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Dialect on Trial: Raciolinguistic ideologies in perceptions of AAVE and MAE codeswitching

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Dialect on Trial: Raciolinguistic ideologies in perceptions of AAVE and MAE codeswitching

Abstract

It is known that listeners map speakers' voices to racial categories and that such identification can have harmful social, political, and economic consequences for African American Vernacular English (AAVE) speakers (Baugh 2003, Grogger 2009, Rickford and King 2016). While this work has focused on the production of linguistic cues used to perceive speakers' race, recent research on the white listening subject (Flores and Rosa 2015) has advocated investigating listeners' raciolinguistic ideologies, regardless of whether speakers command standardized or stigmatized varieties (Rosa and Flores 2017). This paper explores social perceptions of a bidialectal African American speaker when he uses African American Vernacular English (AAVE) compared to Mainstream American English (MAE). The speaker, a 32-year-old African American professor from California, recorded AAVE and MAE versions of a (2 minute) passage accounting his weekend activities, made to resemble an alibi in a criminal justice proceeding. Utilizing a matched-guise design, 116 undergraduate participants were randomly assigned to hear the account spoken in either AAVE or MAE, without background information about the speaker. A majority of participants identified the speaker as Black, as having less than a college degree, and as coming from a lower/working-class background, though listeners hearing the AAVE guise were more likely to perceive the speaker as Black and less educated than those in the MAE guise. Further, participants in the AAVE condition perceived the speaker as more likely to be involved in a gang compared to the MAE condition. That the speaker's codeswitching resulted in racialized differences in some ratings (e.g., race, education, gang status), but not in others (e.g., class, credibility, trustworthiness) raises questions about whether codeswitching can ameliorate the well-established consequences of anti-Black stereotypes for AAVE speakers. Regardless of the presence or absence of AAVE features, ideologies attached to Black voices can still yield associations with legible Black tropes.

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Dialect on Trial: Raciolinguistic ideologies in perceptions of AAVE and MAE codeswitching

Sharese King, Charlotte Vaughn, and Adam Dunbar

1 Introduction

Language is imbued with layers of meaning beyond its truth-conditional content and as such, listeners are able to infer social information about a speaker using cues in the acoustic signal (Eckert 2008). Such linguistic cues can index a range of social categories including age, gender, class, as well as qualities and stances associated with specific categories of people (Ochs 1992). Using these features to identify a speaker may seem benign on the surface, but research has shown that in racialized contexts, mapping speakers to specific racial categories can have harmful social, political, and economic consequences for speakers of stigmatized varieties (Baugh 2003, Grogger 2009, Rickford and King 2016).

Racialized perceptions of voices can yield negative consequences in employment, schooling, housing, and legal contexts. For speakers of stigmatized varieties like African American Vernacular English (AAVE)[1], they tend to earn less than their comparably skilled white counterparts (Grogger 2009), students tend not to receive instructional support for reading and writing that acknowledges their linguistic backgrounds (Rickford, Sweetland, and Rickford 2004), they are likely to experience housing discrimination wherein prospective tenants whose voices sound Black are not shown properties in Non-Black neighborhoods (Purnell, Idsardi, and Baugh 1999), and they may be discredited in the courtroom with their testimonies tending to be misheard, misunderstood, and mistranscribed (Rickford and King 2016). Given what's at stake for speakers with identifiably Black voices, understanding how listeners perceive and evaluate Black speech is important to combating linguistic prejudice and discrimination that such speakers face across a range of contexts.

Preventing the aforementioned harms requires examining the perception of Black voices, including which linguistic cues listeners use to make judgments about the speakers and the broader associations the public makes about different kinds of Black speakers. We address this issue by investigating how the speech of an African American speaker is racialized when he uses either AAVE or Mainstream American English (MAE). Our findings from a matched-guise task (Lambert and Tucker 1972) suggest that while the speaker's use of AAVE didn't affect perceived credibility or believability, it did invoke anti-Black stereotypes related to criminality and violent gangster stereotypes associated with African American men. Further, the speaker's use of MAE made him more comprehensible to listeners, but in that guise he was not necessarily perceived as more educated or economically mobile, a point which challenges the notion that styleshifting or codeswitching completely escapes the social stigma attached to racialized speech.

