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# **African American English: An Interview with Marcyliena Morgan**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Marcyliena Morgan is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at UCLA. As a linguistic anthropologist, she has dealt extensively with issues surrounding African American English and her articles *Theories and Politics in African American English* (1994b) and *The African American Speech Community: Reality and Sociolinguistics* (1994a) emphasize the necessity for sociolinguists to consider social contexts and agentive subjects in the creation of sociolinguistic categories. In order to more fully understand the historical and political contexts of African American English, Morgan has conducted fieldwork in sites including Mississippi, Chicago, and London, yielding work about language use and attitudes across the African Diaspora (1993b). Expanding on this perspective, her article *Just to Have Something: Camouflaged Narratives of African American Life* (1994) compares the distinct narrative tendencies in lynching stories told in Chicago with those told in Mississippi. Morgan's work also confronts issues of gender in language, analyzing how African American women are active linguistic agents, skillfully controlling their own interactional environment (1991, 1993c, forthcoming).

In this interview, Morgan elaborates on the necessity to analyze both microlinguistic issues of grammar and phonology as well as larger issues of discourse pragmatics and, ultimately, language ideology. Our talk ranged from the discussion of the poetry of African American poet Lawrence Dunbar, to the debate over the convergence of African American English and 'Standard' American English, to counterlanguage and indirectness, here and abroad. Uniting all these issues is Morgan's insistently reflexive stance and multi-leveled approach to linguistic anthropology. Morgan emphasizes the need for linguists to reflect on the meaning of the analytical decisions they make, and that such reflection necessitates a historical, political, and sociocultural perspective.

## THE INTERVIEW

Rymes: *In your article, Theories and Politics in African American English, you discuss the case of the African American poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar who wrote in the 1900's and was considered to be "one of the first recognized authors of 'pure' African ancestry" (p. 126). While written by a well-educated man, Dunbar's poetry is clearly written in an African American variety of English and for this reason his work has been both praised and criticized by African Americans. What does this case tell us about the complications involved in discussing 'language choice' especially when talking about the 'choice' Dunbar made to use African American English rather than 'standard' American English?*

Morgan: The Dunbar case makes it necessary to look at the relationship between so called language choice and things that people don't necessarily have control over: For example, you speak the language of the place that you're born into. When talking about the Dunbar case and his 'choice' to use African American English for his poetry, we're also talking about a tremendous amount of dominance going on and this has an incredible impact on what happens to people's language and how a variety is interpreted. You have the marginalized and the marginalizer—you have people with power and without power, but there's also this notion that people with power are not exercising it which is part of the American myth or ideal or the neurotic American side. Anyway, it's like 'we didn't do that' or 'it wasn't quite like that.' So the question becomes how much of language 'choice' comes down to people not speaking American English for various reasons. How much of it is because of the limits we as a society put on peoples' ability or rights to participate in that society. At different historical periods the way we frame these questions changes. If you take the case of Dunbar, even though he was an educated man, it's unacceptable for him to write in an educated variety and be of African descent.

Rymes: *How does the Dunbar case relate to the way African American English is used or not used today?*

Morgan: Today we say, 'why is it that so many black kids aren't speaking standard English? If they're not speaking standard English it means they're not going to be able to get a job, they're not going to have success in society.' When we get black kids speaking standard English we say, 'those black kids are just like white kids.' We say things like 'see, you can be black and have black skin and still have white ideals.' And so we clearly associate language not with a particular culture, but with the dominant culture. So that whatever variety you're speaking in this society is looked at

in relation to the dominant culture. It doesn't matter what the variety is. Especially when you're African American.

Rymes: *In the literature some people have called Dunbar's work "subversive," others called it "self hate," precisely because he was using African American English. What do you think of these characterizations and why do you think these characterizations evolve?*

Morgan: Now I don't think this "subversive" vs. "self-hate" dichotomy is actually what goes on. I think that's sort of the way that we as scholars interpret what's going on. I *do* think that part of the problem that we have is that everything is either defined as resistance (or subversion) or is defined as some sort of acceptance of being marginalized. There's no sense of people living daily lives without this notion of doing one or the other.

