11 Black feminist theory and African American women's linguistic practice

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Introduction

Recent trends in feminist theory, and in social theory more generally, have made explicit the role of language in shaping, reproducing and challenging power relations. Judith Butler (1990, 1993), for example, has argued persuasively from a poststructuralist stance that the categories of sex and gender themselves are linguistically constructed through cultural discursive practices. Ironically, however, the new theoretical focus on language has not been accompanied by close, systematic attention to how the details of language are employed in particular situations for social purposes. Even feminist linguists working within different theoretical traditions, such as Julia Kristeva (1980), are more abstract than empirical in their approach to language and gender. Sociolinguists, trained in the study of how social categories and linguistic practices constitute each other, are well positioned to remedy this situation. Through the deployment of sociolinguistic methodologies that allow scrutiny of language in use, linguists can test and refine models of gender that emerge from other disciplinary perspectives. Likewise, as Deborah Cameron (this volume) argues, the interpretative resources of feminist scholars outside of linguistics may offer fruitful new explanations for language data.

This chapter draws together several strands of research on language use among African American women in order to demonstrate the benefits of strengthening the relationship between feminist scholarship in linguistics and in other social sciences. After discussing the present state of this relationship, I sketch the
contours of a feminist theory, known as Black feminist thought, that has recently been articulated within sociology. This framework, centring as it does on the social practices of African American women, can usefully be brought into dialogue with new linguistic scholarship on gender and race. I outline this research and then describe the results of the present study, an investigation of how the identity-marking language of African American women on a radio panel discussion about race relations can be analysed within the framework of Black feminist thought. The implications of the study are two-fold: first, that close analysis of linguistic texts may be a promising method for exploring social theory, and, second, that Black feminist theory may shed light on the social meanings of the everyday speech practices of African American women.

Black feminist theory

A frequently voiced critique of feminist scholarship within all the social sciences, including linguistics, is that its focus has been limited, for the most part, to white, Western, middle-class, heterosexual adults. Many scholars have tended to make premature generalizations that define gender experience universally for all women, while other social categories, such as race, are either omitted or introduced in an additive fashion. So, for example, Black women are described as a peripheral group composed of the two marginal categories ‘Black’ and ‘female’ (Hull et al. 1982). A variety of theories of Black feminism, articulated by bell hooks (1984), Patricia Hill Collins (1990), and others, redress the inadequacies of these approaches. Black feminist thought, as it has developed within the USA, is not a unified philosophy, but in all its forms it makes women of African descent central to theory. It is rooted in an understanding of how such women may use historically grounded social practices to develop knowledge that is resistant to hegemonic discourse.

The form of Black feminist theory on which I will focus is that developed by sociologist Patricia Hill Collins. On the basis of interviews and close study of African American women’s writings and artistic traditions, Collins locates potential commonalities in the experiences of African American women that in turn may give rise to a particular collection of shared perspectives towards those experiences. Such perspectives, which she terms ‘subjugated knowledge’, are produced and tested through a Black feminist epistemology, or theory of knowledge, that functions as an alternative to dominant ways of thinking. Collins points to four elements of an African American women’s epistemology, each of which is validated by Black institutions: (1) the dialogic evaluation of knowledge claims, in which truth is arrived at through discussion with others; (2) an ethic of personal accountability, which holds all individuals responsible for moral behaviour; (3) an ethic of caring, often manifested as affective involvement in interaction; and (4) concrete experience as a criterion of knowledge, which is prized at least as highly as the authority of the scholar or the expert. As Collins herself notes, the characteristics of Black feminist thought share many affinities with principles articulated both by white feminists and by Afrocentric scholars. This similarity is unsurprising, for as Collins (1990: 219) argues, alternative epistemologies are crucial in offering resistance to dominant ideologies:

Alternative knowledge claims in and of themselves are rarely threatening to conventional knowledge. Such claims are routinely ignored, discredited, or simply absorbed and marginalized in existing paradigms. Much more threatening is the challenge that alternative epistemologies offer to the basic process used by the powerful to legitimate their knowledge claims. If the epistemology used to validate knowledge comes into question, then all prior knowledge claims validated under the dominant model become suspect.

Theories of knowledge such as Collins’s that rest on an experiential foundation have an uneasy relationship to essentialism. To some critics, her theory suggests that only African American women may participate in the constitution of Black feminist epistemology, and that, conversely, all African American women engage in this process. The Afrocentric perspective that Collins takes has been challenged as a mechanism for levelling the heterogeneity of the African diaspora while serving as a litmus test for membership within this diffuse community (King 1992).3 Collins has further been criticized as a so-called standpoint theorist, a term used for thinkers who argue that theoretical positions derive from individuals’ experiences as members of social categories like gender, race, class and sexuality (cf. Harding 1986, Hartsock 1987, Smith 1987). Postmodernists have issued the most common criticism of this framework, charging that it relies on social categories that explode upon close analysis (Haraway 1985).

