

The Construction of White, Black, and Korean American Identities through African American Vernacular English

Discussions of racialized language rarely consider the linguistic practices of Asian Americans. This article examines one Korean American male student's conversational use of lexical elements from an imagined version of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Although the speaker's linguistic practices maintain the dominance of whiteness in racial ideologies in the United States, his particular uses of AAVE index his relationship with both whiteness and blackness. He thereby projects a distinctively Korean American male identity in the context of existing discourses of race and gender in the United States.

The recent academic interest in whiteness in the United States reflects an important effort to draw attention to the silent ways in which racial hierarchies are maintained. Studies of the ideological construction of whiteness in everyday language are especially revealing of the naturalized ways in which dominant racial ideologies are reproduced, as well as addressing the relationality of social categories in social space. In particular, the examination of talk by European Americans has been a fruitful site for identifying the specific mechanisms through which white identity is performed, for example, by indexing a racial Other through Mock Spanish (Hill 1998) or Cross-Racial African American Vernacular English (CRAAVE) (Bucholtz 1999). However, in order to understand the complex ideological space occupied by whiteness, it is also necessary to examine talk

by "nonwhites" (see Gaudio, Trechter, this issue), because whiteness is constructed not only through white language, but also through imaginings of white language and its relationship with other forms of racialized language. In emphasizing the imagined aspect of language, I seek to call attention to the extent to which any linguistically identified variety functions as a convenient racial fiction (Morgan 1994; Walters 1996). Such fictions are resources for the performance of identity (Bauman and Briggs 1990).

An examination of talk by Asian Americans is particularly interesting, given the curious location of Asian Americans in popular discourses as "model minorities" who are clearly "nonwhite" but are also granted the status of honorary, or "surrogate," whiteness (Park 1996:493). In addition, there has been a lack of academic interest in identifying features of Asian American English in ways that parallel characterizations of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). This oversight implicitly suggests that through silent assimilation Asian Americans are becoming honorary whites who desire to speak only Mainstream American English (MAE). Although race is relevant to the definition of MAE, I do not characterize this range of varieties as "European" or "White," because it is problematic to claim that the vast majority of Asian Americans who use this variety are speaking "White English." Instead, I consider how language acquires racialized meanings in interaction—that is, how it becomes indexical of race (Ochs 1992).

In this article, I focus on one male Korean American university student's incorporation of primarily lexical elements of AAVE into a variety that is predominantly MAE. Although Jin's linguistic practices are clearly related to European American uses of CRAAVE, that maintain the dominance of whiteness in racial ideologies (Bucholtz 1999), his particular uses of AAVE in this conversation index both whiteness and blackness. This strategy allows him to project a uniquely Korean American male identity in the context of complex historical, cultural, and political relationships that Korean American men have with both African Americans and European Americans.

The Interaction

My analysis is based on parts of a two-hour video-recorded conversation that took place in the fall of 1998 at my home near the University of Texas in Austin. In exchange for a Korean-style dinner, four male university students, Dave, Eric, Jaehoon, and Jin, who identified themselves as either Korean or Korean American, agreed to be video-recorded for my research on Korean American discourse.

The students belonged to the same sports team affiliated with a Korean American church near the university, and the dinner took place shortly after one of their games. The four men were apparently well acquainted, as attested by their knowledge of one another's personal details, such as parents' occupations, favorite soft drinks, and the Korean names of those who usually used non-Korean names (Dave and Eric). In addition to attending the same church, all of the participants belonged to a religious student organization that supported a dense social network of Korean Americans at the

university. Membership in this organization was based primarily on a student's participation in weekly activities and her or his identification as an undergraduate Korean American Christian. It welcomed students from outside the university, such as Jin, who, despite being a student at a Midwestern university, had joined the organization when he began working as an intern at a local high-tech corporation.