2 Background

2.1 Identifying Black Speech

Understanding what it means to sound Black is a project that has been underway since the 1960s, with sociolinguists documenting the features unique to the variety cross-regionally (Labov, Cohen, Robins, and Lewis 1968, Wolfram 1969). Such hallmark morphosyntactic features include copula deletion, habitual 'be,' -s absence in possessive, plural, and third-person singular contexts, as well as phonological variables like consonant cluster deletion, *r*-lessness, and *th*-fronting. However, perceptual experiments of listeners' ability to discriminate between dialects, and thus racial categories, have revealed that even with the absence of the most notable AAVE features, listeners use subtler phonetic cues related to vowel quality and prosody to distinguish between racial categories with great accuracy (Spears 1988, Thomas and Reaser 2004). Scholarship examining the racial identification of speakers often relies on the assumption that there is a one-to-one mapping between the dialect and racial category, such that Black speakers use AAVE and white speakers use MAE (King

[1]See King 2020 or Green 2002 for a fuller description of naming practices for the variety.

2020, Alim and Reyes 2011). As a result, most work has prioritized cross-dialectal variation between racial groups, while intraspeaker variation amongst bidialectal or multilectal Black speakers has been underexplored. Work by Purnell, Idsardi, and Baugh (1999) is an exception to this dearth of research on intraspeaker variation, as they examine a tridialectal Black speaker's production of AAVE, Chicano English (ChE), and Standard American English (SAE).

Purnell and colleagues studied housing discrimination on the basis of racial identification from a speaker's voice. Their first experiment tested how many appointments a prospective tenant could secure for properties in white geographic locales according to the dialect used. Baugh, an African American man exposed to and experienced in speaking AAVE, ChE, and SAE, was the speaker who contacted prospective landlords requesting to see the property. The results showed that when Baugh sounded Black or Latine, he secured appointments at less than chance rates in white locales, but secured more appointments in the geographic locales where there were higher populations of African American and Latine residents. In what Baugh (2003) describes as linguistic profiling, listeners are able to auditorily profile speakers and engage in housing discrimination based on voices alone.

Purnell and colleagues focused on three distinct racialized varieties, but even within a racial category, there are multiple styles that a speaker can command. For example, sociolinguists have argued that the full range of speech styles of Black speakers should be represented in production data, pointing to Middle-Class Black Speech (Weldon 2021) and a Standard Black English (Spears 1988). Given that such styles may still be racialized as Black even if the most stigmatized variables are not present, it is important for researchers to better understand the perceptual consequences of all types of speech styles employed by Black speakers. This is especially important given the implicit assumption in some research, and in societal discourse, that switching from AAVE to a more standard variety is recommended for Black speakers to ameliorate discriminatory behavior toward them based on their variety (Rickford and King 2016). Additionally, in recognizing that Black speech is not a monolith, we study intraspeaker variation to observe how certain kinds of dialects may be racialized more categorically than others, how such dialects or styles are evaluated similarly or differently, and which styles invoke negative stereotypes or implicit biases for listeners.

2.2 Dialect Intelligibility, Comprehensibility, and Prejudice in Legal Contexts

Our study examines intraspeaker variation of a Black speaker within a context designed to have relevance for criminal justice settings. As we have seen that listeners can draw on a range of cues to racialize speakers, we are interested in how listeners may use this information to attribute guilt or negative qualities associated with the racial group in question. Such information is important considering the legal implications that speaking a stigmatized variety can have in the courtroom and beyond. We know that race plays an important role in criminal justice outcomes (Alexander 2012, Dunbar 2019), but we must explore the way that dialect affects attributions of credibility or trustworthiness. Previous literature has shown that in the context of the courtroom, non-standard accents are judged as more guilty (Dixon, Mahoney, and Cocks 2002) and eye-witness testimonies are perceived less favorably if the witness was perceived to have an accent (Frumkin 2007). Therefore, it is imperative to assess the relationship between racialization, accentedness, and culpability.

