

Diversity and Intersectionality

Sonja L. Lanehart
University of Texas at San Antonio

In a world where the power of Standard English is not always questioned and the history of English not well understood, Professor Bailey has been a strong and much needed advocate for the recognition of “other Englishes,” the acceptance of multilingualism and language change, and the critical importance of linguistic tolerance.

As a teacher and mentor, *Professor Bailey has always encouraged his students to explore the language they see and hear around them*, to pursue innovative research using new technologies, and to apply their understanding of language variation and change to the central social, political, and educational questions of their generation.

—A. Curzan & J. Beithler,
*Perspectives on English Language
 Studies: A Symposium in Honor of
 Richard W. Bailey* (2008)

I can surely attest to those words in my relationship with Richard Bailey. He has had an important impact on my growth as a scholar and mentor because he encouraged and allowed me “to explore the language [I] see and hear around [me].” In short, he helped me to pursue and intersect my work, my languages, my socioculture, my communities, and my identities. I have been and forever will be grateful to him as well as cherish and honor him for this revelation. It is in this spirit that I provide my remarks.

Bailey wrote in his *Nineteenth-Century English* (1996, p. vi) that

Reading the English of the nineteenth century is not made difficult by problems of intelligibility. The danger of misreading lies rather in the apparent familiarity of the language, *lulling modern readers into imagining that this English is much like our own, when it is not.* (emphasis added)

Things can look very simple and familiar on the surface, but underneath is where the complexity, the good stuff, may really be. And looking beneath the surface shows that we

are more than the sum of our parts. We no longer live in a closed, protectionist society; we are part of a global village. Given the Internet, I do not know that it is even six degrees of separation anymore; I think it is more like two or three. In any event, the traditional belief that we are all very easily categorized is passé. We are in the age of post-modernity, neo-Marxism, critical race theory, and LatCrit. While scholars are currently preparing people for jobs that will no longer exist, they need to prepare them for jobs that do not yet exist as well as ways of doing and being that have not been imagined. Many English Language Studies scholars (ELS) and sociolinguists seem not to have gotten the memo. While we would like to continue believing and acting as if our old dichotomies of White language-Black language, women's language-men's language, rural language-urban language, and Standard language-nonstandard language continue to describe and define with whom we do our work and where "the" answers are, such traditional categories no longer work effectively.

Our parts are many—gender, region/locale, nationality, religion, skin color, phenotype, education/schooling, ability, sexuality, race, ethnicity, age/generation, socioeconomic class, physiology, language, variety, sex, etc.—but we are more than the sum of them. All that makes us who we are intersects multiplicatively, not additively (see Figure 1). Just the intersection of race, class, and gender provides a multitude of complexities in examining the implications and explanations about language diversity and use. ELS and Sociolinguistics need to transition into the 21st century contexts a little better; hence, my discussion on diversity and intersectionality.

1 Here's the Scoop

The term "Intersectionality Theory" gained prominence in the 1990s when sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (1990) integrated the idea as part of her discussion on Black feminism, or "Black feminist thought", and made research about Black women more complex and less connected to mainstream feminist research than had been done previously. Collins' work included women of color in her theoretical perspective and accounted for the exponential salience and, hence, intersection, of race, gender, class, and sexuality.

According to Susanne Knudsen (2006, p. 61), *intersectionality* is a theory "to analyse how social and cultural categories intertwine. The relationships between gender, race ethnicity, disability, sexuality, class and nationality are examined" on multiple levels to explicate various inequalities that exist in society. They are not independent of one another but instead are interrelated forms of oppression that are manifested in multiple forms of discrimination." While current feminist thought of the time reflected the lives of middle-class White women, intersectionality accounted for the complexity of women of color and how the various facets of their lives were often disconnected from White middle-class women, women of color, for example, were less concerned about working outside the home than actually having a choice to not work outside of the home. While racism, and sexism were everyday parts of the lives of women of color, they were also up against classism by what were supposed to be their allies: White women. As is often the case for Black women, they are overlooked in research because they are neither White women nor Black men—two groups they are often treated as being on the fringe of, with respect to gender and race respectively.

