ATTITUDE AND ITS SITUATEDNESS
IN LINGUISTIC POLITENESS

DENISE TROUTMAN

Michigan State University, East Lansing
troutma1@msu.edu

ABSTRACT

For over thirty years, linguistic politeness has been constructed based upon the work of Lakoff (1975) and, particularly, Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987). Their seminal contributions, however, may elide other social constructions of linguistic politeness. Thus, this paper presents and represents a different positioning and experience that have not been previously attended to, especially the lived experiences of Black women in U.S. contexts. Key questions addressed are: How does politeness operate in the African American speech community? How does one linguistic practice, *talking with an attitude*, fit within that model of politeness? This work assesses one component of politeness based upon socially real engagements of African American women who situate themselves within the African American speech community, interrogating their own behavior. Using Afrocentric feminist epistemology as one theoretical frame, I conducted qualitative research, interviewing Black women in different communities of practice. From their words and lived experiences, the co-researchers construct *attitude* as a broad concept that can be displayed in language and/or kinesics. Its meanings and functions derive from social context and community norms.

KEYWORDS: Linguistic politeness; attitude; African American speech community; African American women's speech practices; Afrocentric feminist epistemology.

1. Introduction

I situate this paper within Afrocentric feminist epistemology, phenomenology, culturally sensitive research, critical race theory, critical discourse analysis, and qualitative research. There emerges from these theoretical perspectives some overlap of core elements with regard to allowing informants to speak for themselves about linguistic practices in the African American speech community (AASC) and African American women's speech communities (AAWSC)[1], providing allowances for different women's

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[1] AAWSC embeds African American women's speech community and communities of practice (COP) for those contexts where Black women interact with other Black women.

voices to be heard; indexing of lived experiences; privileging of race, gender, class, and community compositely, reflecting social identity and a multiple consciousness (Scott 2002); generating of core themes based on a Black woman's standpoint; challenging traditional approaches and theories; promoting cultural/racial empowerment; revealing and addressing inequities that subjugate, marginalize, or exclude African American perspectives, ways of knowing, and realities. Thus, this paper represents a different positioning and experience that have not been previously attended to; I hope to add to the notion that a variety of linguistic politeness systems exist, aiding in the construction of what makes us human. Key questions addressed are: How does politeness operate in the AASC? How does one linguistic practice fit within that model of politeness? As the admonishment goes in the AASC, I aim to "represent"[2] the voices and lived experiences of many unheard Black/African American women within U.S. contexts.

I begin with (1) a brief review of Lakoff (1975) and Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), highlighting their theorizing on linguistic politeness (LP). Thereafter, I (2) operationalize the concept *AASC*; (3) present a developing theory of LP within the AASC based upon a social norms community model; (4) index aspects of communicative practices; and (5) present main deductions from a phenomenological study on "talking with an attitude" (TWA) and its situatedness in a system of politeness. The system of LP and other ideas presented herein may not reflect the diversity of the AASC or AAWSC based on multivalent social factors, such as region, social class, ideology, or religious affiliation.

2. Review of Lakoff (1975) and Brown and Levinson (1987)

Since the 1970s, the model of politeness discussed by Lakoff (1975)[3] and Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) has dominated scholarly endeavors in various areas, including sociolinguistics, pragmatics, applied linguistics, and discourse studies. Lakoff (1975), in the canonical *Language and woman's place*, averred that women are more socially constrained to polite behavior in contradistinction to men in U.S. settings. She posited three rules that structure polite language usage: (1) Be formal; remain aloof (e.g., use passive constructions); (2) Be deferential to addressees; give them options (e.g., use tag questions, such as *It's our turn, isn't it?*); (3) Show camaraderie, solidarity (e.g., use nick-

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[2] Within the AASC, *represent* is a social act with demonstrable requisites. It requires community members to manifest positive accomplishments or contributions for the larger benefit of the whole community, the nation within a nation.