Although I had organized the dinner event, the atmosphere during the first half could be characterized as relatively relaxed, highly interactive, and fairly typical of nonrecorded interactions I had observed during my later encounters with the same group of individuals. The last half of the conversation, however, consisted of an informal group discussion, during which I asked questions to elicit linguistic and racial ideologies, such as whether the men perceived themselves as speaking "white," "black," or "with an accent." Additionally, I was able to obtain some information on the backgrounds of the participants, as well as their uses of language in a more formal setting. Each of the participants contributed significantly to the tone and topics of the conversation. However, I focus on Jin in this article because of his creative uses of AAVE, to which the other three participants generally responded positively through either repetition or laughter.

Imagined African American Vernacular English

African American Vernacular English features are a particularly dynamic site of meaning-making by various ethnic groups in the United States. My choice to examine the use of AAVE as a resource for one young man's performance of Korean American identity is based primarily on my observation of various social, and particularly ideological, intersections between Korean Americans and African Americans. In the analysis that follows, I address only a few of these intersections and the relevance of these points of contact to Jin's particular uses of AAVE features.

The linguistic borrowings that were used were primarily elements of AAVE "slang" that have been appropriated by MAE speakers often through popular culture, particularly hip-hop. Most likely Jin learned these AAVE elements through his participation in and observance of mainstream institutions and during his childhood in an ethnically diverse urban area of Chicago that he referred to as the "ghetto." Consequently, his borrowings from AAVE also consisted of terms that were less common in MAE because of their inherently racial references to non-European Americans as victims of "the white man society" (Jin; line 2813). In addition, themes from African American discourse were borrowed and given new meanings within a Korean American context of interaction. The borrowings are predominantly lexical and thematic and intersect with the phonological, prosodic, and intonational levels of language.

The AAVE used by Jin can be productively understood as "imagined AAVE." My intention in using this phrase is not to differentiate between "imagined" and "real" versions of AAVE but to highlight the ideological level at which boundaries between languages, dialects, and communities exist. Although such boundaries are often thought to be tangible, given the

linguistic and physical signs used to mark differences, AAVE, MAE, blackness, and whiteness, whether characterizable as "authentic" or not, exist as categories because speakers socially construct them as such (Irvine and Gal 2000).

The Appropriation of African American Vernacular English

In the conversation I analyzed, many of the lexical items with AAVE roots were brought into the language of these Korean Americans via the mainstream media that has popularized African American hip-hop culture (Smitherman 2000:18). Some examples include *man*, *dude*, *waddup* G (line 448), *he dissin your mama* (line 918), *yo mama's stupid* (line 1274), *ghetto* (as an adjective; lines 19, 315, 473, 1650, 1675), *boody* (Line 575), *brotha* (lines 1125, 1474), *bro* (lines 623, 751, 1469), and *representin* (line 627). Although Smitherman (2000) notes that some African Americans view these instances of "crossover" as potentially reducing racial tension (p. 21), she also comments that crossover is problematic in a context of racism since "whites pay no dues, but reap the psychological, social, and economic benefits of a language and culture born out of a struggle and hard times" (p. 21). In addressing the motivations for cultural appropriation, hooks (1992) claims that the "desire to make contact with those bodies deemed Other, with no apparent will to dominate, assuages the guilt of the past [and] even takes the form of a defiant gesture where one denies accountability and historical connection" (p. 25).

It is debatable whether such observations apply as well to Korean American uses of AAVE, because many Korean Americans are likely to claim that they, as nonwhites, are subject to "hard times" resulting from racial discrimination. In addition, discourses generally do not "historically connect" Korean Americans to the enslavement of African Americans, although some recent discourses have addressed the role of Korean American liquor store and convenience store owners in perpetuating African American poverty in the inner city (Chang 1993 cited in Bailey 2000). However, popular and academic discourses addressing the "racial tension" between African Americans and Korean Americans less commonly claim Korean Americans to be "historically accountable," suggesting instead that the tension is the result of both limited economic opportunities for Korean Americans and African Americans and their contrasting communicative practices (Bailey 2000). Whether or not Korean Americans are held accountable, it is clear that Asian Americans who use AAVE in accordance with mainstream norms contribute to the practice of appropriation critiqued by both Smitherman and hooks.