With respect to AAVE, Rickford and King (2016) have raised these questions around presumed credibility and dialect usage in the context of the trial for George Zimmerman who murdered Trayvon Martin in 2012. The authors discuss the speech of Rachel Jeantel, who was an auditory witness (meaning she was in communication with Martin by phone) and the last person to speak with Martin before the altercation. Despite her closeness to the event in question, her testimony was disregarded in jury deliberations with her speech being reported as difficult to understand and a juror describing Jeantel as uncredible. Studying Jeantel's speech and its reception provides a window into viewing dialect perception in legal settings.

Rickford and King's (2016) analysis of her speech showed that Jeantel used many canonical features of AAVE at rates that often exceeded what has been documented in previous community studies of AAVE speakers. From this, Rickford and King raised larger questions about the extent to which speakers of this variety tend to be both misunderstood and disbelieved. More broadly, previous work suggests that accented speech can be judged as less comprehensible, especially when paired with other cues that point to a speaker's racial category (Rubin 1992, Kang and Rubin 2009) and that such lack of comprehension can result in mistranscriptions (Brown-Blake and Chambers

2007, Eades 2010, Koch 1985). Further, accented English may be rated as less credible (Lev-Ari and Keysar 2010), though such work has been difficult to replicate (see Vaughn and Whitty 2020, and references therein) and, more specifically, with AAVE speakers, jurors in a mock trial perceived them as less credible and less educated than their MAE-speaking peers (Kurinec and Weaver III 2019).

Though Rickford and King's work focuses on the production of speech by a marginalized speaker, researchers like Flores and Rosa (2015) have argued for, instead, studying the way that speakers of minoritized varieties and languages are heard. That is, they advocate for investigating how this speech is racialized via the white listening subject, who might hear and interpret the linguistic practices of these subjects as deviant based on their racial positioning. Building on both Rickford and King's questions of intelligibility and credibility, as well as Rosa and Flores' (2017) work studying the raciolinguistic ideologies of the white listening subject, we not only investigate the intraspeaker variation for an African American speaker, but we examine the evaluation of this voice in a criminal justice context where he is describing an account of his weekend activities, as one would when providing an alibi.

3 Methods

Participants (N =116) for this study were undergraduate students from a large university in the Northwestern U.S. who were completing research for credit in social science courses. Participation was limited to English-speaking U.S. residents who were at least 18 years old. Potential participants learned that the purpose of the study was to better understand memory for personal narratives as well as judgments about those narratives. The study was presented to participants online via Qualtrics. A complete list of participant demographics is presented in Table 1.

Demographic Information		Total
Age	Average	21. 92 (SD =8.23)
Gender	Female	61.2%
	Male	34.5%
	Non-binary	1.7%
	Prefer not say	2.6%
Race	Black	5.2 %
	White	63.8 %
	Asian	14.7%,
	Other	14.7%
Political Party	Democrat	42.2%
	Republican	28.4%
	Other	29.3%

Table 1: Demographic information for the 116 participants in the study

Participants in this study were presented with a 2-minute-long audio sample. To create the audio sample, we recorded a speaker reading a passage that gave a fictitious account of his weekend. The speaker was a 32-year-old African American male professor from the inner city of Los Angeles, California with a Humanities PhD. First, he was asked to read the passage in his most professional style, as if he was speaking to colleagues or attending an interview, instructions that were intended to produce a MAE dialect. Next, the speaker was asked to read the same script while using an AAVE dialect he might use with family or friends. Though not a linguist, he was familiar with the term AAVE and its associated patterns. The AAVE version was the same information the MAE version, but differed in usage of several notable phonological and morphosyntactic features, including consonant cluster reduction, *th*-fronting, and habitual *be*. Participants were randomly assigned to listen to one of two audio samples: the speaker using the AAVE guise or the same speaker using the MAE guise.

After listening to the audio sample, participants were asked to evaluate the speaker along various dimensions. In particular, participants used a five-point Likert scale to rate the believability, comprehensibility, and accuracy of the account. Participants also indicated whether the speaker sounded confident in his account of the weekend (1= Definitely not, 5 = Definitely yes). In addition to evaluating the speaker's account, participants evaluated the speaker more generally across a number of dimensions. For example, using a five-point Likert scale, participants evaluated the speaker's likability, trustworthiness, and respectfulness. To assess the perceived criminal propensity of the speaker, participants indicated how likely it is that the speaker is involved in crime and in a gang.

