ABSTRACT

SHALINA OMAR. Cross-Dialectal Communication in the Courtroom: A Review and Resource. (Under the direction of Professor Jeffrey Reaser.)

In the courtroom, the ability to effectively communicate and understand others is vital for fair proceedings and is particularly crucial for witnesses who are asked to take the stand. In a diversifying America, more resources now address cross-cultural communication in legal proceedings, with codified policies and procedures for those who are not proficient in English. However, none of these resources address the communication needs of speakers of different dialects and specifically those spoken by ethnic minorities. In particular, there are just a handful of studies of the courtroom that look specifically at African American English (AAE), a dialect spoken mostly by Black Americans who are also a population disproportionately over-incarcerated.

This capstone is set up in two parts, the first of which reviews the existing literature on cross-cultural interaction in the classroom, the doctor’s office, and the courtroom. This review establishes that cross-dialectal communication is an issue and more research and resources should be directed towards examining the treatment of AAE in these high-stakes areas. The second part of this capstone synthesizes existing research on AAE in the courtroom with a critical discourse approach in the form of a resource intended for lawyers. The resource demonstrates to lawyers the need to attend to their clients’ and witness’ dialects and is meant to help mitigate the disadvantages that exist for AAE speakers interacting with the legal system. The final product provides lawyers with an introduction to dialect and various aspects of AAE, paired with a list of suggestions giving lawyers the tools to address linguistically-motivated barriers to justice.