Courtney Wenande

Class: Senior
Major: Psychology

I am a native of Rapid City, S.D., and attended Murray State on a partial scholarship for collegiate soccer. As an undergraduate, I participated in MSU's study abroad program, was a member of Psi Chi, and conducted several independent research projects. After graduating in 2004 with my B.A. in psychology, I plan to enroll in MSU's master's program in clinical psychology. Ultimately, I hope to obtain a Ph.D. in clinical psychology.

ABSTRACT

Look What Words Can Say Dawg!

The purpose of the present study was to determine how Caucasians viewed Standard English vs. slang street language. Forty-one students between the ages of 18 and 44 were randomly assigned to one of four audiotape conditions. The tapes contained either an African American or Caucasian male speaking Standard English or in slang street language. The content of all four of the tapes was substantially equivalent. The subjects first received a brief description of the person on the tape prior to listening to the contents on the tape. The participants then completed a 30-item questionnaire that measured likeableness and competence. The results indicated that, regardless of their race, speakers of standard English were rated higher on both likeableness and competence. There was a significant interaction between language and race of the speaker.

FACULTY MENTORS

Alysia D. Ritter is a professor of psychology who, during her 16 years at MSU, has taught general psychology, child development, perception, and research methods and design. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Houston. Research interests include sensations, perceptions, attitudes and beliefs pertaining to behavior. She actively encourages student involvement in psychological research. Undergraduates she has mentored have published 16 articles and given 40 conference presentations.
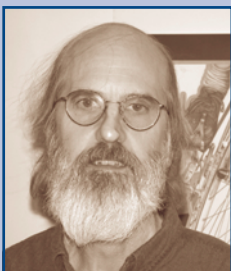
Joel Royalty is a professor in MSU's Department of Psychology. His research interest is the multivariate analysis of behavior through the application of incremental partitioning of variance. Recent research includes the identification of pre-college variables associated with level of drug use in college students, the operation of a halo effect in student ratings of instructors, the salience of attitudes towards the invasion of Iraq on ratings of the overall job performance of President Bush, predictors of level of student satisfaction with service learning courses, and the analysis of type II error rates in published psychological research.

Look What Words Can Say Dawg!

Can attributions really be made based only on the language used by a speaker? Communicating with people is the typical way to learn about someone. It has been found that not only by listening to the meaning of the conversation, but also by the way the person delivers his/her words determines interpersonal appraisal (Alberti and Emmons; Barbee and Keil; Gamer and Rubin, as cited in Koch and Gross, 1997). Research has shown that people who speak the "in group" language are perceived as having more positive attributes than those in other groups (Doss and Gross, 1994). An example is the language spoken by adult African Americans in the United States. Among adult African Americans, the "in group" language is considered to be Standard English, perhaps because African American adults consider Standard English usage as the way they must talk in order to be accepted into the mainstream of society (Gamer and Rubin, cited in Koch and Gross). Standard English is considered "proper" English that is grammatically correct. An example of an "out group" language among adult African Americans is Black English (Doss and Gross). Black English has been thought of as a slang, hybrid language, but it is considered a legitimate language because it follows the characteristics of any valid language (Dillard; Smitherman, as cited in White et al., 1998). Black English is commonly called Ebonics. Black English differs from Standard English by "distinct speech rhythms, voice inflections, varied tonal patterns, creative vocabulary, incorrect grammar and variability of pronunciation" (Burling, as cited in Doss and Gross, p. 285).

Doss and Gross (as cited in Doss and Gross, 1994) found evidence that African Americans who speak Black English are judged more negatively, even by African Americans. Later, Doss and Gross (1994) extended their study by adding code-switching, which is a combination of Black English and Standard English. Code-switching was defined by Grosjean as (as cited in Doss and Gross), "the alternate use of two or more languages in the same utterance or conversation" (p. 284).

