ with third person singular present tense verbs (*She digs* > *She dig*), a change found in numerous regional and ethnic dialects of English. Plural marking shows similar variation. In African American English, plural marking is optional when numbers make marking the plural redundant (e.g., *It was five book on the table*). It is also common for irregular plurals to be "fixed" to align with the regular pattern (e.g., *sheeps* in Navajo English). The possessive /+z/ suffix is also optional for some speakers of African American English (*Mary house ~ Mary's house*).

As with sound patterns, sentence structures may result from combinations of language contact and regular language change. Patterns of inversion in questions and subordinate clauses exhibit this. The standard patterns of inversion involve switching the subject and auxiliary in yes/no questions and wh-questions (who, what, where, when, why, and how). However, "standard" English generally prohibits this inversion in embedded clauses, as in the following example 3.

3. "She is going to the store"

   a. yes/no question: Is she going to the store?
   b. wh-question: Where is she going?
   c. embedded clause: I wonder where she is going.

This set of alternations shows very different patterns in some undervalued Englishes. In most varieties of English it is acceptable to produce a yes/no question without inversion (e.g., "You bought milk?"). For some speakers of Indian English (both in India and the United

States), all three forms can invert the subject and auxiliary or simply leave them alone with the auxiliary preceding the subject. Thus, a sentence like "Where she is going?" would be considered grammatical. In Chicanx English, inversion always occurs with wh-questions, but it also often occurs with embedded clauses. This is not surprising since Spanish allows inversion in embedded clauses. Some cases of variation in inversion originated with contact between the Irish language and English. In Irish, the word order of direct questions (such as in 4a) is the same as in indirect questions (such as 4b).

4. Irish question word order

a. *An* *raib* *tú* *sásta?*
Question Particle be-**Past** you-**SG** content?
"Were you content?" (O'Siadhail 1989: 321; cited in Filppula 2000: 448)

b. *Chuir* *se* *ceist* *ort* *an* *raibh* *tú* *sásta.*
Put he question on-you **Question Particle** be-**Past** you-**SG** content.
"He asked were you content."

In Irish English, alternation between inversion and non-inversion came to mark a distinction in meaning in embedded clauses. Cases where the embedded clause is inverted, as in Irish, indicate that the speaker is uncertain about whether the embedded clause might be true. Cases without inversion indicate that the speaker believes the embedded clause to be true. This pattern survives in Appalachian and Ozark regional varieties as well as in African American English (Barrett 2008). This pattern is demonstrated in example 5.

5. Examples from Ozark English (Barrett 2008)

a. I wonder where she is working.
"She definitely has a job, I just don't know where it is."
b. I wonder where is she working.
"I don't know if she has a job, but if she does I also don't know where it is."
c. I don't know where she goes to church.
"She goes to church, I just don't know where."
d. I don't know where does she go to church.
"I don't know if she goes to church, and if she does, I don't know where."

Irish and Scottish immigrants made up a large portion in the mountainous regions of central Appalachia (and subsequently the Ozarks), so it is not surprising that this distinction still occurs in these regions. This pattern from Irish American English also became a feature of African American English very early in the colonization of the future United States. The earliest enslaved people taken from Africa tended to work alongside indentured servants from Ireland, and today's African American English maintains several features that originated with Irish English. However, in many varieties of African American English, this distinction in meaning has been extended to cases of inversion in wh-questions. So a question like "Where your car is?" indicates that the speaker knows that the addressee has a car. Here, inversion ("Where is your car?") would indicate that the speaker did not know if the addressee actually has a car. Because of this distinction in meaning, some wh-questions usually occur without

inversion. For example, "What your name is?" makes more sense than "What is your name?" because the latter implies that the addressee might not have a name, and the odds of someone not having a name are pretty low.

These various patterns of inversion are outlined in Table 6.3. Regional and ethnic dialects may interact in complicated and interesting ways. Here, dialects differ both in terms of whether inversion is required/allowed in different contexts and in terms of whether inversion indicates a difference in meaning. This type of distinctive local meaning may go unrecognized by outsiders.

Some ethnic dialects, like Navajo English and African American English, have distinctive ways of expressing exactly how an action plays out across time. Grammars may convey the temporal aspects of an utterance as *tense* or *aspect*. Tense refers to the time when an action occurred (past, present, future), while aspect marks a relationship between an action and time. Aspect includes things like whether an action continued across time or happened quickly, whether an action occurs once or happens repeatedly, whether an action is starting or ending, and so on. In "standard" English, aspectual markers include past perfective (indicating that an action has ended, e.g., *She had run*) and imperfective (indicating that the action continued for some time, e.g., *She was running*). Ethnic varieties of English may mark forms of aspect (such as marking habitual or repeated actions) that aren't found in other dialects of English.

In Navajo, verbs mark aspectual meanings that are quite different from those found in European languages like English. A few of the many possible aspectual meanings include those in Table 6.4.

Compared to English verbs, Navajo verbs convey a wider range of aspectual meanings. One might say that English is more concerned with *when* an action occurred, and Navajo is more concerned with *how* an action takes place. Given that English doesn't have an easy way to convey the range of aspectual distinctions found in Navajo, it is not particularly surprising that Navajo speakers have ways of indicating these distinctions in English. For example, the Navajo usitative aspect indicates that an action was habitual. The usitative

Table 6.3 Inversion across varieties of English (after Young et al. 2014)

Variety	*Inversion in yes/no questions*	*Inversion in wh-questions*	*Inversion in embedded clauses*	*Inversion caries meaning?*
Indian American English	optional	optional	optional	no
African American English	optional	optional	optional	yes
Chicanx English	optional	required	optional	no
Appalachian/Ozark English	optional	required	optional	yes
Irish American English	optional	required	optional	yes
"Standard" English	optional	required	prohibited	no

