CHAPTER SIX

"THE WAY I CAN SPEAK FOR MYSELF": THE SOCIAL AND LINGUISTIC CONTEXT OF COUNSELING INTERVIEWS WITH AFRICAN AMERICAN ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN WASHINGTON, DC*

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Introduction

As noted by many contemporary scholars of African American Language (AAL), several of whom are represented in this volume, sociolinguists must turn greater attention toward obtaining a more balanced, integrated understanding of social *and* linguistic dynamics in African American communities. Language data, beyond that from word lists, reading passages, and interviews with fieldworkers, are necessary to understand how African Americans talk. Data from talk that is closer to real-world interactions—that is, talk in multiple contexts, from everyday social situations, and by a variety of speakers—will best inform

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sociolinguists' understanding of language within the sociocultural context of the African American community.

A related and especially critical need is to obtain more language data by African American girls and women. Despite some notable exceptions (e.g., Fordham, 1993; Goodwin, 1990, 2006; Morgan 2002; Nichols, 1983), the descriptive sociolinguistic literature on AAL has paid remarkably little attention to the speech of adolescent girls—particularly in East Coast metropolitan areas, where the pioneering studies of AAL were initiated. In this chapter, we address some of this gap by examining 10 interviews conducted with 10 African American adolescent girls living in southeast and northeast Washington, DC. A White woman, originally from Minnesota, collected the interviews in 2003. She was one of the youth's counselors. The purpose of the counseling interviews was not to elicit types of speech but to collect demographic information from the girls and to solicit their attitudes and ideologies about gender, sexuality, and urban life.

About the Interviews

Carissa Froyum collected the interviews that are the focus of this chapter. Carissa, originally from Minnesota, is a White woman who attended graduate school with the first author at North Carolina State University. Currently, she is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Northern Iowa. The first author, CM, had known of Carissa's research with the DC adolescents, and in 2006, when Carissa was finished conducting her own studies (Froyum, 2004, 2007), CM asked to listen to the interviews. Carissa enthusiastically agreed and volunteered to donate the anonymized interview files to CM to use in her own research, who then obtained IRB approval to analyze the interviews as a secondary data source, to complement her work on the language of African American women (Mallinson & Childs, 2007). All of the participants' names in this chapter are the same pseudonyms given by Carissa.

In 2001, Carissa worked as a counselor and AmeriCorps volunteer at "Urban Youth Network" (also a pseudonym) in Washington, DC. The Urban Youth Network is a non-profit organization located in northeast DC that was founded in the 1970s to serve at-risk, troubled, and homeless youth in DC. They provide short-term, 24-hour shelter and offer services that include crisis intervention and counseling. They also provide an after school program, and each year they hold a six-week long summer day camp program. Carissa writes about the adolescents at the Urban Youth Network:

> "In general, the teens at the camp are best understood as middle of the road...: fairly average students, sometimes involved in mischievous activities, sometimes involved in minor crimes, often with un-nurtured talents. They all attend school. Their families are generally (although not always) hardworking families that are concerned about their safety and wellbeing—enough to enroll them in a free summer camp to keep them off the streets." (Froyum, 2004, p. 21)

The youth that the Urban Youth Network serves come from southeast DC, northeast DC, and just outside of DC proper in Prince George's County, Maryland (Froyum, 2004). In the teens' neighborhoods, at the time of data collection in 2004, approximately 90 percent of the population was African American. Between 20 and 50 percent of children in these neighborhoods lived below the poverty level, around 25 percent of residents had not graduated from high school, and between 20 and 25 percent of adults were unemployed (Chaplin et al., 2004).

From summer 2001 until summer 2002, Carissa lived and worked at the Urban Youth Network. The next summer, in 2003, she returned to conduct an ethnographic study of the youths at the summer day camp. She observed 65 youth and interviewed 20 of them (9 boys, 11 girls). When the interviews were conducted, Carissa had worked at the Urban Youth Network for nearly two years, and she writes that she had established herself as a trustworthy adult, counselor, and confidant to the youths. The interviews she conducted with the adolescents were semi-structured, one-on-one, and lasted around an hour each. In this chapter, we are only examining the 10 interviews conducted with the adolescent girls (although interviews were recorded with 11 DC adolescent girls, one original interview tape was misplaced). They are 10 and 2/3 hours long in total and, as transcribed, consist of just under 106,000 words.