[3] Lakoff's (1975) main premises revolve around socially gendered inequities as structured through a specific gender ideology in U.S. contexts and as manifested in speech practices. Thus, Lakoff's intent is not focused solely on etching a model of politeness. Nonetheless, I have found Lakoff's presentation on politeness enlightening, though often elided in politeness discussions. See Lakoff (2004) Part II: *Why women are ladies*, 77–102 or (1975) Part II: *Why women are ladies*, 51–83. Culpeper (1996), however, does index Lakoff's *model of politeness*.

names). Rules 1 (formality) and 2 (deference) can co-occur as well as Rules 2 (deference) and 3 (camaraderie), yet speakers cannot be aloof and display camaraderie simultaneously. As the stereotypical "arbiters of morality and civility" (Lakoff 1975: 77), Lakoff claimed that women structure polite behavior according to Rules 1 and 2. Thus, they exude a formal style linguistically and nonlinguistically, avoiding "markers of camaraderie: backslapping, joke telling, nicknaming, slang, and so forth" (Lakoff 1975: 99).

For Lakoff (1975: 102), polite behavior indexed oppressive conditions for women within a "Eurocentric masculinist" (Collins 1991) construction of gender ideology. Further indexical of "woman's place" within this gendered ideology of politeness is the claim that women are dubbed 'ladies' euphemistically, constrained to other aspects of polite behavior: they cannot and do not tell jokes; they do not swear; they do not use slang words.

Table 1. Constraints on polite behavior.

Polite behavior for ladyship	
No indelicate expressions	No assertiveness4
No swearing	No loud talking
No telling jokes	No interruptions
No rough talk	No simultaneous speech

Lakoff (1975) locates her database within White, middle class contexts: speech from commercials and situation comedies, speech from her acquaintances and herself, analyzed based on her intuitions. Even though she writes: "I do feel that the majority of the claims I make will hold for the majority of speakers of English; that, in fact, much may, *mutatis mutandis*, be universal" (Lakoff 1975: 40). Lakoff's volume does not index all women's language practices or operative systems of politeness. Cultures, however, may adjudicate language practices differently. Following Giddings (1984), I question, when and where do Black women enter? That is, what is Black woman's "place" in social-linguistic politeness spaces? How does politeness operate in those spaces? These are concerns that I will address in a culturally relevant way, expanding constructions of "language and woman's place".

Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of politeness has received the most widespread prominence and influence. These authors have built a theory of politeness around the notion of "facework", interactional work that speakers engage in to protect and maintain a claimed personae or "face", premised in Goffman's (1967) work. Brown and Levinson (1987) theorized essentially that people have a desire/need to be liked by others (positive face); that desire/need is met through the use of positive politeness

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[4] Consider constructions of Michelle Obama as "too assertive," as discussed by one voter on *The News Hour with Jim Lehrer*, August 2008.

strategies, such as joking, paying compliments, or using nicknames. People also have a need to be recognized as individuals, free from imposition (negative face); that need is met through negative politeness strategies, such as providing distance (using formal address) or avoiding intrusions (apologizing, hedging). The authors also include a third strategy of politeness, which has received less attention vis-à-vis the other two strategies. They write:

> We phrase the derivation in terms of three main strategies of politeness, "positive politeness" (roughly, the expression of solidarity), "negative politeness" (roughly, the expression of restraint) and "off-record (politeness)" (roughly, the avoidance of unequivocal impositions), and claim that the uses of each are tied to social determinants, specifically the relationship between speaker and addressee and the potential offensiveness of the message content.
>
> (Brown and Levinson 1987: 2)

Table 2. Brown and Levinsons's strategies of politeness

Positive politeness	Negative politeness
Expresses positive concern for others or camaraderie	Emphasizes not imposing or intruding on others
People seek approval from others, to be liked by others, to be affiliated with others, to be a part of "we" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003).	People need "space" or autonomy, to be recognized as a separate individual, who deserves respect and freedom from imposition (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003).

Mills (2003) identifies some of the shortcomings in Brown and Levinson's model of politeness, which help advance my theoretical and methodological approach. Brown and Levinson focus on "model speakers" rather than on social context, social interaction, and community members' assessments of politeness. Brown and Levinson (1987: 58) couch it this way:

> We attempt to account for some systematic aspects of language usage by constructing, tongue in cheek, a Model Person. All our Model Person (MP) consists in is a wilfil [sic] fluent speaker of a natural language, further endowed with two special properties – rationality and face. By "rationality" we mean something very specific – the availability to our MP of a precisely definable mode of reasoning from ends to the means that will achieve those ends.