Doss and Gross (1994) evaluated 63 African American male and 67 African American female students whose ages ranged from 17 to 27. Students were randomly assigned to an audiotape session of an African American male speaking Black English, Standard English, or code-switching (combination). On each of the tapes, the speaker addressed five interpersonal situations. After listening to the audiotapes, participants completed the Interpersonal Evaluation Inventory (Kelly, Kern, Kirkley, Patterson and Keane, as cited in Doss and Gross). According to Anderson, this questionnaire measures interpersonal attraction and likeableness (Doss and Gross).

Speakers of Standard English were rated more positively than speakers of both Black English and code-switching on all of the adjectives presented on the questionnaire. In the same study, males rated each of the speakers higher in likeableness did than the females. This gender difference is consistent with previous research that found that people feel more comfortable in the presence of individuals of the same gender (Blake, Maisiak, Brown and Koplan; Fowler, Wagner, Iachini and Johnson; Gould and Weil, as cited in Doss and Gross).

Previous research has also demonstrated that people of any race may change their style of language depending on the type of situation (informal or formal) presented (Ball, Giles and Hewstone; Street and Giles, as cited in Doss and Gross, 1994). Is there a "right" situation in which to use each of these languages? What if, in a formal setting, an African American uses Standard English and in an informal setting uses Black English?

White et al. (1998) tested 55 African American undergraduates ranging in age from 17 to 40 to see if there was a proper place and time to use Black English over Standard English. There were four audiotapes recorded with the same African American male speaking Standard English in both a formal setting and in an informal setting and speaking Black English in both a formal and an informal setting. Before listening to the tape, each person responded to the African Self-Consciousness Scale (Baldwin and Bell, as cited in White et al.). This scale was designed to determine the extent to which African Americans identify with their culture.

Each participant listened to all four of the audiotapes, with order of presentation counterbalanced. After each audiotape, the speaker was rated on the following dimensions: friendly/unfriendly, kind/cruel, trustworthy/untrustworthy, and good/bad.

In the formal situations, whether the person was highly identified or without a strong African American identification, speakers of Standard English were rated more positively than speakers of Black English. Participants also rated speakers of Standard English more positively in informal situations (White et al., 1998).

Smitherman (as cited in White et al., 1998) argued that most middle-class African Americans see Black English as the language of a lower class society. The findings of White et al. and Doss and Gross (1994) that African Americans rate speakers of Standard English more positively used samples consisting largely of college students. This raises the question of whether the above findings are functions of age and/or educational level.

Koch and Gross (1997) tested 53 African American female and 43 African American male junior high school students in a rural southern community. The students listened to an audiotape of an African American male speaking in either black or Standard English. On each audiotape the speaker discussed three different situations. The students rated the speaker on a revised version of the Interpersonal Evaluation Inventory (Kelly, Kern, Kirkley, Patterson and Keaneas cited in Koch and Gross). Koch and Gross found that the junior high school students rated speakers of Black English more positively than speakers of Standard English.

Heath (as cited in Koch and Gross, 1997) found that children between the ages of 11 and 14 appeared to prefer the language that was used by their culture. Identifying with the language associated with one's culture has been demonstrated to create self-identity. Young African Americans may think they are looked down upon because they are a minority group. Because of this, they may identify more with their own ethnic group to raise their own self-esteem by feeling comfortable within a group. Some African American youth may even develop negative attitudes about the "in group" language, making it easier to uphold their own cultural identity (Phinney; Yinger, as cited in Koch and Gross).

It has also been argued that minority groups, including African American young people, tend to think that speaking Standard English instead of Black English is a way of giving up on their cultural heritage. Further, young people may be more likely to respond this way than adults because it is a way for them to set cultural boundaries and to show their peers their group (cultural) commitment (Naremore; Smitherman; Speicher and McMahon; Speicher and McMahon; Yinger, as cited in Koch and Gross, 1997). Gamer and Rubin (as cited in Koch and Gross, p. 224) believe that as African Americans begin to interact and compete for jobs alongside of Caucasians, they view Standard English as being more positive, because it is a "tool for survival."