Rymes: *Does your work on counterlanguage<sup>1</sup> begin to look at language more in the context of people's daily lives? More on its own terms?*

Morgan: I started looking at counterlanguage when I was reading African narratives and public announcements and other African genres and noticed that all these genres are really so similar in the ways the structure or the frame turns out to be. I also noticed interesting ways in which they were different. Well, in linguistics you're always dealing with this notion of innovation, adaptation, and whether something is a continuation of something. And so I began to look at all the work on indirection and began to think that these things need to be linked. So I started reading through some of the literature on Africa where there isn't this prevailing perspective of a non-African dominant culture, where people can talk about African culture or a particular society and not have this pressure to think about "what about the larger society?" And I found that even within that sort of environment where multiculturalism is not even seen from the outsider's perspective, counterlanguage occurs. In Africa, certainly insiders will say, 'but actually this person's from that other village, but you don't notice that so we're not going to tell you.' And this is counterlanguage.

Rymes: *So you're saying that counterlanguage that goes on in the U.S., for example, is similar to indirection<sup>2</sup> in Africa?*

Morgan: It is clear that there was something going on that was connected. But then at the same time you're dealing with fighting this essentialist kind of longing for home. And so the question becomes well is this really "African" or is this a desire for something that makes the African American language experience somehow authentic—as a separate language experience. But when you look at the Caribbean and look throughout the

African diaspora and you see similar things happening then I think you have to say that it's clearly something that's related. It's not necessarily that we're influenced by what happens in Jamaica or Jamaica is influenced by what happens here, but certainly we did start with similar discourse systems and interactional systems. It's amazing to see what happened and to stop looking at it as if Africans arrived as slaves with no cultural memory whatsoever—which is an anti-scholarly, anti-intellectual, anti-human position. I mean, the condition of slavery was an inhuman situation, but people ended up here as human beings who had some sort of cultural memory. So of course that's there. And the question is not what did people do. But the question is well, I wonder what happened to that. Because, while that's hard to talk about, hard to capture, because it *is* hard to talk about and capture, it's also something that is resilient in many ways, in terms of other kinds of intrusions. And I think that is really one of the most interesting things: that you don't end up losing that. Things end up happening that you can see and so there are all these traces throughout the African diaspora and you can see the difference between what it means to have been in the U.S. versus what it means to have been in Jamaica and what it means to then go from Jamaica to London or something like that. So you get to see that things have their own place and their own historical trajectory. And that there are these overlapping similarities.

Rymes: *So what kinds of things do you look at linguistically when you track the trajectory this way?*

Morgan: Well if I'm looking at something like "counterlanguage" I'm basically not looking at grammar or phonology.

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**"I'm looking at the levels of language where  
people can negotiate intentionality and agency."**

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I'm looking at the levels of language where people can negotiate and mediate intentionality and agency, because that is something that I think people can operate with on a very conscious level. Not always as conscious sometimes as others, but that people can intend to do things, and people can interpret it that way. I do work at other levels of language, but not in the context of counterlanguage. I mean one of the things that I find intriguing is that interaction and grammar go together, and so part of what happens interactionally, happens with grammar, and happens with, especially in the African diaspora, phonology. And that becomes very important. So I ask myself, how do I define this particular setting, this particular speech

community, in those terms. And that is where I look at grammar and phonology. But not in terms of counterlanguage. I think that you can only get weak arguments if you look at that, especially because you can't really do historical reconstruction on much of phonology. In terms of grammatical analysis for the African American varieties, we run into many problems with genetic relationships versus typological relationships and those are very hard to deal with. And we're talking about a field where there is tremendous conflict over whether or not there is really something called 'decreolization.'<sup>3</sup> So it isn't clear how one looks at these in terms of historical reconstructions. But I do think when we're talking about African American English, you have to look at what we know about the language source, the language origins of people. The more we look at those things, the more we understand how to really look at what we get in terms of what's going on now. Arriving at a very full notion of language origin involves more than just knowing one language, or generally the language family. The more information you have the more you can actually do.