The goals of Carissa's research at the Urban Youth Network were to study how low-income African American teenagers respond to the demands of inner-city life. She examined the teens' strategies for coping with their surroundings, especially violence and poverty; how the girls and boys used their bodies to gain authority and respect; and how the teens constructed affirming identities for themselves through heterosexuality (Froyum, 2004, 2007). In the interviews, Carissa asked relatively structured questions, while also allowing room for rephrasing and variation in ordering of the questions, if needed. The main topics were friends/family and the teens' attitudes and ideologies about gender and sexuality.

On the topic of friends and family, some of the typical questions Carissa asked in her interviews with the girls were, "Who do you consider

to be your family," "If you could have the perfect family, what would it look like," and "Tell me about some of your close friends." On gender, Carissa asked the girls questions like, "Imagine that you went to bed tonight and tomorrow you woke up as a boy, how would your life be different," and "Picture for a minute, the perfect woman. What would she look like?" Finally, on sexuality, some of Carissa's typical questions were, "What do you think is a good age for someone to lose their virginity," and "What does it mean when people say that somebody else is gay?"

Although some of these questions may sound overly personal, it is important to remember that at the time these interviews were conducted, Carissa and the girls had known each other for nearly two years. The girls were familiar with Carissa as an individual as well as a counselor, and they were familiar with the counselor/counselee dynamic at the Urban Youth Network. Carissa further established a level of comfort and rapport with the girls during the interviews by approaching them as "experts" on their social world and by asking them questions that were pertinent to their lives and on topics they wanted to talk about.

Carissa had also been trained, at the Urban Youth Network, to be an effective youth and family counselor. She writes:

> "I was trained in competency-based counseling techniques designed to build on family strengths and connections. This training taught me to 'read process,' which meant paying attention to a variety of interaction cues: the dynamics in the room (who was talking when, where everyone was sitting), body language, and unspoken issues. It was in these processes, and not the content of complaints, that relationships would be strengthened, I learned." (Froyum, 2004, p. 2)

In her interviews with the adolescent girls, these techniques seem to have proven helpful. While the counseling dynamic is still hierarchical (Carissa as counselor, the girls as counselees), the focus of the interview is on rapport, getting participants to open up, and providing emotional support.

For the most part, Carissa and the adolescent girls completed long, comfortable interviews with each other. Occasionally, the interviews were difficult for Carissa, who was a relative newcomer to the teenagers' backgrounds, social scene, and culture. In her work, she comments that she had some difficulty understanding the teens' "slang" and their African American speech patterns (Froyum, 2004). But for the most part, Carissa and the girls were talkative; the girls responded eagerly to Carissa's questions, told lengthy narratives, and volunteered information about themselves. Carissa mentioned that several of the girls asked to be interviewed, and some said the interviews were one of the most fun things they did all summer (Froyum, 2004).

The Counseling Interview in Linguistic Perspective

Counseling interviews such as the ones conducted by Carissa with the DC girls provide a type of language data that sociolinguists—who usually try to study speakers' "natural" conversation—do not typically work with. For the DC girls, the speech in their interviews with Carissa would not approximate the sort of interactions they have with their friends on a daily basis. Yet, they might approximate the sort of everyday linguistic interactions the girls have with familiar White adults, like a familiar teacher or other professional. Examining the DC girls' interviews should therefore speak to the dynamics of intercultural and intergenerational communication.

Data from counseling interviews may also be interesting to sociolinguists because the counseling interview as a particular *type* of interview may tap into speakers' ranges of linguistic styles in ways that other interviews do not. Because counseling interviews often raise emotional and personal issues that are grounded in the complexities and dynamics of speakers' lives, the language data they yield may be more expressive than language data obtained in more impersonal interview situations. Shifting into different speaking styles to express facets of a speaker's identity may also be more salient in a counseling context. The interview with Carissa may have tapped into how the DC girls use language to present themselves during face-to-face encounters with a young White female adult, and Carissa herself may have been more open to understanding the girls' behaviors, attitudes, and ideologies in ways that a stranger interviewing them might not have been. For these reasons, language data from counseling interviews, in comparison to more traditional interviews, may illuminate different aspects of the relationship between individuals, the symbolic ways they represent their social and linguistic selves, and collective society (Goffman, 1956).