The purpose of the present study was to examine the effects, on perceptions of the speaker, of English usage of both African American and Caucasian speakers. The participants were college students of Caucasian descent. Subjects listened to a tape with either an African American or a Caucasian male speaking in slang street language or Standard English. The speaker on the tape discussed what he had done the past weekend. Subjects rated the speaker on a scale of competence and likeableness.

The first hypothesis was that subjects would rate the speaker of Standard English more positively than the speaker of slang street language (Gamer and Rubin as cited in Koch and Gross, 1997). Based on the research literature reviewed above, it was assumed that subjects would be mature and old enough to consider themselves to be in the "mainstream of society" and would, therefore, consider Standard English as the "in group" language. This hypothesis was also based on the fact that all of the subjects were enrolled in a university in which 87 percent of the students are Caucasian.

The second hypothesis was that participants would rate the African American male speaking slang street language more positively than the Caucasian speaking the same street language. This hypothesis was based on the assumption that slang street language has not been seen as the "in group" language for the Caucasian culture, but that among the African American youth it is seen as the "in group" language of their culture. In addition, it was assumed that Caucasians might be able to relate to slang street language when spoken by an African American but not when spoken by a Caucasian.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 41 students (29 females and 12 males) enrolled in Murray State University general psychology classes. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 44. All participants were treated in accordance with "Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct" (American Psychological Association, 1992) and the research design and procedures were approved by the Murray State University Institutional Review Board.

Materials

Stimulus materials consisted of four audiotapes. On two of the audiotapes, an African American male spoke Standard English or slang street language. On the other two audiotapes, a Caucasian male spoke Standard English or slang street language. Each of the tapes presented the speaker discussing what he had done during the past weekend.

The recorded scripts were written by a 22-year-old African American male who had grown up in Mississippi and who was fluent in both Standard English and slang street language. In order to validate the correct usage and interpretation of the slang street language, five African American males reviewed the content of the two tapes. There was a consensus that the content and meaning of the slang street language script and the Standard English script were equivalent. The two scripts are presented in Appendices A and B.

A 30-item questionnaire, created for this study, was designed to measure each participant's view of the speaker on the variables of competence and likeableness. Sixteen questions were used to measure perceived competence and 14 provided a measure of perceived likeableness. Likeableness items included ratings of respectability, friendliness, open-mindedness, approachability, helpfulness and fairness. Competence items included education, intelligence, communication skills, rationalism, goal achievement, occupation and work ethic.

Individual items used to measure likeableness and competence were rated on a five-point Likert scale. Overall ratings on each of the two dependent variables were operationally defined as the sum of the responses to the individual items.

Procedure

After signing an informed consent form, each subject was given an instruction sheet that included a description (including race) of the speaker on the audiotape. The participants were randomly assigned to listen to one of the four audiotapes. After listening to the audiotape, they received the questionnaire designed to provide ratings of competence likeableness. After the participants completed the questionnaire they were given a debriefing statement and a copy of the informed consent form. Participants were tested in groups no larger than eight.

Results

The effects of type of English usage and race of the speaker on ratings of the likeableness of the speaker were assessed with a 2 X 2 (slang street language vs. Standard English by Caucasian speaker vs. African American speaker) factorial analysis of variance. A second 2 X 2 factorial analysis of variance assessed the effects of type of English usage and race of the speaker on ratings of competence of the speaker.

There were significant main effects of type of English usage on ratings of both likeableness, $F (I, 37) = 27.79, p < .00001$, and competence, $F (I, 37) = 23.02, p < .00001$. On both variables, speakers of Standard English were rated more positively than speakers of slang street language. There were no significant main effects of race of speaker on ratings of likeableness, $F (I, 37) = 1.62, p > .05$, and competence, $F (I, 37) < 1.00$.

There were significant interactions between type of English usage and race of speaker in both ratings of likeableness, $F (I, 37) = 11.47, p < .005$, and competance, $F (I, 37) = 6.63, p < .05$. Table 1 presents means of ratings of likeableness broken down by race of speaker and type of English useage and Table 2 presents means of ratings of competence broken down by race of speaker and type of English useage.