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Rymes: *You've written about the debate over the divergence of African American English and so-called Standard American English. In your review of *The Death of Black English* (Butters, 1989) you outline the arguments of those who believe the two are diverging and those who think the two are converging as well as those who believe, like John Butters, that Black English Vernacular is actually dying out. Where do you fall in this debate?*

Morgan: I have trouble with the debate at many levels. One basic level is that people are using competing methodologies. The notion of 'what is a token' or what a token actually represents is a problematic one because in sociolinguistic study, when you're counting tokens, tokens themselves become iconic. They become tropes. So that an absence or presence makes you authentically African American in some way. But problems arise when you consider what the sample was and how your tokens are selected. For example let's say you interview fifteen people but the distribution is such that eighty percent of your tokens come from two or three of these people. You must be very careful about the level to which you generalize your findings. So when you're comparing these studies back and forth and you're talking about "I found this" you're dealing with subsets in these arguments, you're not dealing with the entire sample size. And it's clear as you read it

closely that you're not. So you're not actually talking about the same thing. The question becomes much more of an ideological question: Why did you decide at this particular move to choose two people and then develop this incredible argument based on two or three people or point two percent of your sample or something like that. So there's so much of that going on.

I also think at the level of linguistics, that what linguists consider to be representative of a particular variety very often does not match what members of that society believe to be a language style that represents membership. And I think that, while you don't want to ignore what linguists think, what actual *users* of these languages, people who actually make these languages come alive, what these people do and say and think should be included in what we write. That's a major problem with the arguments about divergence and innovations; and linguists generally don't deal with these issues directly. They're embarrassed by them or uncomfortable with them.

Rymes: *How does discussion of social class intersect with the debate about varieties of English and African American English?*

Morgan: Well I think that the difficulty with social class in African American culture has not been fully addressed. Minimally anthropologists do it. But when you have cultures where the idea that it doesn't matter what your class is within the culture and you still are a member and are expected to participate in particular ways, then you have to re-assess what is meant by social class and really begin to look at status and the importance of status. One also has to look

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at what social class is in a group that's marginalized. Because the indicators of social class then end up varying, one can appear to be a particular social class and not actually be. So that if I don't have the middle-class occupation but I have everything else, then, am I not middle class? If I *have* the occupation but I'm the only middle class member of a family which is not middle class and I associate and live with members of that family, am I then middle class? Even though one assumes that every bit of my income is going into feeding and taking care of four—maybe ten—people? So do we still call that middle class? I think that this sense that class is determined by a 1920s notion of immigrants and working class

versus various kinds of class associated with occupations and education really only fits one particular culture—I don't think it even fits all white ethnic cultures. But it takes a grandiose sort of imagination to think that such a concept of social class might fit well enough to be applied throughout any of the immigrant populations or peoples of America.

Rymes: *So it sounds like pinning down 'social class' or some sort of 'middle class' might contribute to the difficulty in finding the appropriate methodology for studying African American English.*

Morgan: Or the language of ANY people of color. Because the varieties that people use have so much to do with being in multiple environments. And those multiple environments aren't just ruled by class, but often by cultural values that go against dominant society. So if a particular form of talk is valued in a context even if it is stigmatized by many people who overhear it, it really doesn't mean it's not going to happen. Especially for youth. In the case of youth it means that it probably *will* happen.

I do think that linguists have an obligation to really look at class, to make advances on this notion of class. Sociologists, because of what they're doing, aren't necessarily constantly seeing evidence contrary to these categories, whereas linguists constantly see evidence that suggests we can't have these categories. They're not static.

