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In this intriguing and well-documented monograph, H. Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman take up various language-related instances in Barack Obama’s successful 2008 presidential campaign and use those instances as a vehicle to examine the relationship between language, race, and power in America. A&S are able to document that Obama’s conscious linguistic awareness and his ability to style-shift depending on the audience played an important role in his being elected president. As they state: ‘Barack Obama’s mastery of White mainstream ways of speaking, or “standard” English, particularly in terms of syntax, combined with his mastery of Black culture’s modes of discourse, in terms of style, was an absolutely necessary combination for him to be elected America’s first Black president’ (20). While this comment is hard to evaluate when taken out of context, A&S make their case very convincingly, especially in Ch. 3 in their analysis of Obama’s famous March 2008 ‘race speech’ in Philadelphia. This important speech occurred as a response to the Reverend Wright controversy, which at the time had the potential of eliminating Obama from being a serious candidate in the eyes of mainstream America.

Articulate while Black consists of six chapters, plus a foreword by Michael Eric Dyson and a preface, ‘Showin love’, by A&S. We are intrigued by A&S’s collaboration in that they represent different generations of African American scholars working on Black language from a perspective that comes from within the Black community. S is certainly the most well known of a group of scholars on Black language who came of age in the 1970s. It was during that time that Smitherman 1977 was published, and she was deeply involved in the Ann Arbor Black English case. Moreover, for many linguists who do not specialize in African American English or sociolinguistics, but who have to discuss the topic of Black language in teaching introductory courses or in conversations with colleagues in other disciplines, our basic knowledge of the legitimacy of Black English as a linguistic system derives from exposure to S’s work, even if only in one of various anthologies that contain excerpts. A is a leading scholar of a younger generation of African American linguists approaching the study of Black language from the in-community perspective. While A’s research often deals with broader issues of language and urban education, his work on the analysis of hip hop is probably unprecedented in terms of its linguistic sophistication and his intimate knowledge of hip hop culture (e.g. A’s 2003 analysis of the rhyming schemes of the artist Pharoahe Monch). A&S’s collaboration thus represents a generational bridge for Black linguists. Characteristic of both A’s and S’s academic writing styles over the years is the incorporation of Black language as part of their work. This style-shifting is also found in this book, often occurring when A&S make a side comment or bring home a particularly important point. While mainstream readers of the book as well as some linguists may feel a little uneasy about this, it can be seen not only as an effective rhetorical device, but also as an
important way to try to break down—at least to a certain extent—the pervasive language ideology that many readers of the book will have.

Each of the first five chapters is organized around an incident or an event that occurred during the 2008 Obama presidential campaign in which some aspect of language and/or communication was highlighted. This then is used to lead into more general discussion about the nature of Black language and the issue of how race in America is often viewed through the guise of language. A&S make clear Obama’s mastery of Black modes of discourse and his ability to style-shift, which may not be apparent to the mainstream public.

Ch. 1, ‘“Nah, we straight”: Black language and America’s first Black president’, starts out with Democratic senator Harry Reid’s rather infamous remark about Obama during the 2008 presidential campaign: ‘[Barack Obama] speaks with no Negro dialect, unless he wants to have one’. This quote and a following one in which Obama himself states that ‘[a]ny black person in America who’s successful has to be able to speak several different forms of the same language’ serve as a vehicle to document Obama’s conscious awareness of language and language style. In this chapter, A&S give verbatim accounts of a number of campaign rallies and other events in 2008 where Obama style-shifted into Black language in front of predominantly African American audiences in a way that connected with them. These accounts are fascinating because we suspect that many mainstream Americans are unaware of Obama’s ability to use Black language and Black cultural modes of discourse. A&S make the strong case that his ability to style-shift was instrumental in his becoming president. Whites were comfortable with him because ‘he sounds Black, but not too Black’, and Blacks were comfortable with him because ‘he sounds White, but not too White’ (22). As A&S aptly put it, Obama has the ‘ability to bring together White syntax with Black style’ (21).