Table 6.4 Some of the aspectual categories in Navajo (see Young and Morgan [1987])

iterative – an action that occurred repeatedly
usitative – an action that usually occurs (habitual)
momentaneous – an action that begins or ends in an instant
semelfactive – an action that occurs only once and isn't continued or repeated
durative – an action that occurs across an extended period

marks regularly occurring events – things that "usually" happen. Speakers of Navajo English may express this distinction by using present tense verbal forms to mark past events. This is a regular pattern in Navajo English and is not limited to native speakers of Navajo, but also occurs in the speech of (especially older) Navajos who are monolingual speakers of English. Consider the examples in 6, taken from student essays (Bartelt 1980):

6. Aspectual marking in Navajo English

   a. I was working in the store this summer . . . always I have to put in gas for the people; also I have to stack things on the shelf. Every after work I have to sweep the floor and clean the counter.
   b. I worked at Kaibito School. My position was clerical typist. I used to go to work 8 am to 12:00 and 1:00 to 5:00. also I worked overtime sometime, and my duties is to do typing and doing some secretary work.

In both examples, the authors are describing past events. However, when discussing the habitual actions that were part of their regular job duties, both authors switch to present tense verbs (*have* and *is*). Here, Navajo English has created a way to use English tense markers to indicate the usitative that occurs in Navajo.

Gullah English is another variety with distinct ways of marking habitual events. Gullah (also known as Geechee) is a variety of English spoken primarily along the coast of Georgia and South Carolina. Although most Gullah speakers are African American, Gullah is quite distinct from other varieties of African American English. Gullah and "standard" English are different enough that some linguists treat Gullah as a separate language from English (Schulz 2020).

"Kumbayah"/"Come by Here"

One example of Gullah that might be familiar is the Christian song "Come by Here," which is often known as "Kumbayah" (especially in white-majority churches). The "Kumbayah" version is meant to represent the phrase "come by here" in Gullah. So *kum* is just *come*, and *ba* is the word *by* with the monophthongization found in the South ([baɪ] < [ba:]). Finally, *here* is produced without a final /r/ as [hijə] which is then shortened to [ja:]. So the "Kumbayah" version is based on (racist) stereotypes of Gullah speakers. This may be why most Black churches sing the original "Come by Here" instead of "Kumbayah."

Gullah has many borrowings from African languages and distinct grammatical patterns. For example, Gullah uses a distinctive set of personal pronouns, as seen in Table 6.5. Most of the pronouns are based on English forms, except for *una* (sometimes spelled "oona"), which is African in origin (and is also used in Jamaican English/Patwa).

Aspectual marking is one of the distinct patterns found in Gullah English (see Table 6.6). For example, Gullah marks habitual actions with the auxiliary *da* (< English *do*). Past tense is marked with the auxiliary *been*, which can be combined with *da* (to *beena*) to mark habitual actions in the past tense.

Table 6.5 Gullah personal pronouns (see Mufwene 2004)

Person	*Gullah form*	*Examples*
1st singular: I, me, my	mi	Mi go ta town. (I go to town.) Dey mi dog. (Those are my dogs.)
2nd singular: you, your	una (oona)	Una go ta town. (You go to town.) Dey una dog. (Those are your dogs.)
3rd singular subject, possessive he/she/it/singular they	e (IPA [i])	E go ta town. (She/he/they goes to town.) Dey e dog. (Those are his/her/their dogs.)
3rd singular object him/her/it/ singular them	im (IPA [ɪm])	Mi done help im. (I had helped him.)
1st plural (we/us/our)	wi (IPA [wi])	Wi go ta town. (We go to town.) E done help wi. (He helped us.)
2nd plural (y'all)	una (or oona)	Una go ta town. (Y'all go to town.) Dey una dog. (They are y'all's dogs.)
3rd plural subject, possessive (they/their)	dey	Dey done help mi. (They helped me.) Mi dey breda. (I am their brother.)
3rd plural object (them)	dem	Mi done help dem. (I helped them.) Mi see dem. (I see them.)

Table 6.6 Some aspectual markers in Gullah (see Mufwene 2004)

ø (no auxiliary) – present tense	E wok. (She/He/They are working.)
da – habitual aspect	E da wok. (She/He/They usually work.)
done – completive aspect	E done work. (She/He/They has finished working.)
been – past tense	E been wok. (He worked.)
gwine – potential/future	E gwine wok. (He will work.)
beena – past habitual	E beena wok. (She/He/They used to work.)

The emergence of Gullah involved contact between a number of different languages and dialects. Languages that emerge from contact across languages in this way are often referred to as Creole languages. Although the term Creole captures the multilingual origins of languages labeled as such, recent research suggests that Creoles do not share any common set of grammatical features. Thus, Creoles are better considered varieties of their lexifier languages (the ones that contribute the most words) rather than being part of some distinct group of contact languages (e.g., DeGraff 2005; Blasi et al. 2017).

The Gullah version of the New Testament

Gullah combines elements of African languages with elements of English to create new grammatical structures. Because Gullah is primarily spoken (and usually not written), spellings for Gullah vary widely. In the Gullah translation of the Bible, for instance, some words are spelled to reflect Gullah pronunciation, while other words (like *gwine* for "going") are spelled in ways similar to literary representations of African American language (like Mark Twain or Joseph Chander). It is important to remember that it is a regular language with its own grammatical rules that are distinct from other varieties

of English. The following is the story of the birth of Christ from the Gullah New Testament, (Luke 2: 8–12). The first two sentences are the Gullah translation of "And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night." Can you figure out the other sentences?