At the same time, understanding the linguistic nuances of counseling interviews, such as the interviews with these DC teens, may help counselors and educators better relate to and work with African American women and girls. In the sociolinguistics literature, the articles in the recently published *Handbook of Clinical Linguistics* (Ball et al., 2008) exemplify how linguistic principles and methods can be applied to the clinical study of language disabilities and assessment. In return, the counseling literature is also paying increased attention to the fact that counselors must be attuned to the language backgrounds of their counselees in order to provide them with the best counseling services possible. Beaman (1994) argues, for example, that mental health

professionals must be cognizant of cultural biases toward AAL in order to engage in effective therapeutic relationships with African Americans.

Similarly, Chen-Hayes, Chen, & Athar (1999) argue that counselors must be attuned to the special needs of counselees who do not speak mainstream US English (MUSE). They point out myriad ways that MUSE–speaking counselees are privileged in the counseling situation (pp. 23–26). For example, most counseling materials are written in MUSE with little accommodation for those of other language backgrounds. Also, multicultural counseling tends to focus primarily on race and ethnicity and often overlooks language as a critical cultural factor for counselees going through the counseling process. Finally, counselors may perceive non-dominant language–speaking clients as lacking in skills, intelligence, or ability. To redress these problems, Chen-Hayes, Chen, & Athar (1999) suggest ways that counselors can support clients from non-MUSE-speaking backgrounds. One of their suggestions includes "listen[ing] to the needs and desires of non-dominant English speakers and English speakers who use a dialect or accent. These collaborative efforts work toward community empowerment and solutions, which allow self-determination amongst non-dominant speakers" (p. 27).

These and other studies suggest that understanding the nuances of linguistic behavior can help explain patterns of social interaction that might otherwise be unclear or confusing to counselors. As Goffman (1956) points out, individuals constantly engage in acts of deference and expressions of demeanor with each other, and often these behaviors are signaled by communicative acts. Understanding communication broadly is thus relevant to all avenues of social science inquiry. But more concretely, understanding specific intricacies of cross-cultural and intercultural (mis)communication in counseling situations—and addressing intra-speaker differences—can lead to better support for those individuals and groups who are marginalized in society. With this in mind, we examine some linguistic particulars of the interviews between Carissa and the DC girls.

Linguistic Dynamics

In examining some of the linguistic details of the interviews between Carissa and the DC girls, this chapter delves more into counselor-counselee talk. With data on actual language as used by Carissa and the girls, it becomes possible to investigate how the girls linguistically experience the counseling interview. These data may suggest how much the girls accommodate to the idea of being interviewed by their

counselor—how much they talk, how they talk, and whether the manner and amount of their talk differ by individual girl.

Table 1 provides a short summary of the interview dynamics. As Table 1 reveals, the girls provided interviews that were an average of 64 minutes. They uttered on average 66% of the total words in the interview, and on average they took 61% of the turn-time during the interview. These data were derived using features of the Sociolinguistic Archive and Analysis Project (SLAAP) software (see Kendall, 2007, 2008).

Table 1: Descriptive Details from the Girls' Interviews as a Group

	Mean	**Standard Deviation**
Total words per interview	10,591.7	3,443.9
Speaker's word count per interview	7,315.3	3,452.5
Speaker's % words per interview	66%	11%
Length of interview, in minutes	64.0	16.4
Speaker's turn-time, in minutes	40.5	17.0
Speaker's % turn-time, in minutes	61%	11%

Table 2 provides a breakdown of some descriptive information about the interviews for each individual speaker. In Table 2, each interviewee's talk is expressed in terms of her total words spoken and her length of time "holding the floor" (which includes her utterances as well as the pauses that occur between them). As shown in Table 2, Shirlisa's interview is by far the longest, at just under 95 minutes, and she talks by far the most. Comparing her to Calandra, who had the shortest interview, Shirlisa spoke over four times more words and held the floor for almost four times as long—in an interview that was only just over twice the length. Alayna also stands out as having a longer interview. It seems that both Alayna and Shirlisa had acclimated to the interview as a speech event, as they are the longest and most voluble talkers in the group.