To characterize the use of linguistic features from AAVE simply as individual racist practices is problematic, however, given that speakers are not always aware of the roots of the language they use. For example, Eble (1996:86) claims that many speakers of MAE associate the term *dude* with California surfers or the cartoon character Bart Simpson, rather than with African American culture, because these European American figures were largely responsible for appropriating and popularizing these terms. It is certainly useful to think of linguistic signs as being bound to historical contexts.

But a limited historical view of language fails to address the fact that speakers are often not aware of the historical references they make by using particular signs. On the other hand, racist behavior is not always conscious behavior. Hill (1998) has shown that racist discourses can take covert forms, such as in "White" uses of "Mock Spanish," that indirectly indexes negative racial stereotypes of Latinos and Chicanos (p. 683).

Crossover AAVE may semiotically function in ways that parallel Mock Spanish given that they are both linguistic—and therefore cultural—appropriations from racially marginalized groups in the United States. Cultural appropriation involves more than simply transporting symbols from one cultural context to another. These re-presented cultural symbols indirectly index new meanings that are guided by the appropriators' images of the Other from whom the symbols have been appropriated. Specifically, given that African Americans are most visible in the American media through their associations with comedy, hip-hop, and sports, the use of AAVE features by mainstream American society is based on its perception of African American culture as existing primarily as a heterosexual male urban street culture that supports these activities. Such being the case, mainstream uses of AAVE "slang" are especially prevalent in social circles that desire to create and project a heterosexual masculinity. It should not be surprising that, outside of the African American speech community, young American heterosexual men most actively employ AAVE features in performances of masculinity (see also Kiesling, this issue).

This phenomenon is evident in the first example I present, in which, during a debate about the physical attractiveness of women in Dallas, Jin humorously uses the expression "Aw damn, that girl's got a big boody" (Line 575). His utterance originates from an imagined version of AAVE. This utterance is precipitated when Jaehoon, with apparent seriousness, calls into question the other three men's practice of evaluating women. In doing so, he uses a Christian discourse style of humbleness, morality, and reference to "God" (Line 568).

Example 1¹

Dave (D): 1.5 generation, 18²

Eric (E): 2nd generation, 20

Jaehoon (JH): 1.5 generation, 20

Jin (J): 1.5 generation (nearly 2nd generation), 21

- 568 JH: like who are we to call like, someone ugly or pretty, you know?
god said he made us like um
- 569 Dave: °shutup
- 570 X: (right)
- 571 ((laughter))
- 572 Jin: YOU KNOW WHAT WE'RE TALKING ABOUT HERE MAN.
- 573 JH: sorr(h)y
- 574 Dave: h h sorry h h ha ha ha
- 575 Jin: trying to be all moral and upright but inside he like a(h)w damn
that girl's got a big boody
- 576 ((laughter))

This excerpt exemplifies a complex relationship between religious, heterosexual, masculine, and racialized discourse styles. Briefly, Jin's response to Jaehoon constructs Jaehoon's argument as a superficial façade of morality that contrasts with a commonly understood male heterosexual "truth" that exists on the "inside" (Line 575). Using an AAVE-derived phrase to claim that all of these men commonly sexualize parts of a woman's body, Jin not only constructs his own identity as a young heterosexual male but also indirectly reinforces a racial ideology of African Americans as embodying a masculine "hyper(hetero)sexuality" (Bucholtz 1999:444; see also Davis 1983).

One might argue that the term *boody*, an AAVE-derived term meaning 'buttocks' (Smitherman 2000:31), has only weak indexical ties to AAVE, given its common occurrence among non-African American speakers. A stronger argument can be made, however, that the discursive construction of a woman's "big boody" as an ideal physical attribute more clearly indexes a stereotyped "African American" standard of beauty (Smitherman 2000:31, 60). The linguistic appropriation of AAVE in this way is clearly a racist practice at least on one level. It involves the selective "borrowing" of symbols in ways that take them from an African American sociohistorical context of meaning and place them in a context that invokes instead the mainstream's racial stereotypes of African Americans. The irony, or perhaps the deceptiveness, of this "borrowing" is that it is done under a façade of cultural appreciation and cultural plurality (hooks 1992:24). Jin, even as a "minority" but also as a member of mainstream institutions, took part in this practice by using linguistic features from AAVE in ways that the mainstream had designated. The specific ways in which the use of AAVE relates to dominant racial discourses, however, requires a more critical consideration of the context of the interaction.