To determine the source of the significant interactions, analyses of simple effects were performed using Tukey's HSD tests to compare the mean scores of participants under each level of one independent variable while holding the level of the other independent variable constant. There were no significant differences between the ratings of likeability and competence of African American and Caucasian speakers of Standard English.

However, for ratings of both likeableness and competence, the African American speaker of slang street language was rated significantly higher than the Caucasian speaker of slang street language. Further, while there were no significant differences between the ratings of the African American who spoke slang street language and Standard English, the Caucasian who spoke slang was rated significantly lower than the Caucasians who spoke Standard English.

Table 1				
Means and Standard Deviations for Likeableness				
Race	**Language**	**M**	**SD**	**n**
African American	Street Language	46.36	11.97	11
	Standard English	51.00	4.88	10
Caucasian	Street Language	34.90	7.02	10
	Standard English	56.20	4.73	10
Note. Highest possible score = 70				

Table 2				
Means and Standard Deviations for Competence				
Race	**Language**	**M**	**SD**	**n**
African American	Street Language	44.82	14.11	11
	Standard English	51.30	5.89	10
Caucasian	Street Language	34.80	8.18	10
	Standard English	56.30	5.92	10
Note. Highest possible score = 80				

Discussion

Caucasian subjects were exposed to one of the four audiotapes with a Caucasian or African American male speaking Standard English or slang street language and then rated the speaker on likeableness and competence. One hypothesis was that Caucasian subjects would rate speakers of Standard English more positively than speakers of slang street language. The results supported this hypothesis. They were also consistent with the findings of White et al. (1998) and Doss and Gross (1994) who used African American subjects.

The results were also consistent with the proposal that slang street language is viewed in a negative light when it is the "out group" language among the participants. In the present sample Standard English was the "in group" language and it was assumed that the participants would identify with it because benefits brought by speaking this language (Johnson, as cited in Koch and Gross, 1997) such as a job. Previous research also predicted that the ages of the participants were such that they would be expected to recognize that the use of Standard English is associated with higher levels of achievement and recognition.

White et al. (1998) found that African Americans who are not highly identified with their culture, rated Standard English more positively; thus, it follows that Caucasians who are not highly identified with slang street language would rate Standard English more positively.

The second hypothesis was that participants would rate the African American male speaking slang street language more positively than the Caucasian speaking slang street language. This hypothesis was also supported. Caucasians rated the African American speaking slang street language significantly higher than a Caucasian speaking it. Once again, this finding is consistent with the importance of the link between English usage and cultural identity.

Further research is needed to investigate the differences between ratings of speakers Standard English and slang street language using participants from different ethnic groups. Given the argument by Doss and Gross (1997) that many African Americans use both Standard and slang street language in different situations, further research on the role that specific situational factors play in rating speakers of Standard English and slang street language is needed.

References

American Psychological Association (1992). Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct. *American Psychologist, 47,* 1597-1611.

Doss, R. D., and Gross, A. M. (1994, August). The effects of Black English and code switching on intraracial perceptions. *Journal of Black Psychology, 20,* 282-292.

Koch, L. M., and Gross, A. (1997, August). Children's perceptions of Black English as a variable in intraracial perception. *Journal of Black Psychology*, *23,* 215-226.

White, M. J., Vandiver, B. J., Belker, M. L., Overstreet, B. G., Temple L. E., Hagan, K. L., et al. (1998, February). African American evaluations of Black English and Standard American English. *Journal of Black Psychology, 24,* 60-74.

