

ABSTRACT

ERIN ADAMSON-[In the Words of my Sister: Use and Function of Constructed Dialogue in a Natural-Haired Community (Under the direction of Dr. Agnes Bolonyai.)

While a vast amount of data has been collected on what is now referred to as African-American English (AAE), most of the research focuses on a particular type of speaker and a particular type of speech. That speaker is male, comes from a lower socioeconomic class, and lives in an urban community—reflecting the long-standing tradition in sociolinguistics where "many theories were based on racial and economic classifications where being African-American and having non-middle class status were synonymous with being an AAE speaker" (Morgan 2002). In addition, much of sociolinguistic research has centered on a particular type of variation in AAE speech: morphosyntactic or phonological variation. Other aspects of language such as discursive practices of AAE speakers have received relatively little scholarly attention, especially as it concerns language use and discourse of American Black women of higher socioeconomic backgrounds.

This study aims to fill this gap by examining college-educated African American women's discursive and social practices using an interactional sociolinguistics approach (Tannen 2004) and communities of practice framework (Eckert 1992). It focuses on the discourse of six natural haired Black women who have recently discontinued the use of chemical straightener, a process known commonly as "going natural". Natural hair styling practices and discourses provide a unique site for examining Black women's identity construction and how identity practices can interact with other social parameters (Bucholtz 1999). In order to investigate the linguistic features and discursive practices of Black women within the natural haired community of practice, I focus on the use and function of constructed dialogue. Constructed speech and the use of both direct and indirect quotation is an essential piece in the performance of a credible identity (Tannen 1989, Sorokin 2009). In this paper, I will address two main research questions: 1) How is constructed dialogue employed in the construction of credibility and 2) What linguistic functions does constructed dialogue serve?

Data come from six semi-structured interaction-based interviews with American Black women that expand over 8 hours. The data were divided into two different groups. The first group was participants ages 21-22, while the second group contains ages 30-58. For data analysis, each instantiation of constructed dialogue was coded for the quotative verb (*say, thought, tell, ask, go, like, or none*), tense of the quotative, and the time referent of the event. Then, the data were analyzed to determine if the speaker intended for the interlocutor to interpret the constructed dialogue to be from a conversation that actually occurred or from the speaker's inner speech following the methodology of Ferrara and Bell (1995). The role of certain quotatives used to indicate real speech, and not simply a thought, contributes to the construction of a credible voice. This study shows that constructed dialogue can be used in the construction of a credible identity.