> Now some shephud been dey een de fiel dat night. Dey beena stay dey, da mind dey sheep. Den one angel ob de Lawd appeah ta um. De night time done lightnin op jes like day clean broad. Cause ob dat, de shephud mos scaid ta det. Bot de angel tell um say, "Mus dohn feah! A hab good nyews wa gwine mek ebrybody rejaice. Cause A come fa tell oona, 'Right now, dis day, a Sabior done bon fa oona. E Christ de Lawd. An e bon een David town!' A gwine tell oona wa oona gwine see dey. Cause ob dat, oona gwine know A done tell oona de trute. Oona gwine find de chile wrop op een closs wa been teah eenta scrip, an e been led down een a trough."
>
> (American Bible Society 2005)

Another variety typically labeled as a Creole is Hawaiian (Creole) English, often called *Pidgin* by Hawaiians. Hawaiian English emerged in the later part of the 19th century on plantations where speakers of many different languages worked. The languages that have contributed to the emergence of Hawaiian English include Portuguese, Japanese, Hawaiian, Cantonese, and Tagalog. Similar to the verbal system of Gullah, Hawaiian English has a unique system for indicating tense and aspect, as shown in Table 6.7.

African American English is another variety that marks aspectual distinctions aside from those available in "standard" English. We have already seen how African American varieties of English may mark habitual actions with the auxiliary *be*. Some examples of this kind of habitual marking can be seen in Table 6.8.

The history of habitual marking in African American English is a highly debated issue among linguists. Some believe that habitual marking is due to the influence of Irish English

Table 6.7 Some tense/aspect markers in Hawaiian English (see Sakoda & Siegel 2003)

Form	*Meaning*
gon	future tense (> "going") e.g., Jawn gon bai buk. (John is going to buy a book.)
wen	past tense (> "went") e.g., Ai wen si om. (I saw him.)
yustu	habitual past (> "used to") e.g., Ai yustu plei futbawl. (I used to play football.)
pau	completive (> *pau*, "to finish" in Hawaiian) e.g., Hi wen pau work. (He has finished working.)
ste	progressive (ongoing action) e.g., Where yu ste go? (Where are you going?)
stat	inchoative (beginning of an action, > "start") e.g., Ai stat working. (I began working.)

Table 6.8 Habitual aspect in African American English (see Rickford and Rickford [2000])

She working.	"She is working right now."
She be working.	"She usually works."
She happy.	"She is happy right now."
She be happy.	"She is usually happy." (~ "She is a cheerful person.")

in the early colonial period, as the Irish habitual-marked expression *bíonn mé* occurs in Irish English as "does be" and similar forms. Newfoundland English, with its clearly documented influence from Irish English, for example, has habitual marking. Other linguists believe that habitual aspect emerged in African American English independently in the 20th century, while still others hold that the habitual/non-habitual distinction is retained from African languages. A number of languages from West Africa mark habitual aspect; the distinction is also found in most of the varieties of English and French spoken by African diasporic populations throughout the Caribbean (for a fuller discussion, see Rickford & Rickford 2000; Wolfram & Thomas 2008).

In addition to marking habitual aspect, African American English verbs convey additional aspectual distinctions. For example, the stressed auxiliary been (as in *I BEEN hungry*, in which case the capital letters here indicate that the main stress in the sentence goes on that word) marks an event that began a long time ago and continues up to the present. Thus, "He BEEN married" would mean that he has been married for a long time (and still is). The unstressed counterpart operates similarly to *been* in other varieties of English (He been married ~ He has been married). African American English also marks the aspect linguists call *inchoative*, which indicates that an action is just beginning or is about to begin. In African American English, this aspect is marked with *finna* or *fi'na* ([fɪʔnə]), a form also found (often as "fixin to") among white and Latinx speakers in the Southern United States.

No MSG, no lazy grammar

This discussion of the structure of ethnic varieties demonstrates the range of diversity found across varieties of English. All forms of ethnicity-indexing variation follow regular, logical rules of grammar. However, many people treat this variation as simply "bad" or "wrong" English. Negative evaluations of ethnic variation are often patronizing, showing pity or concern for the poor children who have been "deprived" of proper grammar. Thus, rather than teach white children to understand other varieties of English, American culture expects all children to adopt a uniform way of speaking (that could be considered similar, in some respects, to how most white people speak). This "standard language privilege" (Queen 2019) operates in the same way as "white privilege." Like whiteness, "standard" English is considered unmarked (that is, it is assumed to be the norm) so that people who present themselves as monodialectal speakers of some kind of "standard" English are not thought of as indexing whiteness but rather simply as speaking "English."

In the case of Chinese restaurant syndrome, people (who didn't really know what MSG was) used MSG to index a wide range of racist stereotypes against Asians (as dirty and likely to spread illness). People who suffered from Chinese restaurant syndrome felt severe pain, even though there was no medical basis for their symptoms. This demonstrates how deeply rooted discourse structural racism in American culture. When people don't understand something, they often fall back on stereotypes.

To make matters worse, the same racist stereotypes get applied to almost any aspects of life, including things like clothing choices, musical preferences, and ways of speaking. Often, if some sort of social practice is common among members of some minority group, that practice will also come to index pre-existing racist stereotypes. We have talked about this process of *symbolic revalorization* in which some social practice (like language) comes to stand in for more conventional (and obvious) forms of racism.

Examples of racist stereotypes being connected to social practices which results in real-world implications for those involved can frequently be seen in the news. In 2014, a white Florida man fired multiple shots into a car of young African American men, killing 17-year-old Jordan Davis, who was riding in the back seat. The man's explanation for murder was that the young men in the car had been playing loud "thug music" (Grimes 2019). The actual type of music itself doesn't matter; the motive was the race of the men listening to it. If young Black men only listened to 18th-century opera music then opera would likely be categorized as "thug music."

Clothing styles are another place where symbolic revalorization often occurs. In cases where police murder young Black men, it is common to see references to the fact that the victim was wearing a hoodie (see Figure 6.3). Of course, nothing about a hoodie alone ought to be relevant to a murder case. Giving attention to the clothing a murder victim was wearing only comes to make sense once that clothing has come to index racist stereotypes of those who choose to wear it. In other words, hoodies come to index "dangerous" or "violent" behavior through an illogical and warped analogy: young Black men like to wear hoodies, and young Black men are dangerous, therefore, a person wearing a hoodie is dangerous.