Rymes: *What do you think about the way Labov (1966) segmented the classes by department store?<sup>4</sup> How valid is it that he found that the language used by African Americans in the 'middle class' department store showed evidence of "linguistic insecurity,<sup>5</sup> or a switching between varieties of English, searching for the most appropriate. What do you think of this research?*

Morgan: In many respects I like it because I like poking at the middle class and saying "here you are, and in fact you're linguistically insecure." On the other hand, I think that the notion of linguistic insecurity is contextually driven. I think all of us, unless you're among the elite or you're an incredibly arrogant academic, can be insecure in *some contexts* and we aren't always sure how one should address people in this particular situation or how the style of talk or interaction is interpreted. So I think that in many respects "linguistic insecurity" is normal unless you're incredibly elite. I think Labov's right in that if you're from a strong working class community and you don't leave that context, then you have that strong position. But it's really only people who have incredible power who cannot pay attention to how they talk to people, or the style and the variety that they're using. They're the only ones, ultimately. It isn't surprising to find what Labov found in New York City.



On the other hand, I think what was important about what he did was that there were, at the time, dialectologists promoting an idea that such variation didn't exist; that you didn't get this variety of pronunciation from individuals—especially individuals who shared a particular social class. So it was really a pretty brilliant move on his part. But I think we tend to get caught up in this notion of "oh there's no class and what does this mean" and I think that's absurd really.

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Rymes: *But for Labov it was pretty easy to operationally define "middle class" by basing it on a department store. If somebody wanted to do a study now and decide what was middle class, how could they? Or should they?*

Morgan: You could definitely do it. Should they? I think 'why not?' But in a place like Los Angeles, it's a little more complicated. I think that if you were doing California then you're dealing with language differences as well as different types of language. But you could do it. Target, for example, (or *Targét*, as I like to call it—and *that's* a middle class move!) is quite different from Barney's [Barney's of New York, a department store in Beverly Hills]. It's very easy to do the upper class—We could just go to Barney's and find exactly what Labov found. What is *middle* becomes a little more complicated. Is it Broadway? Or is it Robinsons/May now that they've combined?

Rymes: *Right, and where are you in Los Angeles.*

Morgan: Yes, where are you in Los Angeles. Which Robinsons. I think it takes a certain kind of urban area (like New York City) to pull off a study like Labov's. And I *do* think that it is probably the case that one may be able to do it, but in a place like this [Los Angeles], how one presents oneself in terms of class has so much to do with the fact that this is Hollywood, and people are *often* trying to be something they're not. So, it's much more complicated here.

Rymes: *I know in your work, you've looked at narratives and indirectness in the discourse of African Americans rather than focusing on strictly linguistic analysis. Is this your way of solving some of the methodological problems you see in other work on African American English?*

Morgan: Well, what I try to do in my work is not look at one thing in particular. I think that the problem that people have is something that is a natural thing to do in linguistics: the compartmentalization of levels. And so you do morphology, phonology, syntax, and pragmatics, and you assume you can look at one level and that the other level is not coming in or in any way affecting anything that you're saying. I remember being taught that this level of abstraction is necessary in order to do an analysis. The problem for me, in terms of studying African American culture, is that people have a self awareness of the levels at different points in time. So if we just look at 'grammar' for example, or phonology, we may miss the insight that what someone is doing with that phonology is setting up a particular frame so they can do something else that has to do with pragmatics. By isolating phonology we really have only captured something at the most superficial level. That to me is a problem. I think you can use that methodology if you know the way in which language works in a particular society. So, if you know that indirection is noticeable and identifiable in a particular language in most cases, then you can go ahead, perhaps, and study that. And I think at some level of language analysis if you want to know what some of the grammatical possibilities are, fine. But to go beyond that and try to make generalizations about what people *mean*, or the significance of it within society, I think you need to know a lot more. That's really where I differ with those involved in the divergence/convergence debate.