Table 2: Descriptive Details from the Individual Girls' Interviews

	Total words	**Speaker # words**	**% Total words**	**Int. length (min.)**	**Turn-time (min.)**	**% Time**
Alayna	14,339 **(+)**	10,851 **(+)**	76%	70.8	48.8	69%
Asia	9,530	5,180	54% **(-)**	66.9	33.9	51%
Calandra	6,220 **(-)**	3,364 **(-)**	54% **(-)**	41.7 **(-)**	19.7 **(-)**	47% **(-)**
Elisa	7,591	4,419	58%	45.0 **(-)**	22.5 **(-)**	50%
Grace	10,758	8,533	79% **(+)**	64.4	47.1	73% **(+)**
Keisha	11,340	8,304	73%	66.8	44.1	66%
Latania	9,425	5,741	61%	60.2	36.2	60%
Shantell	12,934	9,349	72%	81.4 **(+)**	53.8	66%
Shawna	6,759 **(-)**	3,545 **(-)**	52% **(-)**	48.8	23.5	48%
Shirlisa	17,021 **(+)**	13,867 **(+)**	81% **(+)**	94.7 **(+)**	75.2 **(++)**	79% **(+)**
Mean	10,591.7	7,315.3	66%	64.0	40.5	61%
St. Dev.	3,443.9	3,452.5	11%	16.4	17.0	11%

(-) and (+) indicate 1 standard deviation below or above mean value for a given feature, respectively

Sociolinguists who study patterns of talk among African Americans generally examine how often speakers use nonstandard linguistic features, whether they are features of AAL or other nonstandard features (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2006). Table 3 provides data on the DC adolescent girls' use of four features. First is the absence of third singular (s), as in *She look_ cute* for *She looks cute*. Second is the absence of the copula in singular and plural contexts, as in *She _ funny* for *She is funny* and *They _ talking* for *They are talking*. Third is the use of *was* and *wasn't* in contexts that would take either *were* or *weren't* in MUSE—for example, *We was outside* for *We were outside* and *They wasn't home* for *They weren't home*, respectively. Fourth is *g*-dropping on words (typically verbs) ending in –*ing*, as in *She's goin' swimmin'* for *She's going swimming* (strictly speaking, "*g*"-dropping, a common term for the production of *-in'* for *-ing*, does not actually involve the "dropping" of a segment; it is the production of the alveolar nasal sound, [n], in place of the velar nasal sound, [ŋ]). The first two features are characteristic of AAL, whereas vernacular English speakers of a range of ethnic, regional, and economic backgrounds use the third and fourth features.

Table 3: Use of Four Nonstandard Features from the Girls' Interviews as a Group

Feature	% Absent out of Total N
Absence of third singular (s) (as in, *She look_ cute*)	57.8% of 637
Absence of singular copula (as in, *She _ funny*)	37.9% of 456
Absence of plural copula (as in, *They _ talking*)	64.5% of 431
Use of *was* in *were* contexts (as in, *We was outside*)	80% of 120
Use of *wasn't* in *weren't* contexts (as in, *They wasn't home*)	100% of 8
G-dropping in -*ing* contexts (as in, *She's goin' swimmin'*)	83.4% of 1621

The data from Table 3 are interesting to sociolinguists simply because little quantitative language data from African American adolescent girls have been published—especially in comparison to the considerable research that has been done on the speech of young urban African American males (Foster, 1995; Morgan, 2004). In addition, these data are interesting because, as noted earlier, the type of counseling interview that Carissa conducted with the DC girls yields different speech than the type that is usually collected and analyzed in sociolinguistic research. In prior studies that have looked quantitatively at the speech of African Americans, such as Fasold (1972) and Wolfram (1969), the language data come from more informal fieldwork studies. In this chapter, the counseling interview data provide a different point of comparison.