Appendix A
Slang Street Language

Look dawg, last Friday night man, you know what I'm sayin, I wanted to take this broad out to Applebee's but you know my cheese was kinda low so you know what I'm sayin, so we went and copped a movie. You know we went to the crib and chilled for a little while.You know what I'm sayin every thin was all gravy, but we got tired of sittin at the crib so we went to the Keg you know what I'm sayin, had a few drinks; shot a little pool. She couldn't shoot pool for nothin dawg. But I first didn't even talk about the way she was shootin. You know what I'm sayin, we talked about a little somethin somethin, and I gave her a few tips. But you know I'm sayin every thing was all gravy until my boys came in, you know they had to act up. One of my niggers was like dawg what the hell you in here caking this broad for. I said what the hell dawg, I can't kick it with my girl and have a good time. I got tired of my boys checkin, so you know dawg, told them me and my shawty lettin it go. You know what I'm sayin, so we went back to my whip. It was kinda late so I took her home you know what I'm sayin. You know I told her I'd holla at her tomorrow. You know what I'm sayin I'm on my way to the crib you know, can't help but think about the shawty cause you know what I'm sayin she's so fme like I told you man, I had been wanted to get with her for like a minute you know what I'm sayin. I left that night at that. You know I went to the house and crashed dawg.

You know what I'm sayin so Saturday rolled around. And I got up and I must of looked at my clock dawg and I'm like damn I can't be getting up dawg like shit I'm just gonna stay in the bed till 12:00 you know what I'm sayin. So dawg I finally got up you know what I'm sayin I ran to the closet you know what I'm sayin and found a little fire ass gear to put on you know what I'm sayin shit I talked about gain to the football game. So you know had to be fired for that. You know what I'm sayin I finally got all my stuff together and went to the little football game. You know what I'm sayin, cheerin for my boys out there on the field you know they strait represent. You know #24 out there is strait out there acting a fool. Which you know my boys and I were like strait trippen the whole time. I looked over at my boy, I told him dawg they pretty done won this game so me and my dawgs might as well go back to the crib and start gettin our drink on man. You know I got that hen and that crown at the crib waitin on me. You know what I'm sayin so we left the game, went back to my crib for a little bit you know we started sippin on a few drinks doin what we do. You know that we bout got to the level we normally be at on a weekend so it was about time for us to go out to this party about then. You know what I'm sayin, so we went to this party and it was str'ait crunk I'm tellin you everything was fire. Everybody in there strait clownen you know jumpin around. I must have had some boys in the circle, I'm talkin about they start actin a fool pushin niggers down and stuff. The next thing you know a fight done broke out you know. So I had to vamp you know what I'm sayin ain't, I don't want to be no part of that. Can't be getting in no trouble round here. So you know I'm sayin we left the party, me and my boys went to the Huddle House you know we had to grab us somethin to eat. We strait in there kickin it. The waitress in there getting bout pissed off though little college students collin in there actin a fool, they half way drunk. You know I'm sayin so why they gettin drunk you know me and my boys tryin to finish eaten so we can get up out of here. You know what I'm sayin we finally finish eatin so we dip. You know what I'm sayin I drop them off, you know what I'm sayin I went to the crib and I crashed. Which you know what I'm sayin that is about how we do it. You know what I'm sayin after all you know I had a pretty good weekend. I think it was strait but I wish I could have more time to spend with my chick. I think that would have topped it all off.

Appendix B
Standard English

Last Friday night I had a date with a great girl. I wanted to take her to Applebees but I did not have the money for that so we rented a movie and went back to my house. After the movie we decided to go to the Keg to have a few drinks and get to know each other a little better. We ended up engaging in a game of pool. She was not a great pool player so I gave her a few pointers during the game. That is when my friends walked in and started to tease me about my date. It was getting old so we decided to end the night. I then proceeded to drive her home and I told her that I would call her the next day. I really had a great time with my date that night. I woke up the next morning and looked over at my clock. It was still pretty early and I had nothing else planned for the morning so I decided to sleep in till 12:00. After I got myself up and out of bed, I decided to go to the football game. I found my friends at the football game and started to cheer for my team. We were very impressed with number 24. He is a great player and he makes a big impact on the team. After the football game I went back to my house and started to celebrate my school's win. I had a few drinks with my friends and then we decided to go to the party. The party was a lot of fun. Everyone was dancing and having a good time until a fight broke out. I didn't want to have anything to do with it so my friends and I went to the Huddle House to get some food and recap the events of the night. After we were done eating we left right away because people were getting loud and the waitress was getting very frustrated with the students' immaturities. All in all it was a great weekend.