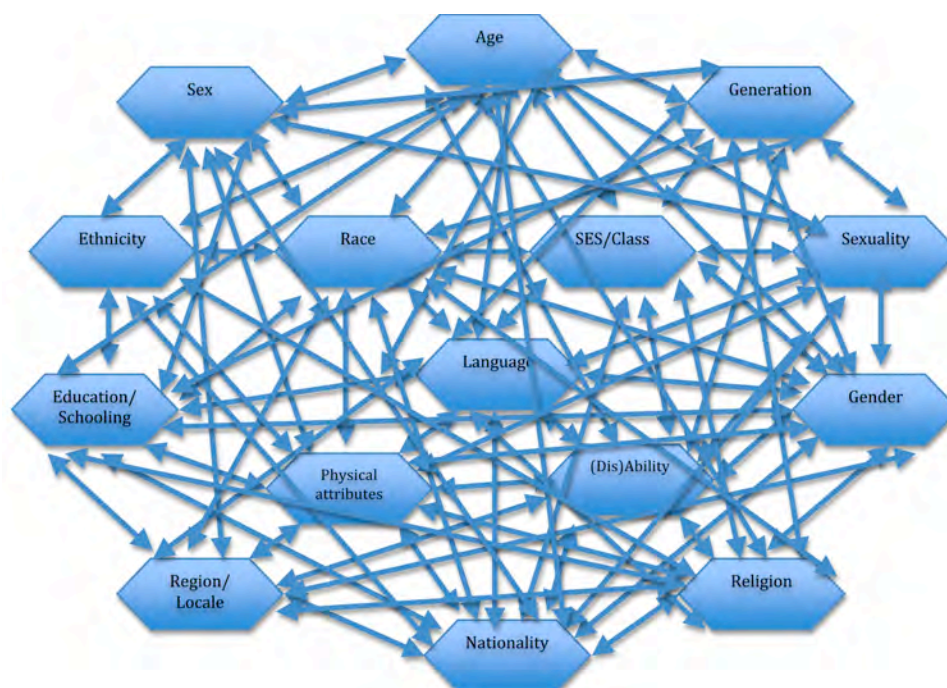


Figure 1. Diversity and Intersectionality

While the theory began as an exploration of the oppression of women within society, today sociologists strive to apply it not only to women, but also to discussions of all peoples. Knowing that Black people live in a racist society is insufficient for describing their experiences. It is also necessary to know their ethnicity, gender, generation, class, sexual orientation, etc. Likewise, intersectionality holds that hegemonic institutions and cultures as well as social semiotics reinforce oppressions, and shape them. One must constantly examine the ways hegemonic institutions and structures shape and are shaped by gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, class, nationality, etc. So, while a Supreme Court nominee is taken to task for saying that a wise Latina can sometimes come to a better judgement than a white male, we know that our identities and experiences provide the subjectivities for making us the unique individuals we are but they also affect all of us—not just people of color. Likewise, intersectionality theory is not simply for the benefit of women but for the benefit of society. And though whiteness is seen as the norm in society and subsequently the standard for all judgements, comparisons, epistemologies, ontologies, etc., whiteness is not the absence of bias—it is the presence of particular biases.

According to Leslie McCall (2005), there are three different approaches to studying intersectionality.

- (1) *Anticategorical Complexity*, which argues that social categories are an arbitrary construction of history and language and that they contribute little to understanding the ways in which people experience society. “For example, the category of gender was first understood as constituted by men and women, but questions of what distinguishes a man from a woman—is it biological sex, and if so what is biologically male and female?—led to the definition of

“new” social groups, new in the sense of being named but also perhaps in the sense of being created. There are no longer two genders but countless ones, no longer two sexes but five (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Other examples abound. In a remarkably short period of time, bisexual, transgendered, queer, and questioning individuals have been added to the original divide between gay and straight sexuality groups, and the social groups that constitute the category of race are widely believed to be fundamentally indefinable because of multiracialism (see, e.g., Fuss, 1991; Omi & Winant, 1994). And, theoretically, eventually all groups will be challenged and fractured in turn. As these examples make clear, this approach has been enormously effective in challenging the singularity, separateness, and wholeness of a wide range of social categories” (McCall, 2005, pp. 1778).

- (2) *Intercategorical, or Categorical, Complexity*, which, “begins with the observation that there are relationships of inequality among already constituted social groups, as imperfect and ever changing as they are, and takes those relationships as the center of analysis. The main task of the categorical approach is to explicate those relationships, and doing so requires the provisional use of categories. The concern is with the nature of the relationships among social groups and, importantly, how they are changing, rather than with the definition or representation of such groups per se. Finally, the type of categorical approach I am developing leaves open the possibility that broad social groupings more or less reflect the empirical realities of more detailed social groupings, thus minimizing the extent of complexity. ... The categorical approach focuses on the complexity of relationships among multiple social groups within and across analytical categories and not on complexities within single social groups, single categories, or both. The subject is multigroup, and the method is systematically comparative” (McCall, 2005, p. 1785).
- (3) *Intracategorical Complexity*, which, “begins with a unified intersectional core—a single social group, event, or concept—and works its way outward to analytically unravel one by one the influences of gender, race, class, and so on” (McCall, 2005, p. 1787). It recognizes the shortcomings of existing social categories and questions the way they draw boundaries of distinction. Hence, this approach is a cross between the intercategorical and categorical approaches.