Such theorizing is abstracted away from humans in social interaction: "With this cardboard figure we then begin to play: How would such a being use language?" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 58) As well, researcher decisions about classifying utterances as

negative or positive politeness and not the participants in the interaction, who are familiar with the social rules, including the system of politeness, seem to be counter intuitive.

Additionally, Culpeper (1996) argues for the inclusion of impoliteness within a politeness theory since politeness entails not only social harmony yet also social disruption in some contexts, the latter, thus, evincing the center rather than marginal activity. Mills (2003) notes that impoliteness is not analyzed within the Brown and Levinson model, when impoliteness is a social reality in many cultural contexts and settings. "There are occasions when people attack rather than support interlocutors", Mills writes (2003: 121).

Mills (2003) and Yarbrough (1997) both point out that Brown and Levinson's building of a theory on Goffman's notion of "face" is problematic due to a misappropriation of the concept "face". Brown and Levinson (1987: 61) explain "face" as follows:

> We make the following assumptions: that all competent adult members of a society have (and know each other to have)
>
> (i)   "face", the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself, consisting in two related aspects:
>
> > a.   negative face: the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction – i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition
> > b.   positive face: the positive consistent self-image or "personality" (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants
>
> (ii) certain rational capacities, in particular consistent modes of reasoning from ends to the means that will achieve those ends.

Our notion of "face" is derived from that of Goffman (1967) and from the English folk term, which ties face up with notions of being embarrassed or humiliated, or "losing face". Thus face is something emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction. In general, people cooperate (and assume each other's cooperation) in maintaining face in interaction, such cooperation being based on the mutual vulnerability of face" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61).

Yarbrough explains that Hu (1944), in her article titled, "The Chinese concepts of face", presents meanings of face differently than Goffman, based on its cultural construction within East Asian societies in particular. According to Yarbrough, Hu establishes *mien-tzu* and *lien* as two aspects of gaining and maintaining prestige and status.

> Mien, the older term, refers to the relation between ego and society; it denotes the stature that is gained through personal success and achievement. It is a more secular [...] concept in that it is totally dependent on the external, worldly

> environment. [...] Lien is the respect and worth that society conveys upon
> every member. [...] Loss of lien is [...] more serious and crippling than loss of
> mien. . . . Everyone has lien, whereas mien is gained and earned.
>
> (Yarbrough 1997: 3)

Goffman, according to Yarbrough, "presents a more Eurocentric conception" and "omits [Hu's] distinction between lien and mien", combining the two aspects of face (Yarbrough 1997: 4).

I acknowledge the contributions of Brown and Levinson (1987) in their initiating a widely adopted theory and in their pushing my thinking about politeness within another linguistic tradition. I address the gendered homogeneity emanating from theorizations and applications of LP, and the "place", the outsider positioning, that it has established for those Black women, who self-identify with practiced notions of politeness within the non-contiguous yet socio-historically constructed AASC.

As Mills (2003) advocates, I intuit that a socially real and accountable theory of LP must go beyond positive and negative politeness and interactional facework, especially if that theory aims to reflect human social interactions, a construction and reflection of what humans do to exude politeness and impoliteness. Accepting either the Lakoff (1975) or Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of politeness, as one Black woman co-researcher articulated it, would construct Black women as impolite.

3.   Operational definition of the concept AASC

Patrick (2007) has explored some of the difficulties with the concept of speech community (SC). Essentially, he argues that there are unresolved problems with divergent constructions of SC in sociolinguistics, although the concept is a core one. Nonetheless, he advocates certain tenets of SC be invoked as well as avoided, for example, invoking class analyses within a social theory, avoiding constructions of SC due to interaction or social cohesion, avoiding conceptualizing SCs as a predefined entities but rather as "objects constituted anew by the researcher's gaze and the questions we ask" (Patrick 2007: 593). Although I do not address all of Patrick's suggestions, I do address some with one aim to construct the AASC following a community-based model. I induce the voices of two African American women, whose words help instantiate and co-construct AASC.