But deconstruction is not destruction, and to demonstrate that a
category is incoherent is not to eliminate its strategic use as a resource for both dominant and subjugated interests. Moreover, because we live in a world that orients to categories, we cannot ignore their effects. Identities can be chosen, as poststructuralists point out, but the meaning of such choices does not rest with the individual alone, and the range of choices is itself limited by the constraints of physical appearance and other factors. In the same vein, Alice Freed (this volume) notes that, despite the incoherence of the category ‘woman’, individuals cannot escape being classified by observers according to gender. Yet postmodern feminists and feminists concerned with racial, sexual and other identities are not as far removed from one another as they may at first appear. Both are interested in undercutting normative social divisions, but whereas poststructuralists are concerned with revealing the socially constructed nature of category boundaries, as well as their transgressions and subversions, identity-based feminists are more interested in the political consequences of these deeply rooted distinctions for the daily lives of women.  

Collins (1990, 1992) positions her work in this debate as emerging from historically specific political considerations. Acknowledging the inadequacy of categories like ‘woman’ and ‘African American’, she argues that overstated accounts of African American women’s unity may be nonetheless necessary at first in order to clear a space in which their diversity can be explored, much as the overgeneralized claims of white American feminists that introduced feminism into the academy later led to more nuanced studies. Collins additionally points out that the leadership of African American women in theory construction does not preclude the possibility of building coalitions with others who are sympathetic to the goals of the theory: Black feminist thought is not, then, a representation of all Black feminist understandings, but it offers one way of incorporating discussion of African American women’s practices of resistance into the fabric of theoretical discourse.  

A tight theoretical space therefore exists between the political expediency of invoking social categories and the wholesale distortion that may be wrought by their use; I negotiate this space by focusing on a speech event in which racial categories are explicitly made salient, a discussion of race relations in the USA. Numerous linguistic practices of the African American women on the panel intersect with the criteria of Black feminist epistemology, but this observation does not imply that the women necessarily subscribe to a particular brand of Black feminist theory or even that they would identify themselves as feminists. My purpose in using Collins’s work is instead to locate possible convergences between a sociological theory of knowledge and its reflexes in linguistic practice in the lives of African American women.

African American women’s speech practices

Recent research on African American women’s and girls’ speech shows several points of intersection with Black feminist theory and exemplifies the important new research paradigms that have begun to surface in studies of the language use of African American women (e.g. Stanback 1985, Foster 1989, 1992, Nelson 1990, Etter-Lewis 1991, Morgan 1991, Rickford and McNair-Knox 1993). In keeping with the new scholarship on African American women throughout the social sciences, the innovations include increased attention to non-comparative analysis, which examines those aspects of Black women’s speech that are not directly comparable with Black men’s or non-Black women’s linguistic practices. Another point of divergence with earlier research is the frequent inclusion of middle-class African American women, and the consideration of a wide range of age groups, in contrast to most traditional analyses of African Americans’ speech that have focused upon teenage boys of the lower social classes in order to get at a purportedly purer form of the vernacular (e.g. Labov 1972a). Mitchell-Kernan (1971) and Folb (1980), two early studies conducted by women, are rare exceptions to this trend. A final difference is that much recent research, rather than relying solely upon structured sociolinguistic interviews or ethnographic observation, uses personal interviews that allow participants to provide their own understandings of the talk they produce. These interviews may also draw upon a common racial and social background between researcher and informant to achieve a more intimate setting in which the vernacular is likely to be used and in which speakers are more willing to reveal their beliefs and attitudes. The new methods used by such scholars are not offered as a replacement for earlier research, but are an invaluable addition that expands the kinds of questions that linguists can ask.

I have selected two important studies (Foster 1989, Morgan 1991) for the insights they can bring to bear on Collins’s description of African American women’s epistemologies. The work of Michèle Foster (1989) offers a useful vantage point on Collins’s
framework. Foster studied the classroom interaction of an African American teacher in a predominantly Black community college and found that the instructor used performances to draw students into the lesson. These performances, in which teacher and student contributions became more symmetrical, were marked by a shift towards the structure and style of African American Vernacular English. Although Foster does not cast her data as exemplifying a specifically Black feminist perspective, the characteristics of this speech event connect closely with the elements of African American feminist epistemology described by Collins. The instructor encouraged students to draw upon their own experiences and to engage in dialogue in evaluating knowledge claims in the classroom, and she bolstered her own reliability as a producer of knowledge by creating in the classroom a community in which she was accountable both professionally, as an instructor, and personally, as an African American. The analytical harmony of Collins’s theory and Foster’s empirical data indicates that linguistic scholarship may be a productive means of illuminating and expanding the theoretical claims of social science.