Rymes: *Do you think that the more linguistically oriented researchers would have a problem with the fact that you don't see formal linguistics as necessarily the most revealing way to study African American English?*

Morgan: Well there is a complication. By not looking solely at formal linguistic analysis, in a way, my work is marginalized. I think anyone that doesn't do it gets marginalized as 'not really a linguist' because the level of analysis that has nothing to do with context, nothing to do with people, nothing to do with culture, is, at this point in time at least, still considered to be the quintessential definition of 'linguistic' analysis. And that's also a big problem that I think exists. And I think it's a conflict that anybody working on any variety of a 'standard' language has to deal with.

Rymes: *You've mentioned in your article, "The African American Speech Community: Reality and Sociolinguistics," that we need to find what Sankoff calls "Sociolinguistically Meaningful Categories." What do you mean by this?*

Morgan: Finding the "sociolinguistically meaningful" really depends on what we're working on. Because I really think that what we're doing is using our discipline to really show, demonstrate, reveal to the world what's going on within a particular group, society, culture. So the sociolinguistically

relevant categories have got to have something to do with that. For example, in my research on African women talking, I've started talking about this notion of 'reading.'<sup>6</sup> Now within African American culture people talk about this all the time: "I don't wanna get *read*" or "She's *reading* me." But this really becomes a sociolinguistic category in that when reading occurs, certain linguistic, grammatical systems then have to be applied. Because it's very difficult to get read, let's say, if you use only American English grammar. It's just not that effective. You're not effectively read—which means probably you're not read.

Another example is the work on "instigating" by Marjorie Goodwin: When I read *He Said She Said* I was of course very impressed and what I eventually did in my work was look at girls' disputes using her framework as a jumping off point. But it made me also remember something that I knew about those disputes and to look at this notion of instigating in terms of what happens in instigating and what does it *mean*. What is the person who's on the quest to find out 'who said what' really doing? It is very much the case that in the process of finding out who instigated, you have to accuse. So there is always accusative language going on. And you're accusing your *friends* of having heard something and not telling you, basically. So all the friends have to defend themselves and convey "I am truly a friend, even though I didn't tell you." And so the person is constantly saying: "You knew, you didn't tell me?" "Uh huh, uh huh," and then you go on to the next person. So of course there are these particular forms, so I think that understanding these contexts becomes necessary to understand relevant sociolinguistic categories. We should begin to expect a certain kind of talk in a particular context and analyze it to see what kinds of things happen at all linguistic levels in these particular contexts. But we should not act as though people aren't establishing these things themselves.

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Rymes: *You've also mentioned in some of your articles how African American Discourse is a form of "symbolic" or "semiotic capital." What do you mean by this?*

Morgan: Well, on the one hand, not all, but most African Americans realize that African American English is different from American English and that in certain contexts it can be used in a way that allows speakers better footing than for example, the people they interact with might realize they can get.

But also, within African American culture, the use of African American English also can mean that you're going to get a certain kind of respect. And I'm not talking about grammar here. I'm talking about style or types of interaction or verbal genres. Because all of that is the case, it does become symbolic capital, and this is true across class. When people say "Black people shouldn't speak Black English" or something like that, it is certainly an apolitical statement, but it's also a statement that is incredibly naive in that I don't understand how people wouldn't speak the language that they're socialized to speak—especially when not participating in various language practices means you can't participate in your home community. While there are people who never want to go back to their home community, I don't think that tends to be typical of the African American experience. So in that respect, African American discourse is symbolic capital, and it just has so much *life*. It is incredibly creative.

Just as an example, I had a African American student in here the other day who is a graduate student at this university and I was talking to her about the word 'conversate' and she said "you know I really did think that was a word even though I'm sure that I knew that it wasn't supposed to be a word. And I know 'beautifullest' isn't right, but I use it all the time, and I like to say 'complicatedly' and I use it all the time and it really drives people crazy but I like it." So there are linguistic rules but there are also things that you can do to those rules as 'play' that aren't stigmatized within the culture.