Wright (2004: 1) teases out elements of community inadvertently, which contributes to my establishing a frame for the abstracted AASC. She writes:

> In her prose poem "Blackness," from her 1992 collection of short stories *At
> the bottom of the river*, Jamaica Kincaid describes the complex series of con-
> tradictions that produce Black identity in the West:

> "The blackness is visible and yet it is invisible, for I see that I cannot see it. The
> blackness fills up a small room, a large field, an island, my own being. The
> blackness cannot bring me joy but often I am made glad in it. The blackness

cannot be separated from me but often I can stand outside of it. The blackness is not the air, though I breathe it. The blackness is not the earth, though I drink and eat it. The blackness is not my blood, though it flows through my veins. The blackness enters my many-tiered spaces and soon the significant word and event recede and eventually vanish: in this way I am annihilated and my form becomes formless and I am absorbed into a vastness of free-flowing matter. In the blackness, then, I have been erased, I can no longer say my own name. I can no longer point to myself and say 'I'. In the blackness my voice is silent. First, then, I have been my individual self, carefully banishing randomness from my existence, then I am swallowed up in the blackness so that I am at one with it."

This "Blackness" resonates for many as a firsthand way of knowing, experiencing, and being *Black* in the US. It helps create some social cohesion for group members. Self-selecting one's identity as *Black*, as President Barack Hussein Obama, is one component involved in the delineation of the abstraction AASC.

Importantly, Wright addresses socio-historical constructions of *Blackness*. The *West* has significance historically and in the construction of Black identity:

because *Blackness* only became a racial category with the forced removal of West Africans to the Western Hemisphere. From the start, Black identity has been produced in contradiction. Although there is no biological basis for racial categories (there is no such thing as a "black", "white", or "Asian" gene, and the amount of genetic disparity between persons of different races is the same as that between persons in the same racial category), blacks in the West have nonetheless had their history shaped by the very concrete effects of Western racism. Unlike Black Africans, who ultimately define themselves through shared histories, languages, and cultural values, Blacks in the diaspora possess an intimidating array of different historical, cultural, national, ethnic, religious, and ancestral origins and influences. At the same time, despite this range of differences, they are most often identified in the West as simply "Black" and therefore as largely homogeneous. Given these contradictions, the attempt to offer an overarching definition for Blackness looks to be a losing game.

For peoples of African descent living in majority-white nations in the West, the harmful and healing potential of Black self-consciousness, or subjectivity, are both quite clear and quite real. Seeking to determine Black subjectivity in the African diaspora means constantly negotiating between two extremes. On one end stands the "blackness that swallow", the hypercollective, essentialist identity, which provides the comfort of absolutist assertions in exchange for the total annihilation of the self. On the other end stands the hyper-individual identity, most commonly found in poststructuralist critiques of racism and colonialism, which grants a wholly individualized (and somewhat fragmented) self in exchange for the annihilation of "Blackness" as a collective term. **Any truly accurate definition of an African diasporic identity, then, must somehow simultaneously incorporate the diversity of Black identities in the diaspora yet also link all those identities to show that they indeed constitute a diaspora rather than an unconnected aggregate of different peoples linked only in name.**

(Wright 2004: 2, emphasis provided)

Wright complicates notions of Black identity: the extremes of "blackness that swallow"/the essentialized, hyper-collective identity and the hyper-individualized identity that constantly annihilates Blackness are negotiated; thus, Wright claims, both extremes must receive inclusion in definitions of Blackness. There are some "essences" to be reckoned with as well as a lack of complete homogeneity in experiences, practices, identities, and values for the notion AASC.

Accepting the premise that language is a form of social practice, then language may also be one source of identity formation uniting people selecting that identity. Ainsworth and Hardy (cited in Mills 2008: 33) write that:

> Discourse does not transparently reflect the thoughts, attitudes and identities of separate selves but is a shared social resource that constructs identity as individuals lay claim to various recognizable social and shared identities.

Thus, African American language or Ebonics, ranging from the phonological to the discursive, serves as a tool, a "shared social resource" that individuals may self-select in constructing and claiming identity within the AASC.