Another study that is valuable for assessing the strengths of Black feminist theory is Marcylena Morgan’s (1991) research on indirectness in the discourse of African American women. Like Foster, Morgan does not identify her work as testing or exemplifying Black feminism; nevertheless, her commitment to using social theory to illuminate issues of praxis puts her in an intellectual alliance with Collins. Morgan reports that within the American slavery system Blacks developed what she terms an ‘alternative reality’, akin to Collins’s ‘subjugated knowledge’, that continues today as a survival strategy of African Americans. Such an alternative reality, Morgan demonstrates, both shapes and is shaped by a characteristically African American communicative style that she calls a ‘counterlanguage’ (1991: 423), a concept developed from Michael Halliday’s (1976) notion of ‘anti-language’. One effect of counterlanguage is linked to speaker intentionality. Compared to European American women, the African American women whom Morgan studied were far more sensitive to the fact that a speaker may deny that she intended a particular meaning and thereby may attempt to avoid responsibility for her utterance. Because of this recognition, the African American women in Morgan’s study were found to hold speakers within the speech community responsible for all possible interpretations of their words, an understanding of intentionality that diverges considerably from that of many non-African American speakers. The expanded vision of speaker accountability in Morgan’s work has its counterpart within Collins’s work in that knowledge producers are responsible for their knowledge claims. Additionally, Morgan’s finding that the listener takes an active role in determining meaning corresponds to the dialogic construction of knowledge in Black feminist epistemology. Again, the concurrence of theory and data suggests that systematic study of the relationship between sociological and linguistic research could strengthen both enterprises.

In assessing Collins’s framework against the findings of the two studies described above, it becomes clear that the direct and unproblematic assignment of the characteristics given by Collins to actual linguistic data may not be possible. In some sense microlinguistic forms both constitute and instantiate larger cultural phenomena, and yet there are dangers in making facile connections between these analytical levels. Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet (1992a, 1992b) suggest mediating between local and global analysis: it is practice, they argue, that constructs social realities from language, and practice that produces language in situated social realities. Within the communities that Foster and Morgan study, social practices – recurrent patterns of action and interaction – authorize certain linguistic forms to count as being imbued with and projecting the particular social meanings that Collins describes. Similarly, the linguistic practices under study in this chapter configure social alliances that can be interpreted within the framework of Black feminist thought.

Since the community that is produced through practice in this case is temporary, formed as it is around participation in a single radio programme, it serves as an especially vivid example of the instrumentality of fluid but patterned practices, rather than more static identities, as the source of alliance and resistance in social interaction. Thus the work of Eckert and McConnell-Ginet supports Collins’s hypothesis that African American women’s epistemology proceeds from historically rooted patterns of experience rather than essentialized social categories.

The panel-discussion study

A natural expansion of the body of work described above is the exploration of African American women’s language in more formal, public and heterogeneous settings. Except for Foster (1989), little work has explored such situations although they are relevant
to questions about the relationships among race, gender and practice. For this reason I take as the locus of my research the linguistic practices of African American women in media discourse. The study focuses upon a radio panel discussion convened in response to nationwide uprisings in the USA in 1992. These incidents of civil unrest followed the acquittal by a jury in Simi Valley, California, of four Los Angeles police officers charged with brutally beating an African American man, Rodney King. As shown in Table 11.1, two of the six panelists are African American women; both work as community advocates. The other panelists are all male; three are Black and the fourth is white. With the exception of one of the Black men, all the male panelists are university professors. The convenor of the discussion, an editor of a local newspaper, is a white man, and the moderator is a white South African man who is a journalist at the newspaper. These categories become relevant over the course of the discussion.