Yet, the data from the DC girls do not show a homogeneous picture. Table 4 provides data for the same four nonstandard variables, this time by individual speaker.

Table 4. Use of Four Nonstandard Features from the Individual Girls' Interviews

Speaker	Absence of 3rd sg. (s)	Absence of sg. & pl. copula	*Was/wasn't* for *were/weren't*	*G*-dropping
% Absent out of Total N				
Alayna	29.8% of 84 **(-)**	24.4% of 119 **(-)**	60.9% of 23	66.2% of 231
Asia	54.2% of 48	41.0% of 61	72.7% of 11	85.2% of 88
Calandra	90.9% of 33 **(+)**	71.0% of 31	100.0% of 1	92.8% of 111
Elisa	89.7% of 39	72.7% of 33	83.3% of 6	96.2% of 53
Grace	72.7% of 66	50.5% of 91	95.5% of 22	92.3% of 169
Keisha	84.8% of 92	85.5% of 138 **(+)**	93.3% of 15	94.3% of 227
Latania	89.8% of 49	67.5 of 77	83.3% of 6	94.4% of 108
Shantell	60.0% of 80	62.9% of 143	100.0% of 28	93.1% of 274
Shawna	48.0% of 25	35.8% of 53	100.0% of 3	54.9% of 51 **(-)**
Shirlisa	18.2% of 121 **(-)**	19.0% of 142 **(-)**	38.5% of 13 **(--)**	69.6% of 309
Mean	63.8%	53.0%	82.8%	83.9%
St. Dev.	26.2	22.4	20.3	14.8

***(-)** and **(+)** indicate 1 standard deviation below or above mean value for a given feature, respectively*

The data in Table 4 show a mixed picture of the range of variation in the girls' use of these four nonstandard features. Often, it is theorized that the language of women and girls is closer to the standard than men and boys from similar linguistic backgrounds, but real-world data tend not to be as clear-cut. On the one hand, all of the DC girls use these four nonstandard features at least some of the time. The girls use some of the features at extremely high rates: for example, in the interview speech of every girl except Shawna, the girls drop their *g*'s from -*ing* words at rates of around 80 percent.

But to complicate things, we also see in Table 4 that some of the girls use the non-standard features far more often than others. Keisha uses all four of the nonstandard forms at least 85 percent of the time. But speakers like Alayna and Shirlisa are far less vernacular speakers. Alayna and Shirlisa, in fact, fall one standard deviation below the mean for three of the four nonstandard variables that are analyzed. These data speak to the range of variation in the ways that individual African American girls and women talk. To further explore individual language differences, we now discuss some details of the personal and family backgrounds of Alayna, Shirlisa, and Keisha.

Individual Language Differences

The quantitative data in Table 4, which reveal individual differences in language use by the DC girls, raise several questions for researchers who are studying the ways African American women and girls talk. Some African American girls and women may indeed use more standard forms; at the same time, they are not necessarily more standard speakers on the whole. Rather, African American women and girls from different regional and economic backgrounds in different social situations, may think about, talk about, and use language in a variety of different ways—and sociocultural information about the speakers is necessary to fill out the linguistic picture. For Alayna, Shirlisa, and Keisha, various ideological, cultural, and social factors help suggest why these girls display very different linguistic repertoires, even though they are similar to each other in their personal backgrounds.

Alayna is a 14-year old girl in the tenth grade. She lives with her adoptive mother in a poor, predominantly African American neighborhood on the northeastern side of Washington, DC. Nowadays, Alayna is in regular contact with her biological mother and periodically sees her biological father. She describes her earlier rocky start in life, when she and her siblings were removed from their biological mother's home because of

drug abuse and neglect and were put into foster care. Alayna says these experiences have made her stronger and more accomplished. She explains in her interview:

> "Most, most kids, uhh, come, grow up in- in a ghetto neighborhood.… North Carolina, Philadelphia, New York. It's uh, it's- it's- a basically a ghetto everywhere, like, a ghetto place. And most people think, they grow up in that place, growing up in a place like in the ghetto is, it's, it makes you stronger. Cause it weakens you, but it also makens [sic] you stronger. … Because if you live in a ghetto neighborhood and you go through a lot of things, like, you go through people shooting around you, or you getting raped or molested or something like that, I mean, going through a lot of stuff in that neighborhood, it makes you stronger and makes you carry yourself with this certain type of respect that, that no one can, p- pull you down or pull you back, from what you want, from your goal, from your dreams."

