

“Where is Your Accent From?”: The Voice of My Identity

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Abstract

This essay probes the role of language in how it contributes to the construct of one's identity. The author discusses lived experiences centered on the perceptions of accented English that is actually African American Vernacular English. The essay explores how these experiences were formed and how they developed over the course of the author's lifetime. The author also discusses ways in which language has caused both comfort and conflict, and provides a glimpse into a unique perspective that can contribute to a greater understanding of the power and importance of language.

Keywords

autoethnography, identity, sociolinguism, African-American Vernacular English

Robert Northman has a B.S. in Social Science from Portland State University where he is currently a Master of Urban Studies student, author, researcher, activist, and an aspiring urban historian. He has lived experiences to include more than three decades of urban street gang membership and former incarceration. He appreciates counter-storytelling, autoethnography, ethnography, and other qualitative approaches that help challenge narratives that deploy racist stereotypes and criminalize Black culture.

I was born and raised in Portland, Oregon and I grew up in the inner-North/Northeast areas of King, Humboldt, Piedmont, and Boise-Eliot. My family moved around a lot, and I attended several schools, including Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary, John Ball Primary, and Harriet Tubman and Ockley Green Middle Schools. Between 1980-1987, My family and I lived on 7th & Failing Street, then on 7th, near Shaver, and on 9th & Killingsworth Court. In 1987, however, we came to the top of a waitlist to move into a low-income public housing project in North Portland named the Tamaracks. For poor families in the 1980s, this was like winning the lottery. I still remember how excited my mom and dad were to finally be moving in.

When we arrived, I was 7 years old and was starting school as a first grader at nearby John Ball Primary. I attended King Elementary the year before and nearly all my classmates were Black children, but John Ball was a little bit different. One of the first things I noticed when I arrived was that there were far more White children in attendance at John Ball. In fact, to my best recollection, my observations were that most of the Black children that attended John Ball lived in one of the two nearby low-income public housing projects, the Columbia Villa and the Tamaracks, respectively. Meanwhile, most of the White children who attended the school did not live in the housing projects and lived in the surrounding residential neighborhood that consisted of modest single-family homes occupied by middle-class families. There were clear cultural differences between the two classes of school children, and I noticed right away that things were different when I hit the school playground for the first time and got hit up by some White kid who I'd met. After a bit of small talk, I remember the kid asking, "where's your accent from?" to which I genuinely replied, "what's an accent?"

Conversely, on the playground behind our new apartment in the projects, things were different than at school. There were no White kids, and, looking back, lacking the melanin of my peers, I must've stuck out a bit. I remember one of my earliest friends in the Tamaracks was a boy name Reggie. When we first met, I remember him telling me, "You don't sound like a White boy." I remember asking him what a White boy sounded like and him telling me, "Like the ones at school." I knew at an early age that although I felt like I was the same as everyone around me, I was visibly different and grew to accept my own differences while still very young. There's a saying in the streets that *it is what it is*. This was the attitude I adopted since childhood. I can't quite say whether it was my accent, my attitude, or both, but as time went on, I'm unsure if *I* gravitated away from the White kids and/or if *they* gravitated away from me, but we definitely were estranged in the long-term, indeed, to a similar degree as I observed the White kids and Black kids to generally be. On the same note, I grew closer with the Black children I met and became friends with, and my family and I lived there for a few more years wherein these friendships solidified and grew.

"*Where is your accent from?*" I've since been asked repeatedly throughout life. Each time I'm asked, I know I'm going to be drained when I'm finished explaining. For that reason, in instances of platitudinal introductions, I've admittedly lied in the past and told the inquirer that my accent was "from the south," since I figured that might make more sense to most people who had to ask and the answer seemingly brought forth less questions, or worse, *funny looks*. But, more often than not, especially when I'm in my hometown of Portland, Oregon, where I was both born and raised, I like to tell inquirers, "I'm from right *here*." Ordinarily, this draws a quizzical expression on the face of the inquirer, but it tells me a lot up front about the person who finds it strange or baffling how my spoken English is somehow "accented."

However, from time-to-time, I find in the moment an opportunity to share where my accent comes from, if for no other reason but to raise awareness to the many associated and accompanying experiences that intersect with the lifelong acquisition of my accent. My first language happens to be Black English. African American Vernacular English, or AAVE, also known more colloquially as Ebonics, or more informally as Black English, is the phonological and grammatical features of the dialect of English predominantly spoken by African Americans (Rickford, 1999).

Accompanying my first language is a ‘transracial’ identity (Weide, 2022). Apparently, however, my pale complexion, Nordic facial features, straight and fair hair, combined with a pair of bluish-gray eyes demand something of an expectation that I speak “proper” English— whatever *that* is—or, in the alternative, perhaps I should have a European accent. This is likely the cause of the confusion leading up to the dreaded questioning.

When “proper” English is unforthcoming from my speech, what seemingly remains is an “accent”. The hint at my spoken English being an accent, right away makes me feel different. Although in my experiences, I have found that “proper” English is spoken about as frequently as Latin. In my own lived experiences, I have heard English spoken in a variety of accents. I dote on each and all as interesting specimens of how we communicate with each other as human beings and how communities tend to develop a spoken language unique to a geographical space and even within spaces shared by separately identifying communities, such as it is in most modern urban environments.

Indeed, in the time and place where I grew up, my “accent” was what was “proper” and it was the vernacular fluently used by the other children I grew up with, and that of the adults in my family, neighborhood, and surrounding community. This community was known and understood to be a Black community. It was a place where the residents were predominantly Black people, and where most of the Black people in the city lived. The churches were predominantly attended by Black people. Many streets and schools were named after Black people and attended by mostly Black children. The customs and norms were that of Black folks, and so too was the spoken language used and understood in these spaces.