What makes the discussion striking is the systematic and creative way that some of the panelists restructure the discourse by using the features of the panel-discussion genre. In Bucholtz (1992) I offered a qualitative analysis that characterized this process. The present quantitative analysis of the data demonstrates that it is particularly the two African American women on the panel who adapt the norms of the discourse. The practices of these speakers are examined within the framework of Black feminist theory, and the theory is used to account for puzzling aspects of the data.7

In order to understand how the norms of the discourse are challenged in the interaction, it is necessary to describe those norms. I have previously argued (Bucholtz 1992) that the panel discussion is a mixed discourse genre with features both of news interviews and of conversation. These elements are often in conflict: conversation is an egalitarian type of talk in which topic, turntaking and participant roles are unplanned (Goffman 1981). Media interviews, in contrast, normatively have a fixed topic that is determined in advance, a turntaking system that allows some speakers but not others to select next speaker, and asymmetrical participant roles that limit question-asking to the interviewer and question-answering to the interviewee (Heritage and Greatbatch 1991). Additionally, interviews are mediated in nature, so that talk is performed not only for the benefit of copresent participants but also for an overhearing audience (Bell 1991). Interviewers are generally seen as facilitators rather than as bona fide interactants; they serve as surrogate interlocutors on behalf of the wider audience. The norms of the panel discussion are intermediate between those of the discourse types just described: speaker roles and turntaking rights are relaxed in comparison to the interview, but the interview system is still held to be normative; and participants usually orient to an overhearing audience.

Creative adaptation of the norms allows participants with less institutionalized power in the discourse – the panelists – to reduce the imbalance of power. By introducing norms of conversation into the interview genre, participants gain an interactional advantage in the discourse, not only because conversation permits a more egalitarian turntaking system, but also because alteration of the norms may be deployed as a strategy of dissent whereby speakers mark their resistance to the institutional discourse. As noted by Morgan (1993), speakers whose language goes on-record through, for example, electronic recording participate in power relations in multiple ways. On the one hand, their talk is subject to surveillance, in the Foucauldian sense, by those who hold institutional power (in her study, the academic researcher; in this work, the discussion moderator). On the other hand, those under scrutiny may take advantage of their position by bringing the powerful and relatively invisible monitor of their language into the foreground, by introducing this individual into their discourse either as an overt or covert topic or as a participant.

The discursive strategies of the African American women on the panel under analysis are of two kinds: those that subvert the role of the moderator in the discussion, and those that construct the panelists' social identities through political alliances. These strategies, both of which have particular linguistic forms associated with them, have the effect of bringing into relief social differences
between the moderator and the panellists that have consequences for the larger social world. As will be shown in the discussion below, the strategies exemplify the four criteria of Black feminist epistemology as laid out by Collins: dialogic evaluation of knowledge; personal accountability; caring and involvement; and the valuation of concrete experience. I will first discuss those structures that are linked to challenges to the moderator's role and then turn to mechanisms that restructure the discourse around panellists' social identities and political agendas.

**Challenges to the moderator**

Acts of participant resistance to institutional structure can be located throughout the discourse. In particular, the female panellists use two linguistic resources – questions and deixis – to destabilize the discursive position of the moderator. As already mentioned, in a media interview the role of question-asking is normatively reserved for the interviewer. But as Table 11.2 shows, the women on the panel, EH and EP, take up this right for themselves during the interview. The results for these panellists are in boldface.

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<tr>
<th>Table 11.2 Number of questions, by panellist*</th>
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<td>CC</td>
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<td>GF</td>
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<td>JM</td>
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<td>EP</td>
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* Ns appear in parentheses. Findings are significant for p < .001.

Panelist questions that specify an addressee almost always select the moderator for that role. Moreover, the questions put to the moderator often challenge the moderator's control of the discourse in their content as well as their form, as in (1) and (2).

(1)  
1. EH: Can we talk across the-
2. LF: =Jump in.
3. EH: =I mean can we be real?
4. LF: =Yes. (h::)
5. EH: =It’s gettin’ on my nerves. Okay. Th(h)ank y(h)ou.

In example (1), the first question, issued in line 1, conforms to the norms of the panel discussion in that the speaker acknowledges that she does not have a right to the floor without being selected by the moderator. Her next questions in lines 3, 5 and 7, on the other hand, challenge these norms by asking questions that force answers from the interviewer and require him to authorize a restructuring of the discussion, one in which every participant can select any other to speak. Such questions, then, do not function simply as questions but as a means of resisting the pre-existing institutional structure. EH's line of questioning, issued at the metapragmatic level (Silverstein 1993), can be viewed as empirical support for Collins's Black feminist epistemology, in that it sets up the preconditions for Black women's knowledge production to take place.

In example (2), the fissure that EH has created in the discourse structure provides an opportunity for the other African American female panellist, EP, to draw upon an alternative epistemology. The moderator has just asked another panellist to comment on white homeowners' flight from urban neighbourhoods. EP responds to the moderator's question with a query of her own, in line 3, concerning the perception among white Americans that Blackness is a stigma.