Symbolic revalorization of clothing is nothing new. In the 1940s, the indexical meanings associated with hoodies today were applied to zoot suits, a style of men's suit with a long (just above the knee) jacket and extremely baggy pants. The zoot suit style was especially popular among young Black, Chicano, and Filipino men. In California, the zoot suit came to index stereotypes of young Filipino and Chicano men as dangerous gang members. In addition, the baggy style of the suit was seen as "unpatriotic" because it used extra fabric during World War II, when people were rationing things like fabric to aid in the war effort. In Los Angeles in June 1943, there was an altercation between a group of white sailors and a group of Chicano men in zoot suits that sparked a series of riots. For five days, gangs of white men attacked young Chicanos (as well as some Filipino and African American young men) who happened to be wearing zoot suits. In many cases, the rioters attacked the suits themselves, destroying the clothes, and, in some cases, leaving victims nearly naked in the street. The majority of people arrested (see Figure 6.4) during the violence were young Chicano men. The Los Angeles City Council eventually passed a resolution making it illegal to wear a zoot suit because the suits were seen as a marker of being a "hoodlum" (Bruns 2014). Of course, the clothes themselves weren't the problem. The problem was the race of the people who wore them.

This same process of symbolic revalorization is evident in the reception of ethnic varieties of English. Ethnic variation is an important sociolinguistic resource. It allows people to convey their personal history and heritage through the language they speak. Ethnic varieties may also convey distinctions in meaning that do not align with those of "standard" English. When faced with subtle semantic distinctions that they do not recognize (like the use of habitual aspect), prescriptivists remain proudly ignorant of the meaning involved and reject the utterance entirely as "bad" grammar. Indeed, prescriptivist ideologies could be viewed

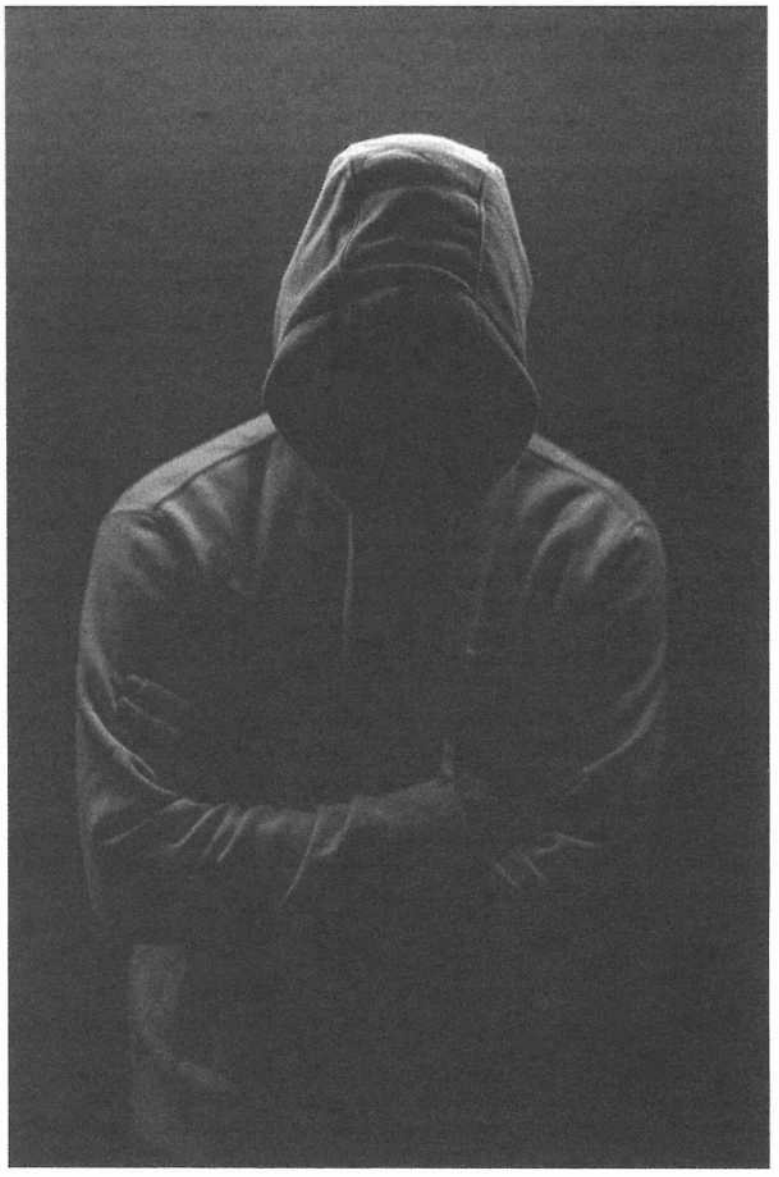

Figure 6.3 The hoodie has come to index racist stereotypes of young Black men as dangerous
Source: photo by Philipp Lansing

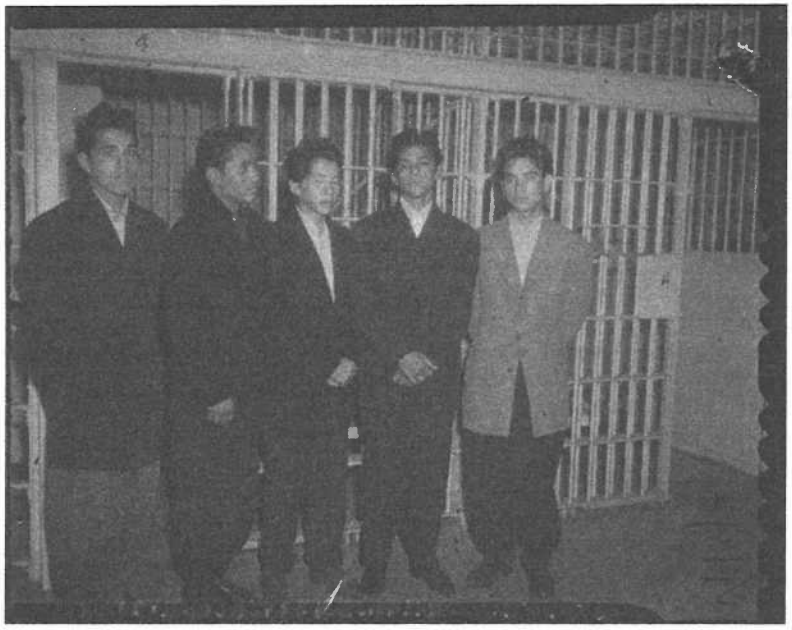

Figure 6.4 Young men arrested during the zoot suit riots in Los Angeles, 1943
Source: UCLA Charles E. Young Research Library Department of Special Collections