I grew up in the ghetto. I grew up poor. I grew up at a time when the schoolteachers kept wooden paddles in their desk drawers to spank misbehaving students, and where I still would get a *wooping* from my parents when I got home from school. Many of my friends didn’t have fathers but I had a stepdad. He was a Black man from a large family and grew up in the same neighborhood I eventually would. By the time I was 5, him and my mom were married, and I subsequently grew up calling him dad. I also grew up in what Anderson (1999) describes as a ‘street-oriented family’.

To be clear, I believe I appear to a casual observer to be a White male, and so while I was growing up, I also appeared as a *White boy*—and, it was certainly the way in which I was referred to and the way in which I understood my positionality juxtaposed with where and how I lived, who I lived with, and the way in which White people were ordinarily seen as outsiders. But I grew up an exception to so many things that are sadly ordinary, and my viewpoints and opinions are not what many might expect.

So, when I'm asked, "*where's your accent from?*" – On one hand, I'm trying to refrain from cussing someone out; and on the other hand, I'm delighted in knowing that *I'm not the one who ain't from around here*. I feel super comfortable being around the Black people who I know and grew up with, and around. I can fall into a casual conversation and feel confident that I'm not seen as someone who is *not from where I'm from*. In these interactions, I don't feel misunderstood or out-of-place.

However, sometimes I feel an elevated level of social anxiety when I'm around Black people who I don't know and who don't know me. I catch myself wondering if they're dissecting me the way me and my people would dissect outsiders when they came around. Most of the time, once I begin talking with a Black person whom I've just met, within moments there is a shared understanding taking place that we are speaking the same language and there is a mutual understanding in both thought and word. Nevertheless, it is extremely awkward when this acknowledgment is missed and though this has happened only a few times, my response has been to retreat from the social interaction, rather than to proceed with an understanding on their part that I am someone who I am not.

Nothing is worse for me than being in a roomful of White people though. White people make me very nervous, and I catch myself being suspicious of them whenever they're nearby. This means I close my mouth and try not to speak for fear I will instinctively raise their guard the way I observe they tend to do when they discern my "accent." Besides that, I generally distrust them because, while I was growing up in the ghetto, White people were often those who were authority figures, and those authorities were largely seen by the community as abusive and oppressive (Northman, 2023).

Also, the anger that accompanies hate is cause for concern. I was once told by a White teacher to "stop acting Black." I joined a predominantly Black street gang, when I was just 13 and the local police department subsequently documented my race as 'Black'. Since I was a child, there have been several instances wherein which I've been described to or by law enforcement as Black.

I felt especially uncomfortable around White people *when I went to prison*. Prison is extremely racially segregated and most of the White prisoners were members of racist White gangs. When I arrived for the first time, I was assigned to a cell in a cellblock and given a "bedroll" which consisted of some linen and things. I made my bed and, shortly thereafter, my unit was released to the "chow hall" for a meal. When I stepped foot into the chow hall, I look around and could quickly see that the space was divided by race. White prisoners sat in one section, Black prisoners sat in another section, Brown prisoners sat to themselves, and so on and so forth.

In that very moment, I had a decision to make. Where was *I* to sit? It was not a terribly difficult decision for me. At least a dozen Black people I knew stood up from the tables they were seated at when they watched me walk in. They threw their hands in the air and waved me over to where they were.

I recognized many of the Black faces seated in the Black section of that prison chow hall and I went through the meal line, picking up a tray like I was at a buffet, and after I was finished getting scoops a prison food dumped onto the tray of my first meal in prison, I made my way to the friends, family, and community that was only found in what prisoners and guards alike considered the Black section. White prisoners largely refused to speak to me, and I was

generally treated as a ‘race-traitor’ from that point forward.

It was one thing that I was invited and welcomed by the Black people who I personally knew from school, from the neighborhood I grew up in, my homies from my gang, and members of the family I’d been a part of since I was 3; because I’m sure that I would have imposed on the prison’s Black community anyway had I not been welcomed by those I knew; and I can only imagine the number of scenarios that could have played out but didn’t.

Indeed, understanding there would likely be a distasteful consensus forthcoming from the White prisoners, the Black-prisoner leadership met to discuss the complexities of my arrival. It was decided that, for all purposes of prison-politics, I was Black, and it was that Black section I sat in thereafter for every day I ever spent in prison. However, with that seating arrangement came duties and obligations because the understanding among Black prisoners was/is the same as the understanding within any other race in prison—if one of *us* gets into with a member or members of another race, we *all* responded to an attack as one. In later visits to different prisons wherein I did not know one Black prisoner whatsoever, I indeed pushed up in there and announced that I was Black—plain and simple and posited myself in the respective section corresponding to my identity. Luckily, and fortunately, no one challenged my imposition and each time, I was eventually welcomed and embraced. I strongly believe that my spoken language created a solid connection in each instance.

This is the identity I still possess to this day. I have Black children. My family is primarily made up of Black people. My friends are Black people. My dreams and memories are casted with Black people. The schools I attended were predominantly attended by Black people. The community I lived in consisted of primarily of Black people. The membership of the gang I’m a member of predominantly consists of Black people. I love Black people and I identify with Black culture, language, and thought.

So, in closing, whenever someone asks me, “*where’s your accent from?*”—the truth is, it comes from my heart.

References

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