

Perceptions of Language and Identity across Generations of Blacks

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In this presentation, we discuss the perceptions of African American Language (AAL) and identity by groups of Black Americans at a Hispanic-Serving Institution in San Antonio, Texas, a Hispanic-majority urban area with a Black presence of about 6%. This Black population is both segregated (lower SES groups tend to live in the eastern part of the city) and dispersed (higher SES groups live throughout the city and not in large numbers in any particular area). Black college students at the university mostly come from two other large metropolitan areas in the state where there are larger numbers of Blacks across wider SES and immigration spectrums.

We examine the language of identity of five groups of participants, both male (n=8) and female (n=8), in equal numbers: (1) African American Faculty & Staff (n=16); (2) African American Undergraduate Students (n=16); (3) First-Generation African Students (n=16). (The latter group is included because of the large number of students in that group and the tension that exists around language and identity between the two groups of Black students.). In addition, we include two additional groups, African American (n=16) and Afro-Hispanic (n=16) teenagers in San Antonio. A purposive sample was used for faculty and staff because their numbers are so small. Snowball sampling was used for the college students and teenagers.

The two guiding research questions are: (1) What terms of reference do you use for the varied groups of the African Diaspora living in the United States and what particular term(s) of self-reference do you prefer? and (2) What does "Sounding Black" mean to you and how do you view it when others say someone "Sounds Black"? Additional follow-up questions are used to gather more detailed data as needed. This presentation is based on the second phase of a larger study on African American Language and Identity among varied groups of Blacks.

In order to access a more complex view of language and identity, a phenomenological approach is used with a Critical Race Theory perspective. While there is not a deliberate focus on discrete grammatical features of AAL in the interviews, grammar is examined holistically and perceptually according to available data. Preliminary findings indicate that there are not gender differences but there are age/generational differences.