(2)  
1. EP: Now to me that's the more profound question L than (.)
2. why do neighbourhoods tilt,
3. why do you white people feel this way about how it is
to be Black,
4. and what are you gonna do about that. (( ... ))

This sequence contains at least two components identified as important by a Black feminist theory of knowledge: the dialogic evaluation of knowledge claims and the personal accountability of the knowledge producer. The first is manifested in EP's unsolicited assessment in line 1 of the question issued by the moderator, LF. By offering an assessment as a preface to posing her own question, EP positions herself as someone with a right to make such evaluations of LF's contributions to the discourse. The evaluation may further
be understood as participating in the ethic of caring as articulated by Collins, for affective involvement is characteristic of this epistemological criterion, besides being central to the act of assessment (Goodwin and Goodwin 1992). The questions themselves connect with another aspect of Collins's framework in their demand for accountability of the producer of knowledge claims. They do so by problematizing the moderator's omission of a more significant issue that is related to but absent from his original question, namely that 'white people feel this way about how it is to be Black'. EP's move to exact an account of this oversight from LF is effective because as a question it demands an answer; it demands that LF answer for his exclusion of crucial information in his shaping of the discourse. However, because EP introduces her question in a declarative form ('that's the more profound question') LF is able to avoid responding.

Personal accountability is also at issue in example (2) in the deictic form you white people. Although second-person pronouns in constructions of this kind do not occur frequently enough in the data to permit a meaningful quantitative analysis, it is revealing that they are produced only by the female panellists (three by EP and two by EH) and that they are always used to remove the moderator from his position of objectivity into a role constructed on the basis of race in which his personal responsibility for his implicit and explicit knowledge claims is highlighted.

The construction of social identities through political alliance

The strategies described above issue challenges to the moderator's institutionalized authority, and as such can be seen to support the alternative epistemological framework delineated by Collins. Collins's work can also shed light upon a second, complementary set of discursive practices employed by the two African American women on the panel. These practices allow the speakers to subvert their own imposed position in the interaction by constructing social identities and patterns of alignment for themselves that do not conform to the roles assigned to them by the institutional norms of the discourse.

The most direct way that this subversion is accomplished is through the symbolic embedding of features of the African American vernacular in speech that otherwise corresponds to the standard. This phenomenon counts as subversion because the standard

is the normative code in public discourse. At times, speakers on the panel draw on distinctive phonological features: consonant cluster simplification, monophthongization of /ay/, deletion of postvocalic /t/, and the use of alveolar stops for interdental fricatives. Vernacular lexical items that the speakers use include such forms as brother for 'Black man', cool out for 'withdraw', and rap for 'account'. The patterns of vernacular use by speaker are given in Table 11.3.

Only TD, EH and EP symbolically employ African American Vernacular features in the discussion. Of the remaining panellists, CC and GF use Standard English and JM uses African American Vernacular English almost exclusively in the discussion. The figures given indicate the number of vernacular features each panellist uses as compared to the total use of the vernacular in the discourse. The table shows that EH and EP have the greatest tendency to engage in strategic switching between Standard English and African American Vernacular English. These findings contrast with accounts of the speech of women and middle-class African Americans that suggest that speakers do not use vernacular or non-prestige forms in formal settings (Labov 1972a, 1972b). The panellists' use of the vernacular as an emblem, rather than as the primary linguistic code, demonstrates that the social meaning of the language is retained, or even enhanced, within an institutional context. Likewise, in her study of the semiotics of code-switching in African American women's life narratives, Linda Williamson Nelson (1990) found that, for the women she interviewed, middle-class status did not diminish the cultural significance of vernacular forms and practices; in-group use of the vernacular marked

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<th>Table 11.3 Use of features of African American Vernacular English, by panellist*</th>
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<td>Phonological</td>
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<tr>
<td>TD</td>
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<td>EH</td>
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<td>EP</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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* Percentages given are of total number of features used by speakers of Standard English who employ African American Vernacular features. Findings are significant for p < .01.
solidarity. Hence, the meanings associated with African American Vernacular English allow the panelists to use it symbolically both to construct an identity and to manifest their opposition to the normative use of the standard in public discourse, a point that is also supported by Foster (1992).

It is striking that this use of the vernacular marks in-group membership precisely when the speakers are surrounded by out-group members: the participants who are imbued with the institutional power of the panel-discussion genre (the moderator and convenor) are white, as is the majority of the radio audience. Within Black feminist theory, Collins terms the position of African American women in such contexts the ‘outsider within’. This concept captures the fundamentally marginal location of Black women – and no doubt of all women of colour – within predominantly non-Black, non-female institutions such as the academy and the media. Collins perceptively comments that African American women may appropriate and exploit the position of the outsider within for strategic purposes, and this process is seen in the present data. The use of the vernacular constructs a racial identity for the women on the panel and marks them as simultaneously inside and outside the dominant discourse.

