“She be acting like she’s black”: Linguistic blackness among Korean American girls

Research on the use of African American English (AAE) by speakers who do not identify as African American has largely focused on how performances of racial “crossing” (Rampton 1995) may be used to construct masculinity, often in ways that reproduce stereotypes of race and gender (Bucholtz 1999; Chun 2001; Reyes 2005; Bucholtz and Lopez 2011). Such work has drawn attention to at least a few important facts: first, a variety that linguists have classified as an ethnolect of a particular ethnic group can be used in meaningful ways by speakers outside the group; second, ethnolectal features are complexly related to other social dimensions, such as gender and class; and third, language practices have sociocultural consequences for individual identities and community ideologies.

Two concerns that remain are (1) how linguists can productively continue the important project of ethnolectal description—for example, identifying distinctive elements of AAE—in ways that recognize meaningful outgroup language use, and (2) how linguists can analyze outgroup uses of AAE without simplistically suggesting that these uses necessarily reproduce stereotypes of black masculinity. In order to address these concerns, I consider the sociolinguistic status of features described by linguists as belonging to AAE, namely, six lexical or morpho-syntactic elements: habitual be, neutral third-person singular verb (e.g., she don’t), multiple negation, ain’t, the address term girl, and the pronoun y’all. By examining about 100 tokens used by five female youth who identify as Korean American, I discuss some of the conceptual challenges that arise for an ethnolectal model of language and draw on some sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological concepts, such as “ideology,” “indexicality,” “persona,” “stance,” “voice,” and “authentication” to address these challenges. Finally, I show how qualitative methods of discourse analysis, which attend to the emergent complexity of how language can invoke social meanings, can usefully contribute to our understanding of how linguistic forms relate to social meaning, yet in ways that may still remain complementary with our projects of ethnolectal description.