Local Ways of Challenging Dominant Discourses

One possible interpretation of the above exchange (Lines 568–576) is that these Korean Americans were passive accomplices in the maintenance of a mainstream American racial discourse. Such an interpretation, however, would serve to support a related discourse that describes Asian Americans as "surrogate whites." As discussed above, Korean Americans, along with other Asian Americans, have been praised in the media for their economic successes as "model minorities" and as proof of an economic system that rewards hard work (Osajima 1988:169). In stark contrast, dominant discourses have characterized African Americans as "typical" or "problem minorities," largely ignoring the historical oppression African Americans have faced at various institutional levels.

Reality, however, hardly mirrors such an overblown image of Asian Americans, who, as a group, still have little political power and wealth in comparison to European Americans (Park 1996:494). The images of Asian Americans as Horatio Alger success stories also exclude a significant portion of the Asian American community that is working-class. Likewise, a more critical look at the local context in which the exchange in Example 1 took

place reveals a different picture regarding the interactants' degree of complicity.

Although participation in a racist discourse cannot be denied, it is equally important to recognize how these performances of masculinity challenge some racist mainstream discourses while at the same time reinforcing others. The dominant discourses' characterization of Asian Americans as "passive" evokes a gendered image of the Asian American that stands in contrast to the stereotypical image of the "hip, male, adolescent, street, or gang-related" African American (Morgan 1994:135). Consequently, Korean American men, who are subject to an emasculated, and sometimes feminine, stereotype, are placed in an ambiguous position with regard to their male identity. In order to eradicate this ambiguity, as dominant ideologies demand, Jin may be enacting a gendered performance through the use of an African American discourse pattern that challenges his emasculation by dominant discourses. Indeed, parts of the interaction reveal that Jin desires to subvert stereotypes of Asians as passive conformists. At the beginning of the conversation, Jin jokingly urges the others, "C'mon man, let's not be passive Asians today" (line 32). In the next excerpt, which takes place in a later part of the conversation, he equates "conformity," which one should "never succumb to" (Line 478), with whiteness. As Jin's friends playfully ridicule him because he has never heard of the Southern second-person plural pronoun *y'all*, he attributes his unawareness to his resistance to the "white man" (Line 478).

Example 2

- 477 D: *man /mæ::n/ everybody's heard it. you just missin // (xxx)*
 478 J: *NAW it's because he's becoming (0.5) he's conforming. he's conforming to society man? i'll never. i'll never- i'll never. i'll never succumb to that. that's just the white man trying to get into your mind.*

The pronoun *y'all* does not have particular ethnic associations according to Dave, who claimed earlier that "everybody says *y'all*" (line 467), and Eric, who added, "Even in Korean music they say *y'all*" (line 470). Both Dave and Eric were raised in Texas. Jin, however, who grew up in Chicago, constructs this form as "white" and hence something he must resist.

Smitherman (2000) notes that, throughout its history, AAVE has been a language of resistance to European American oppressors. Although Jin uses resistant language, such as *that's just the white man trying to get into your mind* (Line 478), that echoes the style of resistance often found in African American discourses, the meaning he gives to the words can be understood only by considering the particular situation of Korean Americans. The utterance of words in an AAVE style in the context of other Korean American men, who understand both the references to AAVE resistance and their own emasculation by dominant discourses, constructs the particular identities of these Korean Americans as resistant to expectations of passive conformity to whiteness.