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**"We should begin to expect a certain kind of talk in a particular context....But we should not act as though people aren't establishing these things themselves."**

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Rymes: *How can these kinds of words can be used as symbolic capital outside of African American culture?*

Morgan: It's an interesting thing. Now if this same student says "complicatedly" in a setting that may have non-African Americans, the African Americans would just laugh because it wouldn't occur to us that she didn't know that was wrong. We would understand her as using it intentionally. But the non-African Americans in that context would think, "Oh my god! She doesn't know! Should we tell her? I don't know what to do." And she would know that both of those things are going on. And that is the way symbolic capital works. The interesting question when we look at it from a strictly political perspective is, 'what does it mean to do that?' What she's saying is, 'we do this, but what you don't get is that there is

intentionality, there's agency. So that our doing this, from your perspective, is reinforcing your bigotry in a way. From our perspective, it's making your bigotry clear, because you're not responding as though you think it's funny that I'm speaking this way. You're responding as though I don't know what I'm doing. On the other hand, it *is* reinforcing their stereotype. And so it's an interesting move in that it's sort of like 'here's the stereotype in your face.' And so among the group it's like 'yep, they're bigots.' And from the other group it's 'poor them, even when they get educated they can't talk.' So it's this interesting tension that's constantly played out.

Rymes: *At the end of your article, Theories and Politics in African American English (1994b), you say that "the study of African American language and culture is also the study of U.S. culture and scholarship." What do you mean by that?*

Morgan: Well, I do think, and I'm certainly not the first person to say that, that we are looking at this country, ourselves, whenever we are looking at African American English because we really do have to take a position. We take an ideological position, we take a political position. We are positioning ourselves within historical perspectives—at every conceivable level we're taking a position. I think that it's important to recognize that in taking a position we're saying something about ourselves as scholars and as a country. And what we're saying may or may not be what people want to hear.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Morgan defines "counterlanguage" as the level of African American language development which is "the result of a conscious attempt on the part of U.S. slaves and their descendants to represent an alternative reality through a communication system based on ambiguity, irony, and satire" (Morgan, 1993, p. 423). While counterlanguage originated as a form of resistance to slavery, however, Morgan emphasizes that counterlanguage also has a foundation in African forms of speech.

<sup>2</sup> African American "indirectness" is typically associated with the practice of "signifying" but Morgan suggests it is also a more general characteristic of African American interaction. Signifying (a form of indirectness) takes two forms: "i) pointed indirectness—when a speaker ostensibly says something to someone (mock receiver) that is intended for—and to be heard by—someone else and is so recognized; ii) baited indirectness—when a speaker attributes a feature to someone which may or may not be true or which the speaker knows the interlocutor does not consider to be a true feature" (Morgan, forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> Traditionally, the idea of "decreolization" was based on the notion of a "creole" as a "deficit" language to be gradually replaced by the standard language. Recently, however, creoles have been shown to be elaborate systems (with significant

linguistic and social foundations) which maintain themselves as languages in their own right and do not necessarily "decreolize" (c.f. Morgan, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Labov (1966) devised a study in New York department stores where he elicited the phrase "fourth floor" from sales people. In the 'lower class' store, subjects maintained their R-less pronunciation even when asked to repeat the phrase a second time. In the 'upper class' department store, sales people maintained their standard pronunciation. In the 'middle class' department store, however, salespeople had R-less pronunciation on their first utterance, but when asked to repeat, they switched to standard pronunciation. This was taken to be a sign of the "linguistic insecurity" (see footnote 4) of the middle class.

<sup>5</sup> "Linguistic insecurity" is "a sociolinguistic attribute measured by the number of cases (out of a prepared list) in which a speaker reports that his own pronunciation differs from what he regards as the correct pronunciation." (Ferguson & Heath, 1981, p. 530).

<sup>6</sup> Building on Goffman (1967), Morgan defines "reading" as a practice which "occurs whenever a speaker denigrates another to his or her face in an unobvious and unambiguous manner." The variety of language used comes into play in "reading dialect," which occurs "when members of the African American community contrast or otherwise highlight obvious features of African American English (AAE) and American English (AE) in an unobvious and unambiguous manner to make a point" (Morgan, forthcoming).

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