

Talking Black in America Viewing Guide

Chapter 2: Access (5:48-9:16)

This section highlights ways in which speaking African American Language (AAL) can work to promote and prohibit access. Speakers discuss feelings of expressivity and solidarity as well as self-consciousness and marginalization.

Key Ideas

Access

In some contexts, language can provide access and foster inclusion. AAL can build solidarity among its speakers because it signals shared aspects of their identity and marks them as ingroup members. Hearing someone speak in a familiar language or dialect often produces feelings of comfort and acceptance.

Barriers

On the other hand, language can be a barrier, particularly when society stigmatizes and rejects it. This stigmatization restricts access by building barriers. These barriers can range from hurt feelings to serious material consequences related to inclusion and exclusion. Speakers in the film describe feelings of self-consciousness and instances of being mocked for the way they talk. Systemic barriers related to language include limitations on opportunities for education, jobs, and housing.

Code-switching

Linguists use the term 'code-switching' (also commonly called 'code-shifting') to refer to the alternating use of two or more languages or dialects by an individual. Speakers of AAL often code-switch in different settings and around different people in order to minimize negative consequences and maximize positive outcomes. In this section, we hear linguist Tracy Weldon code-switches between a mainstream dialect in her professional interview setting while using AAL in voice recordings with friends and family

Pre-viewing Questions

1. Have you ever felt an immediate sense of camaraderie with a person just from hearing the way that they talk? Why? Did it remind you of home? Did it make you feel like that person might have a similar background or some shared aspects of identity?

Viewing Questions

1. What are some ways that language can give you access and some ways in which it can be a barrier? Listen for some of the personal experiences mentioned by Jasmine Williams, Tracey Weldon, and Nicky Sunshine.

2. In this section, linguist Tracey Weldon gives examples of how she speaks in a professional setting, with a friend, and with her mother. What differences do you hear across the three speech styles? Does she use different words or pronunciations? Or both?