Another phenomenon that arises in the interaction, however, is more problematic, and its analysis benefits greatly from the resources found in Black feminist thought. Like the linguistic practices described above, the strategy at issue, the use of backchannelled or minimal responses such as right or mhm, permits the women on the panel to challenge their institutionally imposed discursive position. Backchannels are normatively withheld in radio interactions involving more than two participants, presumably because the audience is unable to identify the speaker. In the present data, however, the panelists EH, EP, and to a lesser extent, JM do issue backchannels, while the other panelists use very few or none. Table 11.4 shows the distribution of backchannels by panelist.

Table 11.4  Use of backchannels, by panelist*

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CC</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TD</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GF</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EH</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JM</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EP</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 100% (109)

* Ns appear in parentheses. Findings are significant for p < .001.

Table 11.4 shows, he does not. We might further expect that because TD uses a number of vernacular features, as shown in Table 11.3, he would also employ backchannels, but he does not. And we certainly would not expect GF, as the sole European American panelist, to produce any backchannels, and yet he does, a phenomenon I discuss further in Bucholtz (1992).

Nor can we simply attribute the results to gender, in keeping with numerous studies (e.g. Zimmerman and West 1975, Fishman 1983, Hirschman 1994) that find that women use more backchannels than men, for JM does produce significantly more backchannels than other men on the panel, although significantly fewer than either of the women. At this point some analysts might suggest an additive explanation: part of the effect is due to racial background and part is due to gender. But to accept such an explanation is to fail to account for crucial facts about the recipients of backchannels in the data. Backchannelled responses are not issued to all the participants equally, but neither are they issued exclusively to members of a particular gender, racial group or profession. For example, CC is an African American academic who receives no minimal responses, while GF is a European American academic and he does receive one. In a purely quantitative analysis, this difference is insignificant, but within the context of the interaction as a whole, it is in fact highly meaningful. If the two female panelists who issue the most backchannels are expressing their group affiliation by showing support for other group members, we cannot explain these apparent anomalies. Likewise, if they are using gendered communicative skills in order to sustain the conversation, we cannot explain why their minimal responses are not issued equally to all participants.

A less mechanistic explanation is in order, one in which speakers
are actively making decisions about their linguistic practices. Collins's epistemological model provides just such an explanation, since according to Black feminist theory speakers test the merits of truth claims in interaction. It is appropriate to use this framework to understand the data, given that the puzzling backchannels are produced in response to statements that represent knowledge claims. Indeed, it is a function of knowledge claims that are one of Collins's criteria of Black feminist theory of knowledge, and backchannels perform this function by encouraging speakers to build on claims that are considered to be valid. Similarly, the ethic of care that Collins associates with her epistemological structure is manifested in backchannel use, for minimal responses display interactional involvement, as in example (3).

(3)

1. JM: I mean really see I mean see it's like—(.)
2. I know folks that (1.9) how can I say it?
3. I don't want to say it's that they've been out of the struggle,
4. out of touch.
5. EH: Mhm.
6. JM: [Let's put it like that. Like they were the first people (0.7)
7. who called and say—
8. I mean,
8. you know what I'm sayin?
9. EH: I do I [<get those calls> all the time.]
10. JM: [It's (h)ike ]
11. EP: [Hhhhhh.] [ ]
12. JM: [Yeah they sayin— ]
13. cause some folks be sittin back in they easy chair [you know ]
14. EP: [Hhhhhh.] [ ]
15. EH: [Mhm. Mhm.]
16. JM: =driving three
17. BMWs
18. EH: =Mhm.
19. JM: =the folks I can't get to help you know (.)
20. [brothers]
21. [Mhm. ]
22.
21. EH: =and sisters on the street,
22. right.
23. EH: That's right.
24. JM: And like,
25. see I'm sayin,
26. 'See I told you'.
27. EH: Mhm.
28. JM: See?

Unquestionably, the backchannels in (3) are interactionally appropriate to the African American speech style that JM employs, but they are not provided merely to mark affiliation with that style, for not all of JM's turns at talk elicit backchannels. Conversely, when a speaker with a very different interactional style, such as the European American professor GF, makes a claim that EH considers valid, she offers a supportive minimal response, as example (4) shows. This response differs in form from previous backchannels, but it functions similarly.

(4)

1. GF: What would it mean for (.) for white people to do something uh constructive here?
2. Well one thing everybody would have to do;
3. there's no question about this,
4. is pay higher taxes.
5. EH: Thank you.

