# Module 9: Language, Race, and Ethnicity

## Before you read

This module focuses on the relationship between language, race, and ethnicity. In it, we will first take some time to understand how race is socially constructed and the importance of anti-racism in early American Anthropology. We will discuss some of the examples given in our textbook, **particularly African American English (AAE)** and the **Ebonics controversy.** However, we will also consider race in the United States from the perspective of Western Apache jokes in Keith Basso’s book *Portraits of the “Whiteman”* and the ways in which the use of Spanish among Puerto Ricans in a New York city neighborhood reflects social inclusion, trust, or lack thereof. The online component of our course will focus on the history of race and anthropology and on presenting some basic characteristics of **AAE**. In our f2f class, we will discuss the controversy surrounding the Oakland school district’s decision to recognize **ebonics** as a language in 1996 and Bonnie Urcioli’s article on the use of Spanish in a Puerto Rican neighborhood in New York City.

As you read this module and our assigned readings, think about our “conceptual toolbox,” the collection of concepts and theories we have collected over the semester. How might the relationship between language, race, and ethnicity be better understood using concepts such as **performativity**, **diglossia**, or **transidiomatic** practices? Think about the **four key terms** outlined at the beginning of the semester: **practice**, **indexicality**, **multifunctionality**, and **language ideology**. How might these concepts help you in analyzing the relationship between language, race, and ethnicity?

Remember, words that are **bolded** may appear in quizzes or exams!

## Focus points

As you read, pay special attention to the following themes and concepts:

* Race and ethnicity as **cultural constructs**.
* **Boasian anti-racism** in early American Anthropology.
* American **hypodescent.**
* The rule-governed nature of **AAE.**
* **Language** and **ethnic/racial identities.**

## About Race

The American Anthropological Association issued a statement on “race” back in 1998. In it, the association states that

In the United States both scholars and the general public have been conditioned to viewing human races as natural and separate divisions within the human species based on visible physical differences. With the vast expansion of scientific knowledge in this century, however, it has become clear that human populations are not unambiguous, clearly demarcated, biologically distinct groups. Evidence from the analysis of genetics (e.g., DNA) indicates that most physical variation, about 94%, lies *within* so-called racial groups. Conventional geographic "racial" groupings differ from one another only in about 6% of their genes. This means that there is greater variation within "racial" groups than between them…. Historical research has shown that the idea of "race" has always carried more meanings than mere physical differences; indeed, **physical variations in the human species have no meaning except the social ones that humans put on them**.

This module primarily focuses on the ways in which race is understood in the United States. In other parts of the world there are no social categories for “race,” in other places, these categories encompass different groups of people (think, for instance, of the Hutu and Tutsi groups of Rwanda) or are understood in different ways (for example, in Latin America, “whiteness” can be achieved through several generations of marrying increasingly lighter people). In the United States, race is socially constructed within the very specific historical context of African slavery. One of the defining characteristics of race in the US is **American hypodescent**: the idea, which at times has been written into law, that a person of mixed descent is always considered to be of the lower-status race regardless of phenotype.

### An Important Distinction: Race vs. Ethnicity

Although race and ethnicity are very often thought to be synonymous, it is important to understand the clear difference between the two: ethnicity is usually associated with culture, race is usually understood to be biological. In other words, **race** is something that is **ascribed** at birth, **ethnicity** is something that is **achieved** through socialization.

### Race and the Origins of American Anthropology

While anthropology in Europe has its origins in scientific curiosity about people of other lands that emerged from the colonial process, the question of race lies at the heart of American Anthropology’s own origin. You may remember that the founder of American Anthropology was Franz Boas, a German scientist who came to the United States in the late 19th century. Boas was extremely interested in the relationship between people and their environments. To this end, he developed a **holistic approach**to anthropology that incorporated **archaeology** as a way to account for the past, careful studies of the human **physical body** to account for the effects of environment on human anatomy and physiology, deep understandings of **culture** in order to interpret human behaviors and actions, and finally, fluency and knowledge of the **language** of the people studied as a way to first, communicate with them, and second, to understand the connections between **language** and **culture**.



Having been the target of **anti-semitism** in Europe, Boas strongly opposed **racism** of any kind. This anti-racism manifested itself in many of his studies. One of his most famous publications was **“*Changes in Bodily Form of Descendants of Immigrants.”*** For this study, Boas and his students set about disproving the idea that immigrants were genetically inferior to white Americans. At the outset, Boas knew that immigrants who had come through Ellis Island on average had **cranial circumferences** that were much smaller than those of people born in the United States.

Boas and his students (fun fact: one of these students as **Zora Neale Hurston**!) measured the crania of American-born children of European immigrants and compared these measurements to those of children of parents who were not immigrants. What they discovered after extensive measuring was that **there was no significant difference in the cranial circumference of American born children of immigrants and American-born children of non-immigrants**. Because of this, Boas concluded, it was clear that immigrants did not have smaller heads because they were racially inferior, but because of environmental factors such as diet. More than any single study, Boas’ study undermined **racial typology** in physical anthropology and helped turn the tide against early-20th century scientific racism.

### Changing Understandings of Race Over Time

As I’ve pointed out above, Boas’ study focused on European immigrants and their children. You might wonder, then, how this study turned the tide against racism.

After all, aren’t Europeans “white”?

Actually, it depends. Listed below are some ethnic groups that at some point or another have **not** been considered legally “white” in the United States:

* Jewish people.
* Swedish people.
* German people.
* Irish people.
* Italian people.

## African American English (AAE)

Remember the podcast on [linguistic profiling](http://www.npr.org/player/v2/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=1128513&m=128513) we listened to at the beginning of the semester? In it, sociolinguist John Baugh used a **matched guise test** to determine whether a speaker of **AAE** might have a more difficult time finding an apartment to rent than a speaker of **Standard American English (SAE)**. Baugh’s study showed that speakers of **AAE** do have a much more difficult time finding rentals than people who are able to speak **SAE**.

**AAE** is a frequent target of criticism by people who consider to the language to be an **uneducated**, **grammatically incorrect**, or **“lazy”** form of English. Many African-American community activists will encourage young people to learn how to speak English [“correctly”](http://youtu.be/nlWOu9FHm-I) and while these efforts enable many young people to acquire the ability to speak **SAE** and thus gain access to better employment opportunities, these efforts are based on the incorrect notion that **AAE** is **deviant** or **wrong**.

Take some time to read through pages 220-227 in your textbook. In these pages, Ahearn explains the **rule-governed nature** of AAE. In other words, AAE is a linguistic system that has its own **phonology**, **morphology**, **syntax**, **semantics**, and **pragmatics**. It is also not the same throughout the US –AAE in Baltimore is different from AAE in New York City. That said, most registers of AAE share the following characteristics:

* Invariant or habitual “be.”
* Copula deletion.
* Double negatives.
* Reduction of final consonants.
* Pronouncing the word “ask” as “aks.”

As Ahearn explains, each of these characteristics occurs following a regular grammatical pattern. AAE is not incorrect English. Rather, like Southern English and other forms of non-standard English, it is a register of English that is frequently used to profile its speakers and maintain hierarchies of power. In John Baugh’s words (cited in Ahearn pg. 223): “It does little good to claim that street speech is a valid dialect –which it is—when the social cost of linguistic and other differences can be so high.”