as part of a larger system of discourses that maintain white control over public spaces (Hill 1998). Through symbolic revalorization, language ideologies that denigrate ethnic dialects substantially contribute to structural racism in American culture.

Language, interaction, and ethnic inequality

In addition to differences in patterns of grammatical variation, communities have specific interactional norms, or what linguist Deborah Tannen calls "interactional styles." Interactional styles include things like how loudly people speak, the distance maintained between speakers, the amount of overlapping speech in a conversation, and the ways in which conversations are expected to proceed. For example, compared to most white communities, the volume of speech may be higher among African Americans, Latinx Americans, Jewish Americans, Italian Americans, and South Asian Americans. For people unfamiliar with this cultural difference, this louder volume may be an "empty" indexical that gets "filled in" with stereotypes. Of course, since stereotypes of different ethnic groups differ, the indexical meanings associated with the same sign, e.g., louder volume, creaky voice (see Chapter 4), etc., will vary across contexts. For Italian Americans, this louder volume may be interpreted as reflecting a passionate and emotional personality, while for African Americans and Latinx Americans, it might be interpreted as indexing a violent, threatening personality. As these

sorts of indexical associations become entrenched, language ideologies come to mirror ideologies of race (or gender, or class, or sexuality, etc.).

Differences in interactional styles may also refer to the linguistic norms about when it is appropriate to speak and when it is best to remain silent. For example, the Western Apache avoid speaking in certain culturally specific contexts (Basso 1970). For example, people who meet for the first time remain silent for some time, waiting to speak until they have reached a point where they feel like they know each other. Similarly, when two people begin a romantic relationship, they also maintain silence until they become more acquainted with each other. When a child comes home from college, for example, parents and siblings would maintain silence until it was clear that the returning child had not changed while away. People also maintain silence around those who are depressed, angry, drunk, or suffering from mental illness. Those in these states are understood as not fully present in an interaction, such that interacting with them is seen as pointless. Of course, white American English speakers often find silence uncomfortable and feel the need to speak in order to avoid silent moments. For the Apache, an unfamiliar person who speaks excessively is seen as nervous and anxious. Too much talking is interpreted as a sign that a person is about to ask for some sort of favor. In turn, white people have often interpreted Apache silence as resulting from some negative stereotypes of Native Americans like "their primitive language makes it difficult for them to speak a complex language like English" or "their people are naturally cold and emotionally distant." We could just chalk this up to misunderstandings – one group views silence one way and another group views silence differently. And if that were the case and people could talk out the misunderstanding, there would be no concern. Yet because the silence is thought to be meaningful, each group fills in the indexical association with their own stereotypes of the other.

Although people reading this book understand that race has no biological foundation, scientists and physicians continue to consider race as a relevant factor in medicine. Some apps to help in diagnoses continue to use algorithms that punish patients who aren't white. The study of physical pain is a good example. Discourse structural racism has long promoted the myth that Black people feel pain at lower levels compared to white people. This bad idea probably emerged long ago, likely as an excuse for the brutal history of whippings, brandings, and other forms of pain inflicted on enslaved people. Scientists have attempted to determine if there were racial differences in experiencing pain (Woodrow et al. 1972), and, when combined with the discursive stereotype of Black people as less sensitive to pain, results of such studies lead white physicians to believe that when Black people complain about pain they are somehow exaggerating the extent of their suffering. In expressions of pain, racist stereotypes may override more conventional indexical meanings, so that saying "ouch" fails to successfully convey its usual association with pain. Because of the myth that Black people exaggerate expressions of pain, it is still the case that while white patients are often given pain relievers immediately upon complaining about their pain, Black patients must ask repeatedly before their pain is treated. More recent research using brain scans to study the issue suggests that, in African American patients, pain corresponds to brain activity associated with chronic pain, particularly the type of chronic pain found in individuals who have suffered extreme stress or trauma, particularly for long periods (Losin et al. 2020). Thus, while norms for interaction might explain part of the ethnic differences in experiencing pain, it may well be that the unavoidable stress and trauma caused by constant experiences of racial discrimination may cause the brain to adapt in ways that increase experiences of pain.

Serena Williams and the (dis)belief in Black pain

On September 1, 2017, in West Palm Beach, Florida, tennis superstar Serena Williams gave birth to her daughter, Alexis. Years before, in March of 2011, Williams had undergone emergency treatment for a pulmonary embolism, a blood clot in the lungs. These clots form elsewhere in the body and ultimately lodge themselves in the lungs causing shortness of breath, severe pain like that of a heart attack, and coughing (often with blood). When Williams began experiencing these symptoms the day after Alexis was born via Cesarean section she quickly alerted a nurse.

While gasping for air, she explained to the nearest nurse what she was experiencing and requested "a CT scan and intravenous heparin (a blood thinner) right away." The nurse thought perhaps Williams was simply confused because of the pain medication she was already receiving, but Williams was insistent. After a series of missteps, which included an ultrasound of Williams' legs, the hospital did eventually order a CT scan of her lungs which revealed several small clots that had settled in her lungs. Having previously had an embolism, pregnancy, surgery, and bed rest are all risk factors for a pulmonic embolism. Williams had experienced these symptoms before and knew not only the test but also the treatment that could save her life and mitigate her pain. Instead, the medical staff disregarded her words and treated her diagnosis as if beginning from scratch. The following day, although the embolism itself had been treated, Williams' coughing was so forceful that the sutures from her Cesarean section ruptured and had to be reclosed.