Critiquing "Whitey"

In a similar resistance to whiteness, Jin strongly expresses his disapproval of orthographic representations of Korean American family names that the participants associate with conformity to "whitey" norms. For example, the name /pak/ can be spelled *Park*, which is pronounced [p^hark] in English, and /i:/ can be spelled *Lee*, which is [li:] in English. In the following segment, the participants discuss the issue of Koreans' adoption of more Anglo-sounding spellings when they immigrate to the United States.

Example 3

- 1736 J: yeah but there's two different forms of "ji" too. "ji" and "chi."
 1737 E: i don't know *why* you'd change it to "chi."
 1738 JH: i know why - why would people like
 1739 J: well (xxx) i: too? that's, well i heard like in uh hanmwun it's like
 it's supposed to be like li-ul almost ((hanmwun = 'chinese
 character'; li-ul = 'the Korean alphabetic character'))
 1740 D: i think that - you know like some people? they wanted to do it
 phonetically? exactly? and some people wanted to do it where
 you know //
 1741 JH: (xxx)
 1742 D: no no no
 1743 J: more whitey
 1744 D: more whitey [yeah
 1745 E: [ha ha
 1746 D: that's what it is like "kim" like you know that sounds more
american like you know
 1747 J: [(xxx)
 1748 D: ["lee" "lee" "lee" is more that's american name like [y'know
 1749 JH: [right yeah.
 1750 D: so that's why.
 1751 JH: to be integrated into the main stream that's what it is.
 1752 D: [yeah yeah
 1753 E: mainstream
 1754 J: forget conformity man. DOWN WITH WHITEY. ((points to camera))
 1755 ((laughter))

Jin's use of the term *whitey*, a derogatory term that derives from AAVE, shows the distinctively Korean American nature of this discourse. As Smitherman (2000:27) notes, one of the areas of the AAVE lexicon from which the European American mainstream has not been able to appropriate is the set of terms that refer to European Americans. This limitation is not shared by Asian Americans: the Korean American participants in this interaction used the term *whitey* 22 times during the course of the two-hour conversation. Many of the cases were repetitions of other utterances of the same word, because its very utterance had effects of humor and resistance; yet the word was also used in several disparate parts of the conversation. Although often lacing his uses of *whitey* with humor, Jin generally used the term to index the oppression of Asian Americans by European Americans, as in Example 3 above. Eric, on the other hand, who also used the term

frequently, used it to refer to a racial category without directly critiquing racial oppression (Line 2373 below).

Example 4

- 2368 Jin: i think white people just don't keep it real and that's why
 2369 Dave: that is = that's true man?
 2370 Jin: cause that's why they always back stabbin like my roommate who
 wasn't gonna pay the last month's // rent
 2371 JH: white.
 2372 Jin: he kicks us out [of
 2373 Eric: [the prototypical *whitey*.
 2374 Jin: ye:::ah ma::n?
 2375 JH: no social skills.
 2376 Jin: but that's not true for everyone i don't think.
 2377 EC: uh huh
 2378 Jin: cause all those *ghetto whiteys* in my neighborhood i think they're
 cool.

Underlying both Jin's and Eric's uses of the term, however, is a connotation of negativity and undesirability that contrasts with dominant discourses of whiteness. In Line 2378, Jin refers to "cool ghetto whiteys," which indexes a positive portrayal of his working-class European American friends. His qualification that they are from the "ghetto" indicates that European Americans are, for the most part, racially undesirable and "not cool," as references to European Americans as *whiteys* in other part of the conversation convey (Lines 1743, 1744, 1754, 2373; see also Bucholtz, this issue, on whiteness and coolness).