Alayna, who was described by Carissa as "mature, open, and articulate," projects the confidence that she says her life experiences have led her to develop. When asked to pick one thing she likes most about herself, Alayna answered, softly, "The way I can speak for myself. Basically. Yeah, that's it." Alayna later describes how a boy she likes once complimented her on the way she speaks: "He said I was holding nice conversation, so I was just blushing," and she ends the story with a sigh. Alayna's dream is to go to college and become a lawyer, so that she can "defend people" who need help.

Shirlisa is also 14 years old, and she is in the eighth grade. Shirlisa is tall and fit, and she refers to herself as someone who used to be a "tomboy." In the future, Shirlisa says, she wants to be a pediatrician, because she loves children. As a child, however, she faced multiple obstacles. Her biological mother used drugs when Shirlisa was a baby, and Shirlisa was turned over to foster care when she was 18 months old. Shirlisa now lives with her adoptive mother, and she is in regular contact with her biological mother, but her biological father has been in and out of her life and recently has gone missing. In her interview, Shirlisa explains a clash of perspectives between herself and her "mom" (her adoptive mother) that arose over her mom's opinion of Shirlisa's friend:

> "And then my friend Sharqueda, my mom, she, my, my mom was trying to raise me in me not talking all ghetto and slang and the talk. … She has a real problem with that. And my friend Sharqueda, she's like that, and I hang with her. And my mom has, she doesn't quite like her because she might not, if she walks in a group of older f-, um, older adults, I might say hi cause of how I'm raised but she might not. And she [my mom] has a

> problem with that and I explained to my mom one time, I said, she [Sharqueda], cause she doesn't have nobody in her house that can really tell her what's wrong and what's right.… And so I told my mom, I said, instead of you looking at it as her as a bad person by her coming over here and by me hanging with her, we can change the way that she acts, 'til like, she can start saying hello to people."

Each of the excerpts from the interviews with Alayna and Shirlisa reveals that language is integral to their self-concept and personal identity. On the one hand, there is pride for Alayna, in both how she can speak "for herself" and the "nice conversation" that she is able to hold. On the other hand, for Shirlisa, there is tension—tension between the conversational norms that Shirlisa's mom wants her to maintain and be surrounded by, versus those of her friend, Sharqueda, who is seen as not having had the kind of "home training" (see Dixson & DeCuir-Gunby, this volume) that would enable her to know what sort of casual adolescent-to-adult conversation is "wrong" and what sort is "right."

All of the interviews with the DC adolescent girls centered on themes of family, gender, and sexuality; Carissa asked no specific questions about language. The fact that Shirlisa and Alayna were the only girls to bring up issues surrounding language at all—combined with the fact that they are the most standard speakers of all the girls (see Table 4) and the longest talkers (see Table 2)—seems significant and related. In short, Shirlisa and Alayna's language attitudes and ideologies appear to go hand in hand with their less vernacular speech as well as their apparent readiness to talk at length during their interviews with Carissa.

Adding a different linguistic piece to the puzzle, however, is Keisha. Keisha is 15 years old and in the ninth grade. During the summer, she lives with her grandparents, so that she can live close enough to attend the Urban Youth Network summer camp. During the rest of the year she lives with her mother and siblings; her father is in and out of her life. Carissa describes Keisha as "confident," and Keisha tells several stories in her interview about being tough. She describes how she successfully stood up to a boy in school who was trying to take her lunch money, and she tells Carissa that she taught her younger sister how to fight to be able to protect herself later in life. As Keisha put it, "I let her beat me up. I be telling her to beat me up… so she can learn how to fight when she gets older. Don't you know, they be bullies in schools?" When asked what she plans to do after high school, Keisha proclaimed, "Go to college. And then I wanna- I wanna have a master's degree, and I want to have a bachelor's degree and I want to work for the secretary of the state. I mean, the secretary- the gov- the secretary of the government or- one of them."