According to the CDC, 700 women die from pregnancy or childbirth related issues every year in the United States (19 in 100,000 pregnant women; giving the United States a ranking of 56th in the world in terms of maternal mortality, tied with Romania, Oman, Moldova, Latvia, and Ukraine). The CDC also conservatively estimates that 50,000 American women deal with dangerous or life-threatening pregnancy-related complications every year. Even within this group, Black women are three to four times more likely than white women to die from these same complications (Hoyert 2021).

These sorts of disparate treatment relate to failures for indexical meanings to be successfully understood. Children who speak ethnic dialects may be sent to speech therapy to "correct" their "deficient" English, employees are told to adjust their speech to mirror a white norm, and young men are murdered because their linguistic behavior is misunderstood as posing some sort of threat. Just as other kinds of misunderstandings have real consequences for real people, one must understand that these racially and ethnically-derived misunderstandings go beyond simple errors. They result in pain and death.

The linguistic variation associated with ethnic dialects is perhaps the most straightforward way of expressing one's ethnic identity. Correcting or attempting to change such speech only serves to deny, dismiss, and disrespect the identity of the speaker. Racist discourse may influence how indexical signs are interpreted. Because indexical meanings are always potential meanings, their interpretation can never be entirely controlled. As it is, patterns of

social discourse and language appropriation serve to impose negative indexical meanings onto forms of ethnic variation.

Language, race, appropriation, and whiteness

The treatment of ethnic varieties of English as simply "bad" English has a number of effects that directly contribute to discourse structural racism. Because language variation is how individuals express their identities, the enforcement of prescriptivism attempts to create public spaces and discourses reserved for white people (Hill 1998). Language variables indexically linked to ethnic identities are corrected, criticized, derided, and mocked across endless contexts. School children, college students, and employees are repeatedly told that their language (and, in turn, their identity) is "wrong." Because of different interactional styles, failing to interact according to an unmarked, unspoken, and largely undefined white norm can be deadly. This is especially true for those with conditions that make social interactions difficult, such as autism. Given that these norms for interaction are almost never discussed, people of color are constantly at risk of violating some interactional expectation and unknowingly indexing racist stereotypes. This risk helps public discourses focus on white people while marginalizing or erasing the experiences of people of color.

Same slur, different century

The cartoon in Figure 6.5 appeared in *Life* magazine in 1911. Within the racial ideology of the time, the category of "white people" was imagined as excluding all immigrants who weren't from Northern Europe, European immigrants who were Catholic or Jewish, and immigrants who were from Ireland or countries in southern, central, and eastern Europe (like Italy, Greece, Spain, Russia, Poland, Hungary, etc.). Although the racial ideologies have changed (so that Irish Americans and Italian Americans are now "white"), the racist discourse used to marginalize immigrants has remained fairly constant. The cartoon portrays an Italian American immigrant with the slur *wop*, a racist term to describe Italian immigrants that was shorthand for "without papers." This is basically the same slur found in terms like *illegal alien* or *wetback* (a racist slur for Mexican Americans, implying that they arrived without documentation by crossing the Rio Grande). The poem below the cartoon is written in Mock Italian American, with features like -a added to the ends of words that end in consonants. The text reproduces numerous prejudicial stereotypes of Italian Americans at the time: smelling of garlic, eating spaghetti, carrying a stiletto knife, and being skilled at being a bootblack (polishing shoes). Although the usual targets have changed over time, mocking of ethnic dialects or non-native accents continues to be a basic feature of racist discourse.

Racist language ideologies are also disseminated through forms that mock the language of communities of color. Humor "about" non-native accents or Black language (sometimes called Ebonics or Jive) often simply repeat racists jokes under the guise of laughing about language (Rickford & Rickford 2000). In some cases, old racist jokes are simply relabeled as "Ebonics jokes." This mocking use of Black language links stereotypes about Black

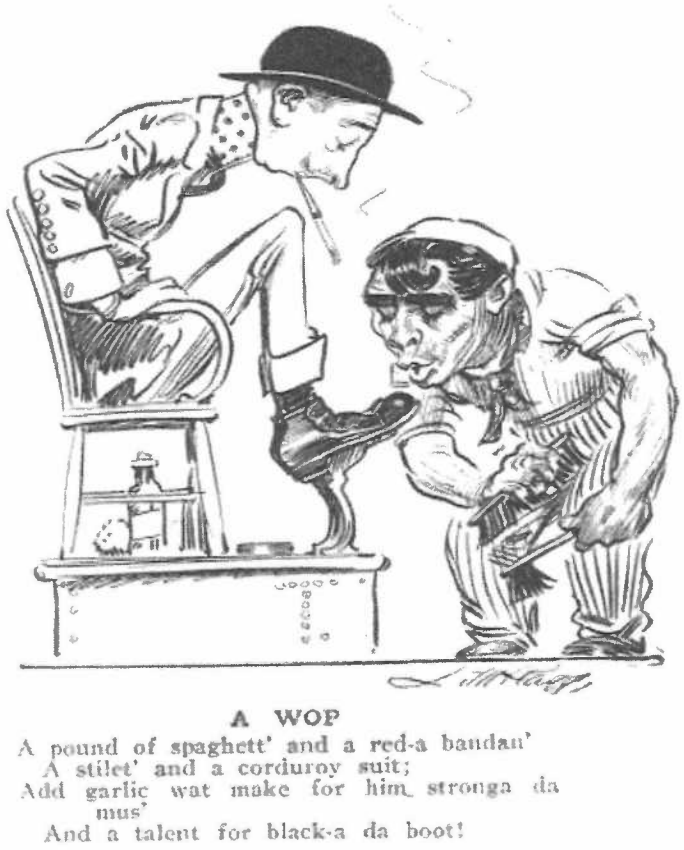

Figure 6.5 Anti-Italian cartoon from *Life* magazine

language with racist stereotypes of Black people. The grammar of mocking does not utilize the complex grammar of African American English and often includes ungrammatical forms. Rickford and Rickford (2000) give an example of one such joke, as seen in example 7.