According to Knudsen (2006), intersectionality seeks to examine the ways in which various socially and culturally constructed categories interact on multiple levels to manifest themselves as inequality in society. “Intersectionality is used to analyse the production of power and processes between gender, race, ethnicity etc., and is involved with analysing social and cultural hierarchies within different discourses and institutions. ... The theory of intersectionality stresses complexity. However, not all categories are necessarily mentioned” (Knudsen, 2006, pp. 62-63).

According to Crenshaw (1991, p. 1244), there are three ways of conceptualizing interseccionality: structural, political, and representational. Structural intersectionality proposes that strategies based solely on the experiences of women who do not share the same class or race backgrounds will be of limited help to women who because of race and class face different obstacles (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1246). This was and is a divide that exists within the feminist movement and that led women of color groups to emerge as separate from white women's groups: Black women, Latinas, etc. have many struggles in common with white women, but they also have many more struggles not in common because we live in not only a sexist society but also a racist and classist one. Hence, the feminist movement is not big enough, not inclusive enough for women of color. As Crenshaw (1991, p. 1250) asserts, women of color occupy positions both physically and culturally marginalized within dominant society, and so methods must be targeted directly to them in order to reach them.

According to Crenshaw (1991, p. 1252), political intersectionality proposes that women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas. The need to split one's political energies between two, sometimes opposing, groups is a dimension of intersectional disempowerment that men of color and white women seldom confront. Because women of color experience racism in ways not always the same as those experienced by men of color and sexism in ways not always parallel to experiences of white women, antiracism and feminism are limited, even on their own terms. Sexual stratification theory posits that women are stratified sexually by race. In traditional sociolinguistic studies on African American Language, Black men have been more favored in research than Black women because, for some, they have been seen as the true arbiters of African American Language. Only more recent research has focused on Black women (e.g., Jacobs-Huey, 2006; Lanehart, 2002, 2009; Troutman, 2001; Morgan, 1991, 1996, 1999, 2002). This seems unconscionable given that men and women are Black and both use language. To negate the existence and experience of one or to subordinate it is contrary to the goals of sociolinguistics and ELS.

The failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color, and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1252). Likewise, race-based priorities function to obscure the issues of women of color; feminist concerns often suppress minority experiences as well.

According to Crenshaw (1991, p. 1283), representational intersectionality purports that race and gender converge so that the concerns of minority women fall into the void between concerns about women's issues and concerns about racism. Debates over representation continually elide the intersection of race and gender in the popular culture's construction of images of women of color. Accordingly, an analysis of what may be termed "representational intersectionality" would include both the ways in which these images are produced through a confluence of prevalent narratives of race and gender, as well as a recognition of how contemporary critiques of racist and sexist representation marginalize women of color (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1283).

In summary, an intersectional analysis argues that: (1) racial and sexual subordination are mutually reinforcing; (2) Black women are commonly marginalized by a politics of race alone or gender alone; and (3) a political response to each form of subordination must at the same time be a political response to both (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1283).

2 An Example and Explanation

One example of the problem of intersectionality's complexity in ELS and sociolinguistics can be seen in a problem I encountered while organizing my Spring 2008 African American Women's Language conference. I wanted a researcher who studied Black lesbian language. I couldn't find anyone despite numerous inquiries. This is an example of diversity and intersectionality. "Black Lesbian Language" involved more than one degree beyond "the norm," if we agree or consider that society views the norm as White heterosexual male. So, while it is possible to find scholars who study Black male language or white female language—one degree from the norm—it is more difficult to find a scholar who studies Black lesbian language or Afro-Latina language. Society views "the norm" as White heterosexual male; these are more than one degree beyond "the norm": Black Lesbian Language, Afro-Latina Language, Upperclass Black Language. That is not to say that there are not people or scholars who are not Black and lesbian or Afro-Latina, but it is that the complexity of that representation is unfamiliar for ELS and sociolinguistics. As indicated by Carmen Fought at NWAV 37 (Fought, 2008), ELS and sociolinguistics still have trouble dealing with data and as William Kretzschmar (in press) has indicated, ELS and sociolinguistics are grappling with issues of scale even if they have not consciously recognized such.

Another explanation might be that we do not have enough Richard Baileys preparing and mentoring future scholars in ELS and sociolinguistics that encourage and insist in some cases that students or faculty *explore the language they see and hear around them* (Bailey, 2008) and the very language that actually exists and that they participate in. We need to move from the seemingly familiar to the possibly unfamiliar and understand that things are not always as they were—or appear to be.