Carissa, in her notes on the interview, writes that Keisha's reputation at the Urban Youth Network is "definitely as kind of like a busy body, really socially outgoing." She mentions that Keisha was "very talkative," that she "likes to chat a lot," and that she liked the interview so much that she asked Carissa if they could do a second one together. As seen in Table 4, Keisha is also one of the most vernacular speakers of these DC girls. Carissa picks up on this fact and writes, "At times, a young person (mostly Keisha) would use a slang term I did not know. In all of these interactions, our cultural differences were highlighted" (Froyum, 2004, p. 23). Although Keisha did not specifically bring up the topic of language in her interview, as Alayna and Shirlisa did, it is clear from Keisha's sociolinguistic data as well as the qualitative data about her as a speaker that language plays a significant role in her self-presentation. She is talkative and chatty with Carissa, uses nonstandard features at high rates, and is always up on the latest slang.

The qualitative data about Alayna, Shirlisa, and Keisha as speakers and individuals, with various backgrounds, experiences, attitudes, and ideologies, can inform the interpretation of quantitative linguistic data that is otherwise more abstract and decontextualized. For example, family attitudes may play a role in encouraging Shirlisa's relatively standard speech (e.g., Shirlisa's mom's negative orientation toward "slang"). For Alayna, who connects her self-esteem to others' positive reinforcement of her ability to "hold nice conversation," beliefs about herself as a person may be intricately tied into beliefs about herself as a "good" speaker. Finally, for Keisha, there are implicit connections between her higher use of vernacular features and her personality as someone who is socially outgoing and confident enough to use the newest slang. Given the psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic complexities of human communication, profiles of speakers like Alayna, Shirlisa, and Keisha can add depth and nuance to the ways that scholars understand the relationships between the mind, self, language, and society.

Conclusions

In future work with these DC adolescent girls' counseling interviews, we will continue to investigate how and why the interviews differ from each other linguistically and socially and how these findings relate to the broader study of AAL. Some of the questions to be further explored concern whether some of the girls, like Alayna and Shirlisa, are in fact "more standard" than the other girls, and whether some girls, like Keisha, are "more nonstandard"—or whether some of the girls have a broader or

narrower stylistic range. There are also different styles of talk within each of the interviews, and the extent to which all of the girls, as well as Carissa, transition into and out of multiple speaking styles is another dimension. Perhaps some of the linguistic data are related to the experiences that the different girls and Carissa had during their counseling interviews and/or their investment in them. Finally, we might also ask how the data from these girls compare to data from the adolescent boys who Carissa also interviewed and to what extent the data from these interviews shed light on speech norms within the broader African American community in Washington, DC.

All these questions and more are relevant as sociolinguists continue to expand our knowledge base about the use of AAL by speakers in places like Washington, DC, and beyond. But in the meantime, perhaps the more immediate take-away message from these interviews is simply that of heterogeneity; the DC girls, who share similar racial, ethnic, regional, economic, and educational backgrounds, do not all speak in the same ways. Because language data are not context-free but rather situationally embedded, as Charity & Price (2008) also argue, it is important for those who study language in society to (1) develop linguistic profiles of speakers and their communities, (2) determine which features are the most common, and (3) take this information to the broader public.

If educators, counselors, social workers, and other professionals have information from sociolinguists that paints a detailed sociolinguistic picture, it will become possible for them to better understand where and how linguistic and cultural differences occur in the speech populations they are working with. At the same time, if sociolinguists have information from educators, counselors, social workers, and others that describes the specific dynamics of a range of African American cultural contexts, sociolinguists can better analyze why different speakers and groups of speakers use language in the manner and contexts they do. Multiple perspectives—psychological, linguistic, sociological, and otherwise—should be triangulated to provide a fuller understanding of the language, self, and society interface within African American populations. The challenge thus remains for sociolinguists, counselors, educators, and others to work together to obtain language data from a range of African American speakers—girls and boys, women and men, of a range of regional, cultural, economic, and educational backgrounds—in a variety of real-world, contextualized social settings. These types of studies best serve those individuals who our research should aim to serve: the speakers who are providing researchers with data, in their own words.

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