7. Why were there only 49 contestants in the Miss Ebonics pageant?

   Nobody wanted to be Miss Idaho.

Here, the punch line ("Idaho" and "I da ho") is ungrammatical in African American English, where the first-person pronoun "I" always requires a form of the verb to be ("am"). By using the term "ho," the joke reproduces racist stereotypes about Black women despite the fact that the joke is "about" language. Similarly, websites that offer joke automated "translation" into ethnic dialects (like "Jive") regularly produce forms that are ungrammatical for actual

speakers of African American English. In particular, the racist bots repeatedly violate the rules for marking aspect in African American English (such as using habitual *be* to mark the simple present). The mocking demonstrates that prescriptivist ideologies are about something other than grammar.

Aunt Jemima

Indexical bleaching is common when the racist origins of popular texts and marketing campaigns come to be obscured over time. In the late 19th century, many products were marketed using representations drawn from the blackface minstrel shows that were popular at the time. The use of Minstrelese (the ancestor of Mock Ebonics) in advertising was quite popular for many years. For example, Uncle Remus Syrup brand syrup debuted in the 1920s with the ludicrous slogan, *Dis sho am good!* Over time, the indexical associations of many surviving minstrel tropes have been bleached.

An example can be found with the use of the Aunt Jemima character, as in Figure 6.6 (Manring 1998). In 2020, the brand decided to drop the Aunt Jemima character even though she had been redrawn several times over the years to make her less and less of a caricature and more like an actual woman. The character of Aunt Jemima originated in minstrel shows played by a white man in blackface and drag. Early advertisements for Aunt Jemima brand depicted this character and included the Mock Ebonics phrase *I'se in town, honey*. A woman named Nancy Green was hired to travel the country portraying Aunt Jemima (announcing her shows with billboards reading *I'se in town, honey*). Over time, the company has attempted to bleach the indexical associations of the racist context in which Aunt Jemima products emerged, but these racist associations with the original character could not be entirely erased.

Given the language ideological pressure to banish Blackness from public discourse, one might assume that white people entirely avoid forms that might index other ethnic identities. But the truth is that white people use Black language all the time. The strong indexical link between Black language and the racist "gangsta/thug" stereotype means that, for many white people, Black speech indexes toughness and masculinity. The ability of Black language to index masculine identities is the basis for the use of Black speech among cis hetero white men and boys (see, for example, Bucholtz & Lopez 2011). The use of Black speech by white teenage boys is largely an attempt to establish a masculine persona. Hence, there are some white teenage boys who exhibit a desperate desire to say the n-word, perhaps the strongest indexical marker of masculinity in Black speech. However, even grown white men commonly use language and gestures that index Black masculinity (such as the fist bump).

While white people often view the speech of African American men as threatening and dangerous, the speech of African American women is typically understood as indexing a sassy, "in your face" attitude. In some cases, white gay men may exploit this indexical link by appropriating the speech of Black gay men and women (e.g., Miss Thang, shade, reading, work it, hunty, etc.). Memes and catchphrases disseminate racial stereotypes alongside language forms that mock African American speech (e.g., *Ain't nobody got time for that!*).

Figure 6.6 1894 advertisement for Aunt Jemima pancake flour

Racism in child's play

Despite attempts to retire racist marketing techniques, an astounding number of elements from blackface minstrel shows have undergone enough indexically bleaching that their racist origins generally go unnoticed. Mickey Mouse was originally drawn to look like a minstrel character (with big eyes and an oversized mouth to create a mouse in blackface). Many common children's songs are bleached versions of songs originally used in blackface minstrel shows; "Oh, Susanna!," "Jimmy Crack Corn," and "Camptown Races" were all originally written for minstrel shows. Indexical bleaching allows for racialized forms of language to persist well past the racist context in which they emerged. Many of these songs were originally composed with forms of Mock Ebonics, as in this verse from "The Levee Song" (commonly known as "I've Been Working on the Railroad") written for minstrel shows performed at Princeton University in 1894.

I been wukkin' on de railroad
All de live-long day:
I been wukkin' on de railroad
Ter pass de time away.
Doan' yuh hyah de wistle blowin'?
Rise up so uhly in de mawn;
Doan' yuh hyah de capn' shoutn',
"Dina blow yo' hawn?" (Pyne et al. 1894)

The use of language that indexes a social group one doesn't belong to is a phenomenon linguists call "crossing" (Rampton 1995). When speakers use the language of another group to index stereotypes associated with that group, it is a form of *cultural appropriation*. In appropriation, speakers take language (and other elements of culture) from other groups in constructing a social persona. Appropriation may reproduce stereotypes by reducing another group to some stereotype (as in the use of Blackness to index white masculinity). Appropriation contributes to indexical bleaching by using a form in new contexts (that do not index Blackness, for example). The appropriation of linguistic forms that index minority identities is a basic way in which white Americans convey their social identities.

White people use occasional Spanish words or forms of Black language as a way of indexing the identity of a person familiar with the world beyond the white norm, as a person who is cosmopolitan and aware of current cultural and social trends. In a study of language use among self-identified white "nerd" girls, Mary Bucholtz (1999) found that "nerd" identity is indexed through a "superstandard" way of speaking that (among other things) avoids the borrowings from ethnic dialects used by their non-nerd white counterparts. Bucholtz concludes that mocking of "nerds" as social misfits is based on their failure to appropriate, making their speech "too white." In other words, white people who don't incorporate appropriated forms into their speech index a persona that is out of touch with current cultural trends, a person that is boring and worthy of disdain.

