

## RESPONSES

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**A materialist response**

WILLIAM LABOV

*University of Pennsylvania, USA*

I am grateful to the editor of *Language in Society* for the opportunity to respond to the criticism directed at ‘The logic of nonstandard English’ (LNE; Labov 1972) and ‘Objectivity and commitment in linguistic science’ (OCLS; Labov 1982). The author of the critique has already given me ample room to be heard, quoting at length from papers that have been read by many. Yet a discussion of the issues raised by Lewis can only do good by bringing more people into the effort to raise reading levels in inner city schools. Though the author is critical of efforts in this direction, I have no doubt that he will welcome the recent developments that I report on here.

First, a note on idealism and materialism. I was more than a little surprised to find myself labeled as an idealist; it appears to me that Lewis has these terms backwards. My first entrance into linguistics in 1961 confronted a mainstream that was frankly idealist, or ‘mentalist’. The main method for gathering data was to ask a speaker (usually oneself) whether a given sentence was grammatical or not. The alternate approach that I have followed is frankly materialist: to observe and record what people actually do say in everyday life. Both approaches are needed to obtain a full view of a language. Many of those engaged in the study of intuitions do not think so. Nevertheless, the materialist approach has gained ground in recent decades, under the title of the ‘variationist’ model of linguistic research. The description of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) that is central to OCLS is a product of this materialist approach; none of the linguists who testified at the Ann Arbor trial based their testimony on intuitions, but rather on studies of how people actually speak in everyday life.

The main point of disagreement here is on the utility of linguistic research. Lewis cites the opinion of John McWhorter—that the differences between AAVE and Standard English (SE) are not significant enough to cause failure in learning to read. This was in fact my own opinion at the conclusion of my research in Harlem in 1965–68. I stated in the final report to the Office of Education that the major obstacle to raising reading levels was the erroneous view of teachers and educational psychologists that AAVE was not a language that could be used as a basis for learning. LNE was my main effort to change that situation. Though it was

reprinted and cited more than anything else I have written, there was no indication, at the time of the Ann Arbor trial, that it had made an effective change in public opinion. Efforts to use contrastive analysis in the classroom, making students fully aware of the difference between home and school language, met with strong objections from teachers, parents, and educational administrators. But since that time, increasing evidence has appeared that differences in grammatical structure between SE and AAVE do interfere with the cognitive process of deriving information from the printed page. To illustrate this, I focus here on the subject/verb agreement marker that occurs at the beginning of the verb phrase and determines the form of questions, negatives, and many other syntactic operations on the sentence.

In 2008, seven linguists<sup>1</sup> responded to a call from the California Curriculum Commission for additional support for students who use African American language who may have difficulty with phonological awareness and standard academic English structures of oral and written language, including spelling and grammar. We produced a Summary Statement that included the following description of subject/verb agreement in AAVE.

In the present tense of Standard English, a suffix -s is added to the verb if the subject is in the third person (he, she, it...). In AAVE, there is no such suffix and no difference between the third person and other persons. Speakers of AAVE have to learn to use -s with the third person and only there.

Seven years later, the *Oxford handbook of African American Language* (OHAAL; Lanehart 2015) provides us with a massive assembly of current research on AAVE. Third singular /s/, generally agreed to be absent from the core grammar of AAVE (Newkirk-Turner & Green 2016:124), has been shown to be problematic for children in both reading and arithmetic. A paper by Baker and myself on ‘What is a reading error?’ (Labov & Baker 2015) showed that the absence of third singular /s/ in oral reading is associated with misunderstandings of the text as a whole, while this is not the case for absence of the /d/ in *told* or the /t/ in *its*. Most surprising was the discovery by Terry and his colleagues that the presence of third singular /s/ in word problems was negatively correlated with the ability of AAVE speakers to do the arithmetic computation (Terry, Evangelou, Hendrick, & Smith 2015).

Many of the linguists cited in OHAAL have responded to the *principle of error correction* and shown that speakers of AAVE have a different system which must be taken into account in the teaching of reading. Some have responded to the *principle of debt incurred* by developing programs that do that, frequently by comparing and contrasting the school language with AAVE (the ‘home language’).

However, such programs have over and over again encountered obstacles in the form of objections to the use of nonstandard language in the classroom setting. These objections spring from strongly held beliefs in the minds of teachers, parents, and educational administrators, ideas with little relation to reality, but with strongly material consequences. OCLS describes some early events of this type: violent protests that led to the termination of the educational programs. The Brooklyn College SEEK program, which incorporated the findings of our

Harlem study, was denounced by the editor of NAACP's *Crisis* as a conspiracy to teach imperfect English to black children, and 'so impose a relic of slavery' upon them. Ernest McKinney circulated a letter to all recognized black leaders, saying that 'what is being promulgated as *Black English* is really a phenomenon out of the heads of a few middle class liberals who have decided to organize Negro life and build up a body of pseudo-scholarship, sometimes bordering on shysterism, with the help of a few participating Negroes'. Gary Simpkins' *Bridge* program, which led readers gradually from reading vernacular to standard texts, had considerable success in raising reading levels, but was terminated by the publisher Little, Brown after receiving a number of objections from parents and teachers. Readers of this journal do not have to be reminded of the violent controversies over the contrastive analysis program of the Oakland School District, widely reported as an effort to teach the "Ebonics" language to black children.

How then can a material linguistic approach contribute to the raising of reading levels in the inner cities? Unless the use of contrastive analysis can be freed from public misconceptions, a rational approach to raising reading levels will be handicapped. The publications of Charity Hudley & Mallinson (e.g. 2011), and the films and publications of Wolfram and his colleagues (e.g. Hutcheson & Cullinan 2017; Reaser, Adger, Wolfram, & Christian 2017) are strenuous efforts to modify the hostile attitudes towards nonstandard dialects with information and reasoning. Our reading programs<sup>2</sup> deal with the material conditions and conflicts of everyday life, so that learning to read is connected with learning to live. By contrast, Lewis appears to be invested in a rhetorical tradition centered around the denunciation of racism. It is not clear to me how that tradition makes contact with the problem of raising reading levels in the inner city schools. Denunciation does not necessarily increase information and understanding. But a materialist approach to the problem of raising reading levels will certainly invest in that steady growth of understanding that leads us to the result we are all looking for.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Guy Bailey, John Baugh, Lisa J. Green, William Labov, John Rickford, Geneva Smitherman, Tracey Weldon, and Walt Wolfram

<sup>2</sup>The Reading Road, Penn Reading Initiative <http://www.ling.upenn.edu/pr/>

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**Address for correspondence:**

William Labov  
Department of Linguistics  
3401-C Walnut Street Suite 300, C Wing  
University of Pennsylvania  
Philadelphia, PA 19104-6228, USA  
[labov@comcast.net](mailto:labov@comcast.net)

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## White affects and sociolinguistic activism

MARY BUCHOLTZ \*

*University of California, Santa Barbara, USA*

This year, undergraduates in my class ‘Language, race, and ethnicity’ carried out collaborative sociolinguistic activism projects addressing a range of issues in our community, such as racist street signs and California’s ban on diacritics in personal names on official documents. Despite my and my teaching assistants’ explicit instructions that the projects should aim to effect some tangible change—the replacement of the street signs, the legalization of diacritics—many students focused instead on the more amorphous goal of ‘raising awareness’ of these issues on our campus and in the local community. As we explained, while raising the public profile of a social injustice is a necessary step toward changing it, this act alone cannot bring about change.