Identity will of course shape to some extent what claims an individual considers to be valid, but it is clear that the relationship between identity and interaction is not unmediated. Linguistic practices take on meaning only in the context of a particular local site and only with reference to other linguistic practices such as genre and community norms. Although the absence of European American women in the interaction makes it impossible to vitiate rival accounts of African American women's backchannels in these data, an analysis based on Black feminist thought accounts fully for the data and may offer an alternative to theories rooted in rigid understandings of identity or social roles.

Conclusion

This chapter shows how linguistic methods can be used to assess feminist theories that are produced in other disciplines and, conversely, how such theories can provide insights into linguistic data. The analysis demonstrates how the linguistic practices of two African American women subvert the institutionalized relationship between themselves and the moderator of a radio programme in which they participate. Collins's model of Black feminist epistemology is supported by the particular form that the reconstructed discourse genre takes in the data, and Collins's theory can illuminate interactional phenomena that are otherwise difficult to
explain. Finally, by using subversive moves – questions and assess-
ments, deixis, vernacular features and backchanneling – the
speakers effectively restructure the speech situation, offering an
alternative to the dominant institutional conventions. These dis-
cursive moves provide potential strategies for speakers in other
settings.

The phenomena that create this process of reversal are articula-
ed in the epistemological concerns traced in Collins’s work:
dialogic evaluation; personal accountability; affective involve-
ment; and concrete experience, as well as the stance of the outsider with-
in. The success of the two African American women in unsettling
the discourse corroborates the observation by Collins reproduced
at the beginning of this chapter: namely, alternative epistemologies
are deeply threatening to the dominant ideological system. The
Black feminist theory that Collins proposes is certainly not the only
theory that may be used to illuminate these or other data on the
speech of African American women – in fact, Collins’s approach
lays the groundwork for further theory construction. Yet this par-
ticular theory provides a single explanation for a variety of
otherwise disparate sociolinguistic processes. The restructuring
of the panel discussion through these features serves to highlight
the institutional context of the discourse and the personal accountabil-
ity of all participants, including the moderator of the discussion.
The result of such strategies is to challenge the power differences
that inhere in institutional and social subject positions – that is, as
found by Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis (1991), Marcylena Morgan
(1991) and Linda Williamson Nelson (1990), and as suggested by
Collins’s model, the strategies are designed as a challenge to hege-
monic discourse.5

While there is no inevitable isomorphism between Black
women’s lives and Black feminist epistemology, the interface
between Black feminist theory and African American women’s
speech practices in specific local sites provides insights into how
theory is reproduced outside the confines of the academy. Finally,
although this chapter is necessarily more suggestive than conclu-
sive, I hope to have shown that feminist linguists and other feminist
social scientists have much to offer one another.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Vicky Bergvall, Janet Bing, Colleen Cotter, Sue
Ervin-Tripp, Alice Freed, Leanne Hinton, Robin Lakoff, Bonnie
McElhinny and John Rickford for providing many insightful com-
ments on earlier versions of this chapter. Any weaknesses that remain
are my own responsibility.

2. As Robin Tolmach Lakoff (1990) points out, acts of resistance of this
magnitude lead to strategies of containment by the dominant social
group, usually by labelling such acts ‘illogical’. In the data that follow,
this reaction is not observable in the discourse itself, but it is interest-
ing to speculate about where, if anywhere, this consignment process
took place.

3. Kathryn Shields-Broder (personal communication) rightly points out
that the very name ‘Black’ feminist thought implies an equally essen-
tialized unitary position of all Black women world wide, while pre-
csenting only the perspective of North American women who are
descendants of slaves. Despite the availability of this essentialist rea-
reading, I will not presume to rename the theory but will ask readers to
bear in mind that the discussion should be understood to be limited
by the geographical and historical boundaries given above.

4. The compatibility of the two perspectives is also noted by Bonnie
McElhinny (1993), and they are successfully mediated within the
innovative and influential work of Gloria Anzaldúa (1990) and
Donna Haraway (1991). Although some theorists, often called cul-
tural feminists, may lose sight of the constructed and limited nature of
the perspectives they study (Belenky et al. 1986, Ruddick 1989), most
scholars who use social categories as a resource in their work make
clear that they do so as a political and historically specific intervention
rather than as a move to reify these structures as universal (Spivak
1988).

5. Of course, researchers who are not members of the community they
study will inevitably miss certain insights; as a European American I
myself face this limitation. At the same time, however, it is imperative
that white feminist linguists do not restrict the use of feminist theory
to the contributions of other white researchers. To do so would be to
reproduce patterns of exclusion and misrepresentation that weaken
the quality of linguistic research. Moreover, the data under analysis
here seem appropriate for analysis by a white researcher because the
discussion was directed to a white audience, as discussed in note 11
below. Finally, Janet Bing has pointed out to me that strategies of sub-
version used by the African American women on the panel are also of
utility to white feminists and other political progressives who oppose
hegemonic public discourse.