Participants were also asked to make inferences about the demographics of the speaker. For example, using a scale of 0-100, participants guessed the age of the speaker. They also identified the speaker's probable highest level of education (1 = Less than high school, 7 = doctorate) and social class (1 = lower class, 4 = upper class). To explore the relationship between race and dialect, participants identified the assumed race of the speaker from options that included: White, Black or African-American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Other. No participants believed the speaker was American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, so these categories are omitted from the table presenting these results (Table 2). For rating the speaker's race, education, and SES, participants could also select "Don't Know" as an option. Finally, participants responded to demographic questions about themselves, including their age, race, gender, and political ideology.

Statistical analysis of the results was conducted using logistic and linear regression models in R.

4 Results

We first present participants' responses to questions asking them to infer properties of the speakers' identity, based on the dialect guise they heard. These results, presented in Table 2, reveal that most participants identified the speaker as African American (79.3%), though listeners hearing the AAVE guise were more likely to perceive the speaker as Black (M=86.2%, logodds=1.88, p=.01). In terms of education, only 13.8% of listeners identified the speaker as having a 4-year or professional degree across guises, but specifically in the AAVE guise, listeners were more likely to rate the speaker as less educated (M=72.4%, logodds=-0.97, p=.04) than those in the MAE guise (M=58.6%). Further, the speaker was mostly heard as lower- or working-class (62.9%), with no statistically significant differences emerging between the guises.

Demographic characteristics		Total (%)	AAVE (%)	MAE (%)
Race	Black	79.3	86.2	72.4
	White	8.6	0	17.2
	Other	2.6	3.4	1.7
	Don't know	9.5	10.3	8.6
Education	Less than high school	2.6	5.2	0
	High school diploma	23.3	34.5	12.1
	Some college	39.7	32.8	46.6
	2-year degree	7.8	5.2	10.3
	4-year degree	12.9	8.6	17.2
	Professional degree	.9	0	1.7
	Doctorate	0	0	0
	Don't know	12.9	13.8	12.1
SES	Lower-class	4.3	8.6	0
	Working-class	58.6	60.3	56.9
	Middle-class	31.9	27.6	36.2
	Upper-class	0	0	0
	Don't know	5.2	3.5	6.9

Table 2: Listener ratings of which demographic category the speaker belonged to based on the dialect guise presented

We turn now to discuss the effect that each dialect guise had on participants' evaluations of the speakers' believability, likability, trustworthiness, perceived involvement in crime or a gang, and comprehensibility. Results indicate that certain judgments varied by guise, while others did not. That is, there were no statistically significant differences in how listeners rated perceived credibility, likability, trustworthiness, and involvement in crime across dialect guises (although the numerical patterns trended in the expected directions, see Figure 1). However, differences between guises emerged for gang-status and comprehensibility. Specifically, participants in the AAVE condition perceived the speaker as more likely to be involved in a gang (est=-0.43, $p<.01$) compared to the MAE condition, and the MAE guise was rated as more comprehensible than the AAVE guise (est=0.33 $p=.03$).

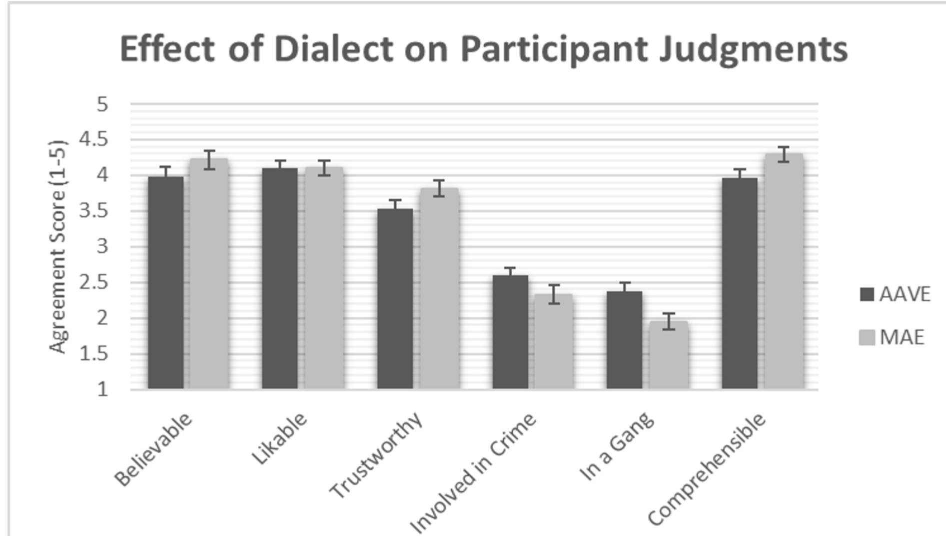

Figure 1: Likert Scale ratings of believability, likability, trustworthiness, perceived involvement in crime or a gang, and comprehensibility based on listeners hearing an AAVE or MAE guise

