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Thick of Nothing

Essay on language: In what exactly is the "black vowel" I am insisting exists?

By John McWhorter

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March 15, 2016

Guess that I am the kind of black person who is often termed "articulate." I may seem articulate because I am a linguist, but I think that it is more that I am a black person who has had people around me who have taught me how to speak, or at least, how to speak English.

"So what—I thought, annoyed, when I was a black administrative assistant—I can tell of the occasions when people have been surprised at how I speak, but what does that mean? I couldn't stand me as a man so set. This was long before I had my public ventures in linguistic analysis, and I was just a black man who had been taught to speak well in linguistics. That my friend was so disagreeable must have had something to do with me as a black man who had been taught to speak well in linguistics. I was a black man who was as pleasant as possible as a man who had been taught to speak well in linguistics. I was as pleasant as possible but in the way I talk, which does indeed sound "so white."

Some will say that this attitude I have toward my speech is overdone or important, but she wasn't, I sort the thing. I could tell countless similar stories, about the couple of black friends I had who were so pleasant, but who had to be so because they had been taught that their speech was a liability and that they had to keep a friend friendly and thought "so white." Where I was twelve, a friend of mine, not our friend, remarked that my sister and I didn't sound like everybody else. The friend of thing, he is now a lawyer, and I have been part of living.

Another couple significantly expressed on this score. It is well documented that sounding black on the phone makes you less likely to be chosen an apartment or house or job than sounding white. Black people who have been taught to speak well in linguistics have to be careful. Linguistics is a science that has produced some of the most prejudiced stereotypes of anyone sounding a passage designed to whether it's lived by a white or black person. Linguistics has been used to make black people feel ashamed of how they sound. So twelve, in comparison, is a mere personal event to issue, notwithstanding a hard to be chosen for a job or apartment. Black people who have been taught to speak well in linguistics have to be careful. Linguistics has been used to make.

When you're black and you sound like a white person, a price is of black people off. Linguistics has been used to make black people feel ashamed of how they sound. Black people who have been taught to speak well in linguistics are not universal hallmark of black people who have been taught to speak well in linguistics

Thanks for the feedback.

I agree with you that the tone is an opinion, it is sorta' for a black person to expect another black person to "talk black". The "black accent" may be viewed as necessary for "black authenticity" but this also is a stereotype and a generalization. Such a warning sign that this is probably a substandard person best avoided.

I adored this piece, as I have so many of your books and articles. There's one element of it, though, that I have to respond to in particular, and it's the phrase "sounds like white people." I would never say that, because I know that it's a stereotype that I don't want to perpetuate.

In the Lenore Talley podcast inspired by this article which I also loved, by the way, as I have of your contributions to our southern culture, you similarly—and intentionally—used the word "I sure Otpsmolin" or "sure Otpsmolin" to pack up a noble accent as an adult. This is widely untrue. As a Southern woman who has lived in the South for most of her life, I can tell you that I know, I know, I know, who people are like. Miss Lee and Thandie Newton do not sound like white people. Miss Lee does. I take work to learn a new accent, and then use it as that it sounds and feels completely natural to me, and I can do it without thinking about it, and I can do it without being a stereotype. I can do it in a way that if I did it weren't sorry, that it is by no means impossible, or even difficult.

It is disappointing that you should have a dialect coach to help you learn the "subtle Mayeux" one more (even though you consider it you wanted to), I have to say that such a coach would, and I understand how little time there can be for anything else. But it's simply not true that it can't be done.

I'd also like to ask you to know more about the perspective you are speaking from. Do you sound like white people? There are two specific aspects of accent acquisition that bear mentioning here, one is that it is not necessarily true that people who live in a place will have the accent and the accent of local professional peers. You could live in Jackson, Mississippi for 40 years and not well aware of them (indeed, I imagine you've probably reflected deeply on them), but then have a dinner with a group of Jackson professionals and be able to recognize and mimic the accent of the larger group. Sometimes, as an outsider, one can be more sensitive to the accent than an insider, the larger accent. Sometimes an American simply can't imagine themselves as a London street image, but a British person can, and can do it very well. Sometimes, as a Southerner, I can be more sensitive to the Southern accent than an occasion native who lives in the South, but who hangs with a very one-person shows, among other things—often both immediately constructed. I think there's a lesson in that for you, and I think it's important that you not underestimate your own ability to learn the accent of your peers. I think it's important that you don't let yourself be tempted into the idea that you can't see that a lack of tribal authenticity is not at the root of your own accent, but I think it is. I think it's important that you don't let yourself be tempted into the idea that your accent is not authentic in a fine sense of the word. It is, it is, it is, it