Caribbean Americans and African Americans negotiating
Black Ethnic spaces through language

By studying the sociolinguistic behavior of other Black ethnics (e.g., African Americans and non-African Americans) in the U.S., we can illuminate the ways in which individuals from these communities use and manipulate language, consciously and unconsciously, as a resource to mark their multiple identifications, some of which overlap and some of which are distinct. This talk focusses on the English spoken by children of Black West Indian immigrants to New York City and their African American counterparts. Labov’s (1972) seminal sociolinguistic work on the speech of African Americans in New York City, *Language in the Inner City*, laid the foundation for a comprehensive model of African American Language as a dialect in its own right. But today, New York City is a very different place, and its Black community has changed accordingly.

After the passing of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, New York City immigrants and their children hailed from all over the world. Today, the ever-increasing numbers of second generation West Indian Americans affects the ethnic landscape and raises the question of what is African American Language in New York City today?

The results of the research discussed point to a similar linguistic repertoire for both groups of Black New Yorkers, with subtleties evident at the quantitative level. While both groups are quite /r/-ful, Caribbean American-identified Blacks have higher rates of /r/-fulness than African American-identified Blacks. Moreover, while both groups show the tensing and raising of /ɔ/ typically associated with New York City, there are differences in the length of the off-glide. Finally, while the realization of /ou/ is closer to a New York realization than the Caribbean Creole English varieties, off-glide differences exist between the two groups. An interview with an individual in Caribbean student group organized as a community of practice suggests even finer complexities in the sociolinguistic similarities and differences among Black New Yorkers.

Saturday, May 9, 2015
11 AM - 12 PM
Borough of Manhattan Community College
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