5 Discussion

Together, the evaluation of the speaker across demographic and dispositional attributes reveals the kinds of associations that listeners make with this single Black voice, across dialect guises. Specifically, the inferences made about the speaker's demographic characteristics show that listeners mostly identify the speaker as Black across guises, but more often identify him as such in the AAVE guise. That is, the more use of AAVE features in his speech, the more likely the listeners are to identify him as Black. This supports previous work which has shown that listeners are more likely to identify a speaker as Black when they use hallmark AAVE features, but can also identify them even in the absence of the most stigmatized morphosyntactic, lexical, and phonological features (Perrachione, Chiao, and Wong 2010, Purnell, Idsardi, and Baugh 1999, Thomas and Reaser 2004). For this specific speaker, although there were many features that differed between the guises, there were still features present in his most professional speech that indexed Blackness. Importantly, this ability to still mostly sound Black across guises may speak to the broader notions of Standard Black English (Spears 1988) or Middle-Class African American English (Weldon 2021) that African Americans can draw on in their presentation of themselves as professionals. Thus, whether or not the terminology MAE is the most appropriate designation for this speaker's ideologically most non-AAVE guise is an open question.

Despite the fact that this passage was recorded by a college professor with a PhD, the listeners rarely rated the speaker as having a professional degree. Further, the speaker was more likely to be interpreted as more educated in the MAE guise, rather than the AAVE guise. The association of less

AAVE in the MAE guise with more education is likely a result of prescriptivism and standard language ideology which views nonstandard speech as unacceptable or deficient (Lippi-Green 2012). Additionally, the association of more AAVE with less education and lower-class identities raises questions about the connection between the inference of a Black voice and the assumption that African Americans are less educated and/or more working class. Put differently, does the concept of Blackness tend to conflate with working-class identity, and how do these dimensions of identity co-articulate into broader stereotypes of African Americans?

Finally, the results for this particular task speak to the topic of styleshifting or codeswitching amongst speakers of stigmatized varieties. In Alim and Smitherman's discussions of styleshifting, they state that it "is also par for the course for many Black Americans who travel in and out of Black and white social worlds and work environments," (2016:5). Learning to styleshift, or only speaking MAE, is often discussed as a means through which Black speakers gain economic mobility or become more employable or are seen as more credible in court. For example, a reader confronted with the findings of Purnell et al. (1999) might reasonably assume that their best recourse to avoid potential housing discrimination is to switch to an MAE style. However, the present results suggest that such a strategy will be less successful if a Black speaker's MAE speech is racialized as Black, and this can have important consequences. Even in what our speaker thought was their most professional-sounding voice, listeners were not convinced that this was someone with a professional degree, such as a PhD. However, they were less likely to view him as belonging to a gang in the MAE guise versus their AAVE guise. Thus, styleshifting to MAE might reduce the association of speakers with anti-Black stereotypes, like "the gangster," but it could still jeopardize potential opportunities for upwardly-mobile African Americans if they are viewed as less educated. Previous research has shown that African American speakers with more features of European American English are harder to racially identify (Thomas and Reaser 2004), but even for African American professionals with less stigmatized phonological variants, such features can still affect listener evaluations. Our study of just a single speaker was illuminating in this regard, but we suggest that much more research on listener perceptions across a wide range of Black voices, and styleshifting within these voices, is needed.