However, when ethnic-indexing forms undergo indexical bleaching, the process contributes to the maintenance of white public space. The appropriation of a form from communities

of color causes indexical bleaching because the contexts in which that form is used has been overrun with usage by white people. Once a form has lost its ability to index the identities of the form's original users, communities of color must develop new ways of saying the same thing to maintain the indexical association between language and ethnicity. In her study of language ideology and hip hop identity, Marcyliena Morgan (2001: 194) refers to this process of constantly inventing new ways of speaking as creating *lexical havoc*. This is particularly common in hip hop where artists try to ensure that they use new and innovative forms because the indexical associations of new words can quickly turn. As Morgan (198) notes, "the value of lexical items rises and falls for reasons that range from poor artistic and musical expression to uncritical appropriation by suburban youth."

African Americans (especially men and boys) must repeatedly invent new slang to keep ahead of the white people (especially white men and boys) who appropriate. Of course, the new words will be appropriated by white people again, creating the need for newer words, which will eventually also be appropriated. This creates a repetitive cycle of invention and appropriation in which common slang terms constantly change.

Another example of indexical bleaching is the refusal to attempt to pronounce names with origins in languages other than English. Those with names that are unfamiliar to white people have likely experienced someone refusing to say their name: "I don't think I can say that, let's just call you Cindy." In June 2020, for example, a math professor in California was placed on leave after refusing to say the name of one of his students, Phuc Bui Diem Nguyen. The professor claimed that Phuc Bui's name, which rhymes with "hook bouy" [fʊk bui], sounded too obscene in English and asked her to pick a different name. When she was offended, he told her that if his name happened to mean "eat a dick" in Vietnamese, he wouldn't use the name in Vietnam (Taylor & Morales 2020). These language ideologies serve to enforce what Jane Hill (1998) has called "white public space," the control of public spaces (both physical and discursive). Such language ideologies are strong enough to lead some to be complicit in the public humiliation of those with "foreign-sounding" names. The forced indexical bleaching of names is an old American tradition. Immigrants arriving at Ellis Island in the first half of the 20th century were regularly forced to change their names because they sounded "too Italian, too Jewish, or too Irish." One's name, of course, is the strongest indexical marker of a person's individual identity so that having one's name "bleached" is one of the most painful results of language ideologies.

Language is love

The linguistic varieties of English that index ethnic identities show regular and typical grammatical patterns. Although they may have regular differences from "standard" English, ethnic dialects are no different from any other of the world's languages. And just like any variety, ethnic dialects can index the unique cultural experiences and intimate contexts of interaction for their speakers. Speakers of ethnic varieties (and many other undervalued varieties) often have strong emotional and intimate attachments to the non-standard forms in their variety of English. This deep love for the language of one's own community often emerges as a reflection of deep emotions, such as in the creation of verbal art like poetry or song lyrics. For example, the use of Navajo English is common in poetry and fiction by Navajo authors such as Laura Tohe or Blackhorse Mitchell (see Webster 2012). Many of America's greatest authors have written works in undervalued Englishes of one type or another. What is sometimes referred to as "dialect literature" is often a means of celebrating the natural expressiveness and beauty of undervalued varieties of English. Ethnic varieties of English are thus

deeply personal and treasured by speakers. This emotional attachment makes attempts to erase or appropriate forms of ethnic grammar particularly harsh.

James Baldwin wrote (1979), "It is not the Black child's . . . language that is despised; It is [their] experience." In other words, the issue that some people have with ethnic varieties of English has nothing to do with the grammatical forms actually found in those varieties. The actual forms of variation could be entirely different, and they would still index the same meanings drawn from racial discourse. The "problem" is that those forms of grammar index ethnic identities, and these identities are seen as unwelcome in spaces that public discourse presumes should be under the control of white people. Thus, prescriptive prohibitions against racial and ethnic variation are tools of racial and ethnic domination.

Discussion questions

1. Linguists are not infallible, even when it comes to discussing linguistic topics. For example, the labels used to define African American English have changed over time, sometimes according to trends in naming (choosing "African American" over "Black") but sometimes because of something underlyingly bad (calling such varieties "substandard," for example). Why is it important to think about the appropriate name for a language variety? Whose opinion on the name and description of the variety matters most – a linguist or a speaker? How so?
2. If racial and ethnic varieties of language are not inextricably linked to race and ethnicity, why do linguists use labels like "African American English" that are connected to race and ethnicity to discuss them, even though there is no biological basis for racial categories?
3. We said the African American English form *finna* is related to the Southern American English expression *fixing to*. What do these expressions mean? Why might they be related? Assuming *fixing to* was the original form, what sound changes had to happen to arrive at *finna*? Note: the differences in these forms, like in all languages, is the result of systematic, not random or lazy, variation.
4. If one doesn't already exist, imagine what it would be like to have a dialect generator that generated versions of your own variety AND always made examples that connected such language use to being ugly, violent, or incestuous. How would it make you feel? If you have encountered one that purports to represent speech with which you identify, how did it impact your understanding of your own language? Why do such dialect generators exist?
5. Names are very important parts of people's identities. How would it feel to have your name mispronounced or ignored altogether? How can people change how they think about pronouncing unfamiliar names? What approaches might be useful?
6. Go back to Table 6.1. Of the words listed there, how many do you recognize, and what are their indexical associations? Are there other borrowings into English from Yiddish that you are aware of? What do they index?
7. Why might it be racist to repeatedly use phrases like *Chinese virus*, *kung flu*, or *Wuhan virus*, especially in light of the fact that other names like *coronavirus* and *COVID-19* were already in wide circulation at the time?
8. Thinking of Baldwin's quote in the last paragraph, what would it mean if the opposite were really true: that the Black child's language is despised and not their experience? Would this predict that Black children whose language was highly similar to standard ideals would not experience racism?