3 Conclusions and Better Research Directions

Intersectionality might be more broadly useful as a way of mediating the tension between assertions of multiple identity and the ongoing necessity of group politics. Although we are more than the sum of our parts, each part has a say in our identity. According to Tabouret-Keller (1997, p. 323), individuals' ability to get into focus with whom they wish to identify is constrained: One can only behave according to the behavioral patterns of groups one finds it desirable to identify with to the extent that:

1. One can identify the groups;
2. One has both adequate access to the groups and ability to analyze their behavioral patterns;
3. The motivation for joining the group is sufficiently powerful, and is either reinforced or lessened by feedback from the group;
4. We have the ability to modify our behavior.

As such, according to Tabouret-Keller (1997, 323-24), language, however defined, precedes any of us at birth and the existential locus of *Homo sapiens*, be it individuals or groups, is in language itself. Intersectionality provides a basis for reconceptualizing X or Y or Z (e.g., race, sexuality, ability, class, gender, etc.) as a coalition between X/Y or X/Y/Z (e.g., race and sexuality, sexuality and ability, race and gender, race and class and gender, etc.). We can now dare to speak against internal exclusions and marginalizations, so that we might call attention to how the identity of "the group" has been centered on the intersectional identities of a few. Also, we recognize that identity politics take place at the site where categories intersect, thus seeming more fruitful than challenging the possibility of talking about categories at all.

Better research directions might be that we (1) *Explore the language we see and hear around us* and the very language that actually exists and that we participate in; (2) step outside the box of “the norm” to the human condition box; and (3) articulate speaker characteristics and acknowledge their significance to the identity and language production and use of speakers.

References

- Bailey, R.W. (1996). *Nineteenth-century English*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 1241-1299.
- Curzan, A. & J. Beithler. (2008). *Perspectives on English Language Studies: A Symposium in Honor of Richard W. Bailey*.
<<https://www.lsa.umich.edu/english/bailey/bailey.asp>>.
- Fausto-Sterling, A. (2000). *Sexing the body: Gender politics and the construction of sexuality*. New York: Basic Books.
- Fought, C. (2008). On the borderlands of communities: Taking linguistic research to *la frontera*. Plenary address, NWAV 37, Houston, TX, November 6-9.
- Fuss, D. (Ed.). (1991). *Inside/out: Lesbian theories, gay theories*. New York: Routledge.
- Jacobs-Huey, L. (2006). *From the kitchen to the parlor: Language and African American women's hair care*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Knudsen, S. (2006). Intersectionality: A theoretical inspiration in the analysis of minority cultures and identities in textbooks. *Caught in the web or lost in the textbook*, 61-76. 5 December 2008. <http://www.caen.iufm.fr/colloque_iartem/pdf/knudsen.pdf>.
- Kretzschmar, W. K. (in press). The beholder's eye: Using self-organizing maps to understand American dialects. In A. Curzan & M. Adams (Eds.), *Contours of English: Essays in honor of Richard W. Bailey*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Lanehart, S. L. (Ed.). (2009). *African American Women's Language: Discourse, education, and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press.
- Lanehart, S. L. (2002). *Sista, speak! Black women kinfolk talk about language and literacy*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Mann, S.A., & Kelley, L.R. (1997). Standing at the crossroads of modernist thought: Collins, Smith, and the New Feminist Epistemologies. *Gender and Society*, 11(4), 391-408.
- Mann, S.A., & Huffman, D.J. (2005). The decentering of Second Wave Feminism and the rise of the Third Wave. *Science and Society*, 69(1), 56-91.
- McCall, L. (2005). The complexity of intersectionality. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 30(3), 1771-1800. 5 December 2005. <<http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdf/10.1086/426800?cookieSet=1>>.
- Morgan, M. (1996). Conversational signifying: Grammar and indirectness among African American women. In E. Ochs, E. Schegloff, & S. Thompson (Eds.), *Interaction and grammar* (pp. 405-434). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Morgan, M. (1991). Indirectness and interpretation in African American women's discourse. *Pragmatics*, 1(4), 421-451.
- Morgan, M. (2002). *Language, discourse, and power in African American culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Morgan, M. (1999). "No woman no cry": Claiming African American women's place. In M. Bucholtz, A. C. Liang, & L. A. Sutton (Eds.), *Reinventing identities: Category to practice in language and gender* (pp. 27-45). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Omi, M., & Winant, H. (1994). *Racial formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. New York: Routledge.
- Tabouret-Keller, A. (1997). Language and identity. In F. Coulmas (Ed.), *The Handbook of Sociolinguistics* (pp. 315-326). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Troutman, D. (2001). African American women: Talking that talk. In S. L. Lanehart (Ed.), *Sociocultural and historical contexts of African American English* (pp. 211-237). Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Sonja L. Lanehart
 Department of English
 University of Texas at San Antonio
 1 UTSA Circle
 San Antonio, TX 78249-0643
 USA
 Sonja.Lanehart@utsa.edu