6. The scholars who conducted these studies do not make reference to
Collins or other African American feminist theorists, and they might
not agree with the connections I see between such theories and their
own work. The associations that I trace, then, are not to be construed
as the definitive reading of this complex and nuanced research, but
rather as a way of understanding social theory through the testimony of linguistic data.

7. This study necessarily incorporates a number of methodologies, ranging from conversation analysis to variationist approaches, that do not often co-occur in a single research report. Although such integrative analysis is not entirely without precedent (cf. Macaulay 1991), it has been undertaken primarily in the service of describing dialect rather than of making sense of discourse. The collaboration among methodological resources is essential to capture the complexity of the unfolding interaction. Sociolinguistic techniques locate linguistic forms in social space, while discourse-analytic principles of interaction-based analysis expand the linguistic context of social relations. Hence both components are necessary for a full understanding of how social categories are produced, replicated and resisted in discourse.

8. The following transcription conventions have been observed. Each intonational unit of longer utterances appears on a separate line.

- falling intonation
- rise intonation
- rising intonation
- self-interruption; break in the intonational unit
- self-interruption; break in the word, sound abruptly cut off
- length
- bold emphatic stress
- (.) pause of 0.5 seconds or less
- (n.n) pause of greater than 0.5 seconds, measured by a stopwatch
- h exhalation (e.g. laughter, sigh); each token marks one pulse
- (//) transcriber comment; non-vocal noise
- <> uncertain transcription
- [ ] overlap beginning and end
- [ ] second overlap in proximity to first
- = latching (no pause or overlap)

9. This symbolic use of socially meaningful linguistic markers is distinct from code-switching, in which entire grammatical structures of two different linguistic systems are juxtaposed, and which is normally oriented towards an in-group and is not utilized with non-bilingual or non-bidialectal outsiders (Gumperz 1982). Significantly, only those phonological forms and lexical items that are culturally associated with African American Vernacular English are embedded in the speech of the African American women participating in the panel discussion.

10. This collection of phonological variables has long been known to be characteristic of African American Vernacular English (Wolfram 1969, Labov 1972a, Baugh 1983).

11. Although the local radio station was unable to provide a racial breakdown of its listenerhip, the national broadcasting company of which the station is a part reports its listenerhip as 89 per cent white, 11 per cent all other races.

12. The small number of personal anecdotes prevents me from conducting a quantitative analysis of the role of concrete experience as a means of assessing truth claims. However, the majority of personal anecdotes in the panel discussion are offered by the two African American women.

13. It is important to recognize that the speakers' achievement was local and temporary in its effects; neither the radio station nor the sponsoring newspaper implemented the changes in journalistic focus and institutional structure that the women proposed as ways of overcoming racism. And although researchers may be tempted to celebrate the panelists' intervention in public discourse, subsequent media treatment of Black community issues — from African Americans' response to the O.J. Simpson verdict, to coverage of the Million Man March on Washington — indicates that any such celebration would be premature.

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*Index*

**Bold entries under author indicates chapter in this book.**

acquisition of gender markers by
hijras, 239–44
and discourse, 77–94
affirmative action, 179
African American
men, 213–14, 222–3
middle-class, 271
women, 267–84 (see also Black feminist theory)
African American Venacular
English, 271–83, 286 n.10
communicative style and
indirectness, 272
age as a sociolinguistic variable,
Aiko, M., 104
Aller, B., 179
androcentrism, 16, 22, 69–71, 153, 154, 169, 177, 179, 191–4
and economics, 126–49
and engineering, 174
androgyne, 22, 180, 186
anthropology, 202, 228
Anzaldúa, G., 285 n.4
Armstrong and Tennenhouse, 50 n.3
assertiveness training, 36, 47
backchanneling, 280–3 (see also
discourse markers)
backlash, anti-feminist, 35, 40
Barrett, R., 258
Baugh, J., 286 n.10
Bauman and Scherzer, 205
Beattie, G., 79
Becker, G., 150
Belenky, M. F. *et al.*, 177, 179, 285 n.4
Bem, S., 3, 6, 7, 55, 69, 70, 174–5
Bennett, A., 79
berdache, 10
Bergvall, V., 16, 21–2, 70, 173–201
and Remlinger, 181, 182, 194
Sorby, and Worthen, 179, 197 n.7
Bergmann, B., 150
Berlin and Kay, 1
Biber, D., 5
Bilous and Krauss, 94