Ch. 1 also introduces some of the salient linguistic features of Black language to the reader. A&S accomplish this by elaborating on some recorded usages of Black language by Obama during the 2008 campaign and providing a linguistic analysis of the features being used. Another important aspect of this chapter is that it makes the strong case that language is central to viewing racial politics in the United States, and that it is understudied by scholars of race and ethnicity. There is a pervasive mainstream ideology of language, race, and politics behind Reid’s infamous quote, namely that ‘White America rewards Black Americans who don’t sound “too Black”, particularly in contexts that matter’ (24), such as politics.

Ch. 2, ‘A. W. B. (articulate while Black): Language and racial politics in the United States’, centers around the use of the term ‘articulate’ in describing African Americans. The term has come to be racially loaded when characterizing African Americans because its use often assumes the opposite as an underlying expectation. Early in the 2008 campaign, Senator Joseph Biden said the following about Barack Obama: ‘He’s the first mainstream African American who is articulate and bright and a nice-looking guy’. By saying that Obama is the first mainstream African American who is articulate, Biden is implicitly contrasting Obama with other African American presidential candidates (e.g. Jesse Jackson in 1984) who may have sounded ‘Black’ when speaking to mainstream
audiences. Biden’s statement at the time received much publicity because of its underlying assumptions. With respect to language, it equates Black language with being not only inarticulate but also deficient, thus reflecting the pervasive US language ideology. As A&S note, ‘being “complimented” as articulate evokes longstanding White discourses of Black Language (and people) as “deficient” ’ (52). They show through a survey that the social meaning encoded in the term ‘articulate’ is far more salient for Black Americans. Obama himself is very aware of the loaded nature of the term ‘articulate’. In his response to Senator Biden’s comments, Obama said: ‘I didn’t take Sen. Biden’s comments personally, but obviously they were historically inaccurate. African American presidential candidates like Jesse Jackson, Shirley Chisholm, Carol Moseley Braun, and Al Sharpton gave a voice to many important issues through their campaigns, and no one would call them inarticulate’ (31).

Ch. 3, ‘Makin a way outta no way: The “race speech” and Obama’s rhetorical remix’, constitutes a highly insightful linguistic/discourse analysis of Obama’s ‘race speech’ in Philadelphia on March 18, 2008, the single most important speech of the Obama campaign. A&S remind us of the events that led up to this speech. In early 2008 sound bites emerged from various sermons by Reverend Dr. Jeremiah Wright—Obama’s pastor for twenty years and someone who was close to his family and his campaign—that were taken as being anti-American and anti-White. As a consequence, Obama’s numbers in the polls were dropping, and there was tremendous pressure on him to denounce Rev. Wright. Because of this, by mid-March the Obama campaign was on the verge of unraveling. Obama’s speech on March 18 addressing the controversy became the most anticipated speech of his campaign. The ‘race speech’ was at the time considered by many to be ingenious, connecting with both Blacks and Whites; it is not an exaggeration to say that the speech saved his campaign. In their detailed analysis of the style and content of Obama’s speech, A&S provide us with an understanding of why the speech was so effective. They describe a type of sermon style that goes back to the Puritans and is common in Black churches, referred to as the Jeremiadic sermon after the Biblical prophet Jeremiah with his particular mode of prophecy focused on social justice. The Jeremiadic sermon has a tripartite structure in which the speaker first intones America’s promise, then castigates America for its misdeeds, and finally reaffirms that America will confirm its mission. This style, in which the rhetorical structure is simultaneously chastising and uplifting, is the one that Rev. Wright preached in. A&S show that Obama’s race speech had the same rhetorical structure as the Jeremiadic sermon, but the language that Obama used departed completely from the fiery zeal and emotive style of a sermon that one might hear in a Black church. Rather, Obama proceeded in ‘calm, deliberate reasoning, seeking to elicit rational, thoughtful understanding and action that will ultimately benefit the entire nation’ (83). The speech did not have the rhythm of a Black sermon and was delivered in Standard English. As A&S show, the brilliance of the speech and its ability to connect with both Blacks and Whites comes from Obama’s capability to combine the structure of a Black sermon with White speaking and rhetorical style. The speech put an end to the Rev. Wright controversy, and its effectiveness can be seen in the observation that many of us today have forgotten how critical the speech was at the time.

