

Perceptual Bias in the Courtroom: How Dialect can Shape Interpretations of Witness' Testimony



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African American English (AAE)

- AAE is a language variety with distinct, rule-governed morphological, semantic, phonological, syntactic, and pragmatic language domains (Harper, 2008).
- AAE functions as a sociolinguistic resource to communicate identity through the incorporation and manipulation of language domains in intricate and implicit patterns.

EXAMPLES OF AAE'S LINGUISTIC FEATURES

Morphosyntax:

- Deletion of verbal copula
 - He \emptyset outside.
 - He is outside.

Phonology:

- PIN-PEN merger
- Consonant cluster reduction:
 - /mæsk/ → /mæs/

Semantics:

- Use of the habitual *be* to mark habitual actions
 - "She **be** late"

Syntax:

- Multiple negation or negative concord
 - He **don't know nothing** about it.
 - He doesn't know anything about it.

THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE

- Though it is the case that not all Black students may speak AAE, it does place Black students at risk of being stereotyped and misdiagnosed with a language impairment, in the case that they may simply have dialectal differences from their teacher or school administrator.
- Risk of misdiagnosis can account for the disproportionate rates of Black students inside of special education services (Stanford, 2018).
- Academic disengagement and depression of academic achievement paired with the overrepresentation of strict disciplinary punishment for African American students furthers the school-to-prison pipeline (Bacher-Hicks, 2024).
- Research has confirmed racial inequalities in school-based punishments, which persist subsequently into arrests (Barnes, 2018).

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION DISORDERS IN PRISON POPULATIONS

- Language and communication disorders can be found more prominently in persons in the juvenile justice system than in the overall population (Morken, 2021).
- This population can then be more vulnerable to communication breakdowns, as they are found to have lower expressive and receptive vocabularies (Albin, 2023).

THE "UNINTELLIGIBLE" TESTIMONY

- Several studies have linked recent court cases of witness testimonies that were ruled as "unintelligible" due to the witness' use of AAE.
- In 2013, Rachel Jeantel's testimony was famously dismissed as incomprehensible and not credible (Rickford, 2016).
- When dialectal differences become the primary cause for dismissing a witness' testimony, a need for intervention and change is vital.



SLPS AS EXPERT WITNESSES

- SLPs must have educational backgrounds in person-centered care, cultural responsiveness, and competence.
- Through these requirements, SLPs may then serve as an expert witness in cases involving a person with complex communication needs, or diverse linguistic backgrounds.

My HITM Project

My HITM project seeks to measure undergraduate SLP students' perceptions of credibility using mock trial transcripts that highlight AAE features. Learning more about their knowledge will allow SLP programs to develop course materials that highlight linguistic diversity.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

1. When using mock trial transcripts, how do undergraduate students within the Communication Science and Disorders field perceive the credibility of AAE speakers in relation to GAE speakers?
2. Is there a difference in perception of credibility based on oral versus written transcripts?

REFERENCES:

