Connecting Discourses of Language and Place in Washington, DC[1]

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1 Introduction

In sociolinguistics, one of the most pertinent relationships under investigation is that between language and place. Some of the earliest work on sociolinguistic variation complicated the picture of the relationship between language use and place identity. Labov (1963) showed that use of place-linked variables in Martha's Vineyard was conditioned not only by social factors such as race, class, and age, but also by attitudinal factors, or how speakers felt about the island, others on the island, and the relationships between the island and the mainland. Place is not just 'there'; it is constantly negotiated, and ideas about place are reflected in language use.

The connection between language and place may be seen as three-fold. First, language use reflects speakers' membership in speech communities and allows people to identify themselves, and others, as being from particular places. Second, language is a strategic tool for the negotiation of what it *means* to be from a specific place. Speakers can use – or not use – features associated with places in order to shape their own identities and the identities of the places they inhabit. In Schilling-Estes' (1998) study of one speaker's stylistic deployment of Ocracoke English features, the speaker's overt performance of a rote phrase that makes explicit the relationship between Ocracoke and heritage tourism occasions the most extreme variants. Third, language, when circulated in the public domain, constructs an identity for the place and its inhabitants. Johnstone's (2009) work on the commodification on the Pittsburgh dialect through novelty t-shirts points to public circulation of perceived 'stereotypes' as one way in which language varieties and their features become socially recognizable.

In this paper, I examine the connections between discourses of Washington, DC, as a place, and residents' commentary on language in the DC area, taken from sociolinguistic interviews with long-term residents of the DC area. I argue that these connections are

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made through intertextual (Bakhtin, 1981[1930]) or interdiscursive (Silverstein, 2005) means, where speakers' talk about language draws on ideas about place in a less straight-forward way than, for example, the listing of dialect features as an answer to the question "How do people here talk?" or "Do you have an accent?". Two main connections between language and place in DC emerge: 1) Washington, DC, and DC language are both stand in contrast to places such as New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, and the South, and 2) race is cited as a key component of DC identity and DC language.

In the next section, I describe previous sociolinguistic work on Washington, DC, and situate this paper within my larger project on language and identity in DC. I then describe some sociohistorical and demographic characteristics of Washington, DC, and show how these are reflected in one definition of DC in the humorous website UrbanDictionary.com. I then outline the analytical frameworks of my analysis: intertextuality, interdiscursivity, entextualization, and recontextualization, after which I present and analyze the sociolinguistic interview data, and conclude the paper.

2 Sociolinguistic Exploration of Washington, DC

Until recently, Washington, DC, was largely absent from the sociolinguistic literature. Following Fasold's (1972) study of African American English in Washington, DC, few large-scale studies have been conducted, though calls for more work on language variation in DC came as early as Wolfram's (1984) notice on the complex sociolinguistic landscape of DC. The *Language and Communication in the Washington, DC, Metropolitan Area* (henceforth, LCDC) project, carried out by students and faculty in the Department of Linguistics at Georgetown University, is spearheading both quantitative and qualitative investigations of language and identity in Washington, DC. Areas of investigation include the discursive and diachronic construction of place in DC area oral histories (Schiffrin, 2009), syntactic change in progress in DC (Nylund and Seals, 2010), (ay)-monophthongization (Jamsu, Callier and Lee, 2009), rhoticity (Schilling and Jamsu, 2010), realizations of (-t/d) and (ING) (Nylund, 2010) in DC, as well as the links between phonological variation and discourses of gentrification in DC (Podesva, 2008).

The present study is part of a larger-scale investigation of language and place in Washington, DC. In my dissertation project, I investigate the three facets of language/place relationships in DC: how the language and place connection is circulated in broader cultural contexts; how the use of phonological variables situates DC in the language variation literature; and how speakers use variables associated with ethnoracial and geographic meanings in order to construct their own linguistic and place identities in sociolinguistic interviews. The first point is highlighted in the present paper, and begins with an examination of DC as a place.

3 Washington DC: History, Race, and Regional Belonging

The sociocultural context of Washington, DC, has been described as different from other cities on the East Coast of the United States, such as New York, Philadelphia, and Boston, since its inception as the seat of the US government. Historically, the biggest contributing factors to DC's 'unique' position as an urban center have been both its demographic composition and the labor market. In the 19th century, DC did not experience waves of economically motivated immigration from Europe. The Washington area instead attracted many freed slaves both prior to (Manning, 1998: 331) and after the abolition of slavery in 1862. The availability of jobs for African Americans in Washington rested on a

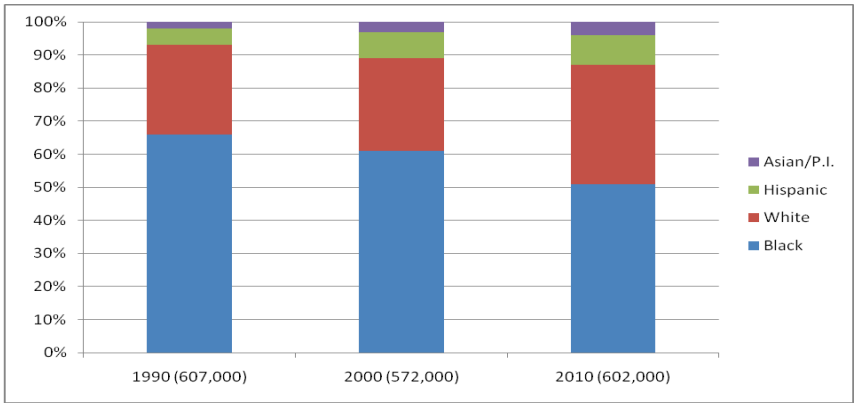
history of reliance upon an enslaved, and then cheap, black labor force. Still, opportunities abounded, not least as the rapidly growing Federal workforce of civil servants hastened the urban expansion of the city and provided a variety of "good government jobs". The migration of African Americans to the DC area was the earliest one in the country (much earlier, for instance, than the Great Migration to cities including New York during World War I (Lynch, 1973, cited in Manning, 1998).

These patterns of migration and the early establishment of African American communities led to the development of a 'bi-racial' city, whose minority group population – African Americans – in 1960 comprised 54%, and in 1970 71%, of the population of DC (US Census Bureau, cited in Manning 1998: 332). The intersection of race and class, in the time of segregation and beyond, resulted in poorer black communities being concentrated in densely populated pockets of the inner city, and wealthier, middle-class black communities 'fleeing' to the suburbs, in particular Prince George's County in Maryland (Cashin, 2004)[2].

The intricate migration, industry, and race history of Washington, DC, which was carved out between the Northern and Southern states to serve as the capital city of the US, has given rise to the question of whether DC is in the North, in the South, or neither? The differences in migration patterns (in that Washington, DC did not experience the tremendous influx of European immigrants so iconic of many cities on the Eastern Seaboard) suggest that DC is different from the North. In addition, DC's uniquely long-standing status as a majority-black city also sets it apart from large parts of the South. In later sections, I show how this geographic 'placelessness' is mirrored in DC residents' reflections on what language in DC is like. In addition to the history of DC, however, it is also imperative to consider the present-day picture of Washington and its ethnoracial makeup.

Current demographic figures reflect trends which have been ongoing since the peak of the DC African American population in the 1970s. Figure 1, below, details the overall ethnoracial trends in Washington, DC, as of the 1990, 2000, and the recently released 2010 US Census.

Figure 1 The population of Washington, DC: 1990- 2010 (Neighborhood Info DC, 2011)



[2] PG County was the highest-income majority-Black county in the US as of the 2000 US Census.

Two patterns are of particular note. The population of Washington, DC, is undergoing a process of racial diversification. From 1990 to 2010, the Hispanic and Asian American populations have more than doubled, from comprising about 7% in 1990 to near 15% in 2010[3]. The other – and starkest – trend is the decline of the black majority in DC. As of the 2010 US Census, the black population comprised 51% of DC residents, suggesting that Washington, DC, is about to lose its majority-black status. Simultaneously, DC is experiencing its first population growth in decades. Figure 2 illustrates the ethnoracial distribution of DC's eight wards, as well as which wards have become more populous since the last US Census.

Figure 2 Demographic change in DC Wards 1990-2011 (Neighborhood Info DC, 2011)

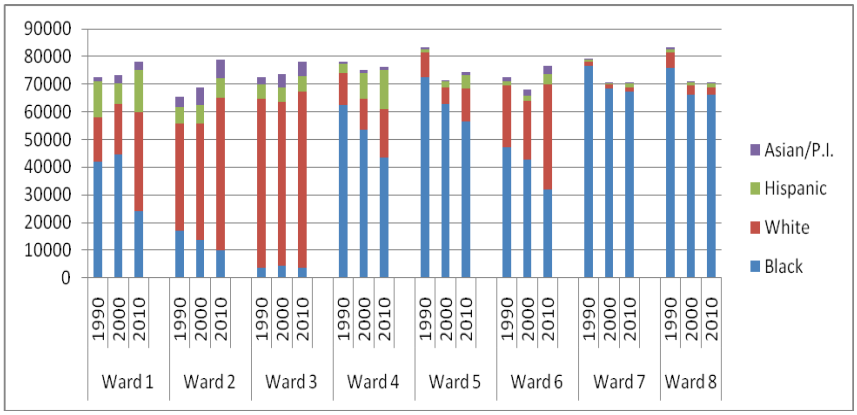


Figure 2 illustrates that although DC as a whole is undergoing diversification, its transition "from biracial city to multicultural metropolis (Manning, 1998: 336)" has in fact exacerbated racial segregation in the city. The significant increase in white residents is responsible for the population growth in DC. Wards 1, 2, 3 and 6 are becoming more populous as they are becoming whiter. Wards 4, 5, 7, and 8, home to a majority of DC's black population, are experiencing a population standstill, or decline.

The severity of segregation and gentrification[4] in DC suggests that race is a large component in the contestation of place and place identity (Modan, 2007) in DC, as it is in many other places. In the following section, I showcase an example of publically circulating discourses of DC as an aregional and racialized place.

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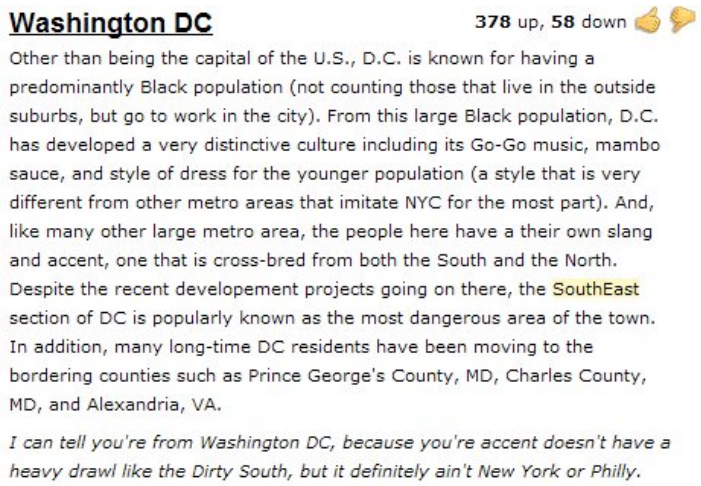
[3] The increase in the Hispanic population is particularly noteworthy. Latinos have – primarily in the last two decades – been settling in neighborhoods such as Columbia Heights and Mount Pleasant (described in Modan's (2007) ethnography of the community).

[4] A topic for another study, gentrification is one of the keywords in DC's (among numerous cities) public debates about race and place. In an article entitled "Confessions of a Black Gentrifier", Hilton (2011) astutely and provocatively examines the position occupied by educated, geographically and socially mobile black Washingtonians, both in the construction of widely circulating "black equals poor" and "newcomers are oppressive interlopers" discourses in DC.

4 Public Images of DC

The following image (Figure 3) of DC is taken from the humorous, user-generated site, UrbanDictionary.com. In addition to being a repository for slang terms, neologisms, and Internet memes, users contribute dictionary-style entries on more everyday things. Descriptions of places, for instance, include geographic information, evaluative commentary, and descriptions of iconic, or commodified, facts about the place being described. Consider this description of Washington, DC:

Figure 3 Public Discourse about Washington, DC on UrbanDictionary.com



The writer engages with both images of DC described above: the regionless capital city, and the distinctive black city. DC's black identity is shown in the writer's equating of DC culture with "distinctive [black] culture including its Go-Go music [and] mambo sauce." Another reflection both of the social reality of segregation in DC, and the long-standing circulating discourse of Southeast DC (which comprises wards 7 and 8, as well as part of ward 6) as a dangerous, violent place. According to this writer, Washington DC is a culturally and demographically unique place. In addition, they write, DC is neither Northern, nor Southern. In the 'sample sentence' in italics at the bottom of the entry, the writer suggests that one way of knowing someone's from DC is because they don't sound like they're from the Dirty South, on the one hand, but on the other hand their speech is unlike northern dialects like New York or Boston. The addition of language as a typifying feature of Washington, DC, furthers the writer's conviction of DC's uniqueness.

This entry also suggests that a strong link exists in publically circulating discourses of DC, between ideas about place, and ideas about language. I suggest that engagement with discourses of DC as an aregional place and as a black place is apparent in metalinguistic commentary in sociolinguistic interviews with life-long residents of the DC area. When asked about what language is like locally, speakers do not produce rote phrases or perform iconic phonological variants (Schilling-Estes, 1998) or point to particular, commodified forms of language (Johnstone, 2009) that are identifiable as indexing DC. Rather, speakers negotiate the complex relationships among place, race, and language through a process known as recontextualization.

5 Intertextuality, Interdiscursivity, and Recontextualization

The notion of intertextuality draws on the ideas of Bakhtin (e.g. 1984[1930]) who argues that "[the text] lives only by coming into contact with another text … illuminating both the posterior and anterior, joining a given text to a dialogue (Bakhtin, 1984[1930]: 162)". Intertextuality is the constant interplay between texts and their co-texts as well as texts and the sociocultural ideologies and widely established concepts which enable the texts to be interpreted. In an interactional setting we may look at these concepts as "manifest intertextuality (Fairclough, 1992)", that is, direct quotation, repetition, puns and repurposing of units of talk, and "interdiscursivity (Silverstein, 2005)", the connection between what is said in the here-and-now, and the discourses which influence the talk and make the talk interpretable as belonging in a particular category.

This paper engages with the latter of the categories. Intertextuality and interdiscursivity in the context of the sociolinguistic interview suggests that speakers' recognition of things they have heard before, things they have been asked before, and things they have had opinions about before the interview occasion, color and guide their responses[5].

Bauman and Briggs (1990) propose entextualization and recontextualization, two mechanisms by which reinterpretations of texts or discourses in new contexts become possible. Baumann and Briggs (1990: 73) write: "[entextualization] is the process of rendering discourse extractable, of making a stretch of linguistic production into a unit - a *text* - that can be lifted out of its interactional setting." A text, then, is something that is recognizable, and which participants in an interaction are able to "lift out" of its context. Entextualization is the process by which a text becomes recognized as such. In the sociolinguistic interview, the interviewer's question is perhaps most easily recognizable as entextualized – by asking a question, the interviewer signals to the interviewee that a particular kind of talk is appropriate. A question like "Do you have an accent?" entextualizes the immediate discourse as metalinguistic commentary.

The most significant part of Bauman and Briggs' proposition to the study of metalinguistic discourse is the notion of recontextualization. Once a text has been entextualized, it is available for recontextualization – a repurposing of the text and the creation of a new connection between a text and its surroundings. Bauman and Briggs point out that the process of recontextualization is an act of control on the part of a speaker, allowing them to infuse texts with preferred meanings, or block the reading of dispreferred meanings. In the sociolinguistic interview, a speaker's reply to a question is fundamentally an act of recontextualization. A question presents a fork in the road and allows the speaker to choose how they are going to answer it. In the case of metalinguistic commentary, asking a question about language prompts the interviewee to make connections between ideas about language and ideas about other parts of social life. In Washington, DC, talk about language occasions recontextualization as talk about DC with respect to region and race.

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[5] In this paper, I choose to retain the term 'intertextuality'. The sociolinguistic interview is a speech event in which the interviewee operates within the "big I interview" frame, in which they assume a 'knowledgeable' and 'thoughtful' participant role (Nylund, 2010) and may make use not only of ideas about language and place, but also of repurposed thoughts and opinions – texts – which they have previous expressed.

6 Place, Race, and Language in Metalinguistic Commentary

The following three examples illustrate how an entextualized topic – language in the local community in one case, and accentedness in two others – is transformed through recontextualization by the speakers. The first example, below, is taken from an interview with Mark, a 51-year-old white man, who is a lifelong resident of Washington, DC. The interviewer's question, "Do you think you have an accent?"

(4) Mark

1.	Interviewer:	Do you think you have an accent?
2.	Mark:	Interesting! Good question!
3.		And the reason I say (.) a good question…
4.		There have been times
5.		where I have been with different groups of people
6.		who... find out that I am a native Washingtonian.
7.	Interviewer:	Mm-hm.
8.	Mark:	Some... have said...
9.		"But you speak like you're from the South!"
10.		But I've had other people say…
11.		"You speak... like you're from the North!"
12.	Interviewer:	@@@@
13.	Mark:	And I say, "What does that mean?"

Mark's response recontextualizes the topic of accentedness and engages with the previously described historical fact and public discourse of DC's aregionality. When asked whether he thinks he has an accent (line 1), Mark does not evaluate whether he does or not, but instead presents an imagined "outsider-dialect encounter" narrative (Johnstone, 2006). In Mark's reportedly repeated encounters, non-Washingtonians "find out" that he is from Washington (suggesting that this is not obvious, in line 6), and different outsiders evaluate his speech as drastically different as Southern and Northern (lines 9-11), again, suggesting that his Washington speech is not easily classifiable. Mark's recontextualization of "accent"-talk as "Where does DC language belong"?-talk shows a definite link to the discourse in which DC is neither seen as Northern, nor Southern.

In the next extract, Frank, a 44-year-old, African American, lifelong resident of the DC area, is being asked about language use in his community. Takoma Park, MD, where Frank lives, borders the Takoma neighborhood of Washington, DC. Frank has long lived in the area, and resided two blocks from the Maryland border until his fairly recent move to Takoma Park, MD, where he now lives close to the close to the DC border.

(5) Frank

14.	Interviewer:	Uh… is there, so do you think is there a way people here talk
15.		that's identifiable as Takoma, I guess?
16.	Frank:	I think subjects but not- content of talk, but not the way they
17.		talk.
18.	Interviewer:	Has, do you think your way of talking or your language use has
19.		changed ever since you've moved to Takoma Park?
20.	Frank:	I think it just comes with exposure and adaptation.

21. I don't think it's necessarily geographical?
22. Uh, you know, but… and I think you also learn…
23. different contexts, in different communities, you can do
24. different things.
25. Interviewer: Mm-hmm.
26. Frank: Cause I still can, you know, go back and relate very well and
27. talk. If they wanna call it Ebonics or whatever, you know, I –
28. you know, I can do that, that's=
29. Interviewer: Sure.
30. Frank: =But, uh, I don't think we're around…
31. Even the other African American families and people,
32. most people are not… talking that way

The interviewer entextualizes the topic not only as about language in the neighborhood, but about Frank's move from Takoma, DC, to Takoma Park, MD (lines 18-19), suggesting that the two places have distinct ways of speaking. Frank recontextualizes the talk through his negation of the suggestion that geography matters (line 21) and his assertion that presence in, and mobility between, "different communities" (line 23) necessitates a repertoire of speaking styles, which he himself possesses. Frank here recontextualizes the metalinguistic talk, which proposed that talk in Takoma Park can be seen as distinctive. A more striking example of recontextualization as an act of control on the part of the speaker is seen in lines 26-28. Frank asserts that he can "go back [to DC]" and talk to the DC community where he used to live. Engaging with the idea that DC is black, and that black language is distinctive from non-black language, Frank dismisses the imagined variety ascribed to him as "Ebonics or whatever (line 27)" before once again foregrounding stylistic repertoire, rather than distinctive ways of speaking, as a necessary component of his experience in DC. In this way, Frank is actively engaging with ideas of DC as a place – when he "goes back" to DC, he is perhaps expected to talk "Ebonics", which Frank rejects. Talk about distinctive language in the community is in this example recontextualized as talk about the diversity of experience within the African American community in Washington.

In the final example, Fred, a 41-year-old white man, is asked to evaluate his own speech much like Mark was in example (4).

(6) Fred

33. Interviewer: So do you think you have an accent?
34. Fred: I- no, I don't, I don't think I do.
35. Int: Do you think other people have accents?
36. Fred: Well, you mean people I meet or people in Washington,
37. or just people in general?
38. Int: <<inc>>
39. Fred: Every-yes, I do, I hear accents all the time.
40. Um, I like to but what's funny is no one can seem to s-
41. place where I'm from.
42. Uh and one thing that I have noticed is, uh,
43. I think maybe I'm completely wrong,
44. I haven't really thought about it but it seems to me
45. that people from Washington, uh, that are not …
46. oh God, this is gonna sound awful,

47. that aren't BLACK, you know, don't generally have accents.
48. You know? Or at least it's a very neutral kind of, you know,
49. not like in Baltimore, New York or Boston.

Fred's recontextualization of the "accent" talk he is asked to engage in engages both with ideas of DC as an accentless place, and ideas of DC as a racialized place. It is noteworthy that while Frank, above, worked to draw attention away from the perceived link between DC language and race, Fred draws attention *to* this link. By – reluctantly – suggesting that "people from Washington, uh, that are not… BLACK… don't generally have accents (lines 45-47)", Fred is drawing a sharp boundary between black and white Washingtonians, where blacks are accented and whites are accentless. He then qualifies his statement by drawing another boundary between accentless white Washingtonians and accented residents of Baltimore, New York, and Boston (line 49). Fred is appealing to discourses of DC as a racially divided place, and of DC as 'neutral' in contrast to iconic cities and dialect regions.

7 Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to show that recontextualization is a powerful mechanism for the construction and circulation of language and place ideologies. In DC, asking how people here speak is also asking what the city itself it like, and what the people who live there are like. DC is seen as standing in geographic and linguistic contrast with both the North and the South. Most striking are the two discourses of race in DC: one in which black and white residents are divided by place of residence and language (exemplified by Fred), and another in which monolithic portrayals of black life in DC are rejected (as they are by Frank). Future work on this topic will more thoroughly examine metalinguistic discourse as a site of interdiscursive and ideological engagement, and will further interrogate the role of language as a component of place identity.

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