Alongside listeners' inferences, the Likert scale data also provided additional information about the perception of the speaker and their propensity toward crime. First, we didn't find significant differences in likability, believability, and trustworthiness across dialect guises. The latter two are most important considering open questions raised by Rickford and King (2016) regarding the credibility of witnesses based on the dialect used to deliver the testimony. While the relationship between AAVE and perceived credibility requires further exploration, in this task, the speaker was not viewed as less credible when they used more stigmatized variables in their passage. Since the speaker was not perceived as less believable when using AAVE, the results do not support previous literature suggesting accented speech, more broadly, is rated as less credible (Lev-Ari and Keysar 2010). However, we believe that our findings, along with other repeated failures to replicate this result, do not indicate that credibility is never associated with accentedness, but rather that this relationship is constructed through and conditioned by local context and social factors (see Hall-Lew, Paiva Couceiro, and Fairs 2019, and Vaughn and Whitty 2020).

In addition to concerns about credibility, Rickford and King (2016) also raise questions about the degree to which stigmatized dialects are misheard or misunderstood, especially by listeners who are not speakers of the variety. Although our study did not directly test intelligibility, prior work indicates that racialized expectations of speakers can lead to intelligibility differences (Babel and Russell 2015, McGowan 2015), and that such differences can be cued by expectations about not just ethnicity but about variety within ethnicity (Vaughn 2019). For example, Vaughn (2019) found that listeners who believed that the same Latine speaker was a native Latine English speaker adapted to the speaker's English speech in noise faster than listeners who believed the same speaker was a native Spanish speaker. As in the present study, different varieties, or beliefs about different varieties, can affect linguistic processing or metalinguistic judgments, even within an ethnicity. Moving from intelligibility to comprehensibility, differences in comprehensibility between the guises in our study suggest that listeners, 94.8% of whom did not identify as Black, reported that they thought it was easier to understand the speaker in a MAE guise. This aligns with previous research that finds accented speech can be judged as less comprehensible (Kang and Rubin 2009) and such results have important consequences for AAVE speakers across a range of contexts including the classroom and

courtroom.

Collectively, the Likert scale results indicate that while listeners may not find AAVE speakers more unbelievable or untrustworthy, issues of comprehensibility around the dialect may be at play. Decreased comprehensibility can also co-occur with stereotypical social associations with the racial category, such as the gangster trope, in the AAVE guise. Perceived trustworthiness and believability are certainly important for African American speakers, especially when relaying information in contexts with legal consequences. However, the association of AAVE with controlling images, or negative portrayals of marginalized groups, are known to influence ideologies toward racial groups, while justifying said groups' oppression (Golash-Boza 2016, Hill-Collins 1994). That is, such stereotypes participate in the othering of oppressed groups, therefore helping to maintain their subordination. In the end, when studying the propensity toward crime via dialect perception, we found it effective to include multiple questions, including some that tap into stereotypes, in order to reveal different kinds of information regarding how listeners ideologize criminality around specific racial groups.

6 Conclusion

Racial identification has been an important aspect of studying dialect perception across listeners, but exploring listeners' raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores and Rosa 2015) around particular dialects can illustrate the various social meanings that are attached to specific voices and the implications of such associations. Specifically, the white listening subject's racialization of a voice matters regardless of the presence or absence of AAVE features, as even speech with fewer AAVE features can still yield associations with legible Black tropes. That is, speakers who are categorized as a member of a marginalized group may be treated similarly along some dimensions regardless of the variety they employ. Considering what is at stake for speakers of stigmatized varieties, we reiterate the call for more work on dialect perception for Black speakers (Rickford and King 2016), including those who are bidialectal or command more than just AAVE. As demonstrated in this study, listeners can perceive different demographic characteristics and social attributes of a speaker based on the dialect used, but for some dimensions of identity, no differences across dialects are perceived. Examining how such evaluations change based on intraspeaker variation for individual African American speakers is important, as it informs how styleshifting or codeswitching can ameliorate linguistic discrimination. For example, speaking MAE can potentially prevent associations with harmful stereotypes, but it doesn't mean that if the voice is identified as Black it won't be read as less educated and/or as having a lower SES status. This will be especially important in conversations around the proposed benefits of pushing vernacular speakers to acquire standardized varieties (Rickford and King 2016). Future directions for our project include examining multiple Black talkers whose styleshifting between varieties differs, testing the effects of dialect in various specific criminal justice settings, and exploring how raciolinguistic ideologies can potentially affect listeners' performance in memory tasks within criminal justice contexts.

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