Ch. 4, ‘“The fist bump heard ’round the world”: How Black communication becomes
controversial’, revolves around the topic of Black communication styles. The particular event in the Obama campaign that A&S use to introduce the topic was the June 3, 2008, celebration of Obama’s sealing the Democratic nomination. In celebration, Michelle Obama extended her fist and Barack Obama extended his to ‘give a pound’ (or what has been termed a fist bump). The pound was made famous by the July 2008 cover of the New Yorker magazine, which is reproduced in the book (95). After discussing the meaning of and the language used to describe a fist pound, A&S go into detail on the style of Black communication. This includes discussion on the uncensored mode in Black communication and crossover of both nonverbal and verbal communication to the White public sphere. This chapter is quite detailed and has important discussion on the use of the N-word and mothafucka.

Ch. 5, ‘“My president’s Black, my lambo’s blue”: Hip hop, race, and the culture wars’, brings out Obama’s awareness of hip hop, his view of it as an art form, and his knowledge of its culture. The chapter starts out with a 2008 quote from Obama in which he calls hip hop ‘smart’, ‘insightful’, and having the remarkable ability to ‘communicate a complex message in a very short space’ (130). The chapter also discusses Obama’s relationship with various hip hop artists, labeling Obama as the first hip hop President. Obama’s positive attitude toward hip hop was noted by various artists who became strong supporters of Obama in the 2008 campaign. In addition, A&S identify common themes of the discussion of race, language, and cultural hegemony that surrounds Obama’s use of Black language and are also present when analyzing the use of hip hop language. The chapter contains a detailed and nuanced analysis of a hip hop record and video, ‘My President’, released by the artist Young Jeezy six months before the election. As in Ch. 3 on Obama’s race speech, we see A&S at their best when they give a detailed analysis of a discourse style.

The final chapter of the book, ‘Change the game: Language, education, and the cruel fallout of racism’, is in one sense disconnected from the rest of the book in that it is not themed around an event from the 2008 Obama campaign. Instead, the chapter focuses on the education issue, advocating a critical approach to language education as a means to challenge White linguistic hegemony. Given the legitimacy of Black language and the complexities of Black communication style and its vitality, as illustrated in the previous chapters of the book, how can we change especially teachers’ attitudes toward Black language in a way that uses students’ knowledge of and creativity in the language to foster learning? Part of achieving this necessarily involves challenging the linguistic hegemony of Standard English. A&S give an example of a curriculum in which African American students develop a sociolinguistic awareness that makes them more engaged in the learning process (though we do note that the specific curriculum being discussed is somewhat dated with respect to the type of technology it mentions). A&S conclude the chapter by suggesting that we can learn from international communities such as those in South Africa and Norway that recognize the legitimacy of multiple languages or multiple varieties of a language. While this chapter is different from the others, its goal is more perlocutionary in that its tacit aim is to make the reader aware of the consequences of the hegemony of standard English and to encourage readers to combat it.
In sum, A&S make a very compelling case that Obama’s mastery of both White mainstream ways of speaking and Black culture’s modes of discourse was a necessary combination for him to be elected president. It becomes clear that Obama’s popularity among African American voters is not because he is Black but because he can connect with culturally African American voters as well as with the mainstream public. A&S remind us of the now largely forgotten events and comments of the 2008 campaign revolving around issues of language and race that had the potential of derailing the Obama campaign and how Obama was able to navigate them, in large part due to his conscious awareness of language-related matters that affect minority Americans. While the book is in some sense meant more for the general public than the linguist, there is still much that linguists can learn from it. Certainly, this book would be valuable for any class that deals with the Ebonics issue or language and race in America, especially since many of the endnotes for each chapter provide audio or visual links to the language samples being discussed.

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