In other words, Jin uses the term *whitey* to critique the unmarked, positive, and dominant nature of whiteness, because he and his friends are, along with African Americans, ethnic Others in dominant discourses. Despite the fact that Asian Americans have been in the United States since the mid-1800s, Asian Americans are still viewed by the mainstream media as peripheral and invisible: "strangers from a different shore" (Takaki 1987). Consequently, the use of this term symbolically places these Korean Americans next to African Americans as common Others—that is, commonly oppressed by "the white man" (Line 478). Nevertheless, since Asian Americans and African Americans are also differently located in dominant ideologies of race, the utterance of the term *whitey* in this context gives it a meaning that is particular to these Korean Americans, who as Asian Americans are viewed by the white mainstream simultaneously as surrogate whites and as foreigners. Although meanings are carried over in the Korean American revoicing or recontextualization (Bauman and Briggs 1990) of a term with AAVE roots, certain historical implications become less relevant and new meanings arise that index the ethnicity of these Korean Americans.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated the ways in which a young man used elements from AAVE to negotiate his Korean American male identity in the

context of dominant discourses in which Asian Americans have been distinctively positioned with respect to African Americans and European Americans. The data reveal the fluidity with which boundaries are symbolically crossed in everyday interaction and the multiplicity of meanings that potentially characterize such crossings. However, the analysis suggests that such symbolic crossings are not necessarily challenges to dominant discourses. Jin's use of AAVE elements, such as the term *whitey*, actively defied dominant characterizations of Asian men as nonmasculine and passive. Nevertheless, his use of AAVE features that had been appropriated by MAE speakers simultaneously contributed to the perpetuation of race and gender hierarchies.

In this study, I make no claims about the degree to which Jin's speech approximates imagined ideals of European American English or African American Vernacular English or whether his particular linguistic practices can be characterized as necessarily, or particularly, "Asian American." It is an unavoidable fact that everyday discourses indexically link speech communities with sets of linguistic features, such that a speaker can be judged as "sounding white" or "talking black." I find it useful, however, to understand the mechanisms by which such links are reproduced in everyday interaction. It is within local communities of practice (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992) that speakers such as Jin and his friends negotiate their identities and jointly (re)construct the links between language and social categories.

An understanding of the social force of language in performances of identity also entails a critical examination of the dominant discourses that contextualize these performances. Jin's practices contribute to the dominant discursive practice of maintaining boundaries between categories of race and between categories of gender, in his attempt to negotiate his own Korean American male identity within these ideologies. His practices necessarily coincide with, derive their meanings from, and participate in the negotiation of social boundaries within mainstream American discourses. It is equally important to note the marked absence of Asian Americans from realms in which mainstream American practices are reproduced on a national scale, such as popular culture and mainstream politics, suggesting that Asian Americans are often regarded as peripheral members of the "mainstream American community"—if regarded as members at all. Such marginalization limits the recognition of Asian American local practices in the (re)production of ideologies on a global scale.

Undoubtedly, however, the particular discourses that arise within local Asian American communities engage in a dynamic interaction with the dominant discourses that marginalize them. The "dialogized heteroglossia" (Bakhtin 1981) that characterizes Jin's everyday uses of AAVE allows for the local construction of a particular male Korean American identity in ways that necessarily acknowledge and maintain dominant racial ideologies but also provide an alternative framework of race and gender. In the particular interaction analyzed in this article, Jin's use of AAVE as a form of resistance to "whitey" constructs "Asian Americanness" as distinct from whiteness and challenges mainstream characterizations of Asian American men as passive, feminine, and desirous of whiteness. It is through the mechanisms

of everyday talk that the dominance of whiteness is both maintained and resisted. And it is through the racialized imaginings of language enacted in such talk that whiteness is constructed as distinct from—yet related to—other social identities.

Notes

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1. Transcription conventions (based on Goodwin 1990; Sacks et al. 1974):

◦	low volume
-	a sudden cut-off of the current sound
<i>bold italics</i>	emphasis signaled by increased pitch or amplitude
[	speech overlap
//	speech overlap
:	lengthening of sound
.	falling intonation
?	rising intonation
=	latching; no pause between turns or intonation units
(h)	breathiness, often indicating laughter
((comment))	transcriber's comments
(number)	seconds of silence
CAPITALS	increased volume
(xxx)	problematic hearing
<u>underline</u>	primary focus of the analysis
/transcription/	phonetic transcription

2. I refer to an Asian American who is born in the United States to immigrant parents as "second-generation" and one who immigrates to the United States during childhood or adolescence as belonging to the "1.5 generation."

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