These, then, are some of the elements of community for African Americans in the U.S.: shared history of enslavement, Jim Crowism, segregation, and "race"-ism; investment in ties that bind, including knowledge and value systems; historical connections to Africanized language forms; self-identity; Blackness that individualizes and Blackness that swallows.

Within the broader AASC there exists related yet smaller speech communities and COP. For me, AAWSC represents both types, a speech community within a speech community with various COP located within it, such as the women's day committee members at XYZ church.

4.   A developing theory of LP within the AASC

Rather than following and building upon the Brown and Levinson model in an exploration of politeness within the AASC, in the next segment of this paper, I present a different frame for conceiving of and constructing politeness/impoliteness (see Culpeper 1996), evolving from lived experiences and a social behavioral model of interaction. In the aim to develop a socially real theory of politeness within the AASC and AAWSC, I center the present theory development and analysis on a community-based, discourse level model that examines intersections of race, gender, and other concomitant social factors within specific contexts. Based upon my experiences growing up in a Black community in U.S. contexts, my conversations with other Black people, interactions within different COP within the AASC, and the discussions with Black women enrolled in my courses, my conjecture at this stage of theory development is that a socially real system of politeness within the AASC exudes from broader rules that dictate and shape
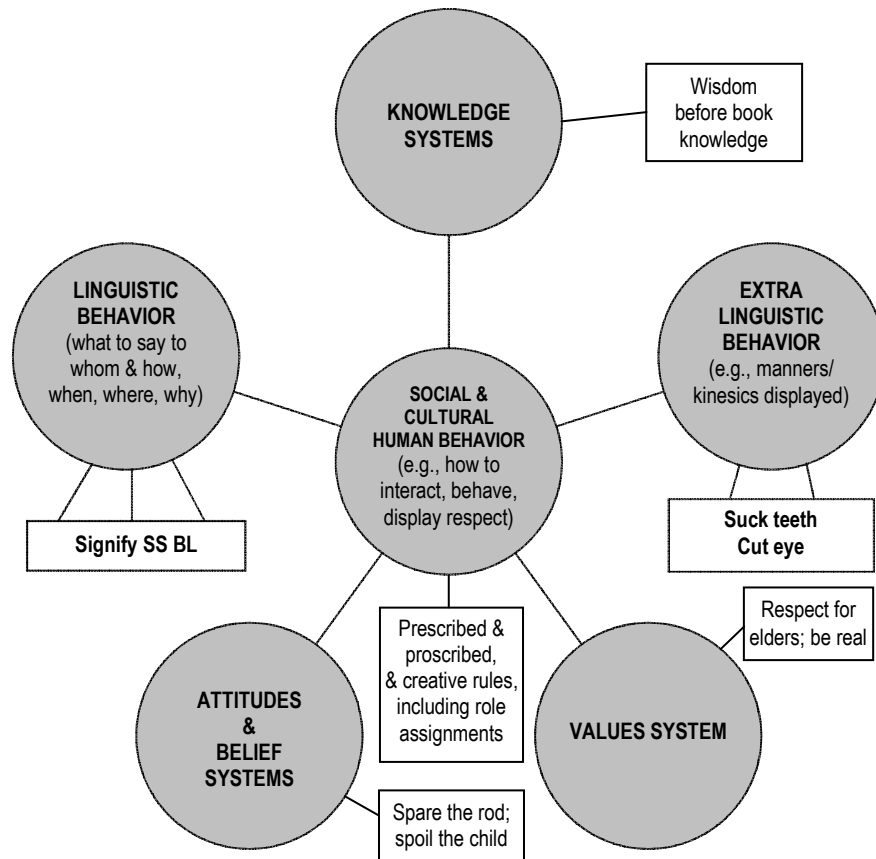
Figure 1. Social behavioral system – AASC (Troutman 2008).

social behavior within the speech community; these social behavioral rules, in turn, in-
form LP within both the SC and various COP. Thus, the social rules must be identified
and accounted for as they inform linguistic politeness. I represent this system diagram-
matically in Figure 1.

Expectations due to membership in the AASC seem uppermost within an African
American politeness system, as represented in Figure 1. Decisions about acting polite or
impolite would seem to stem from group membership. Brown and Levinson (1987)
mention one study, Rosaldo (1982), which critiques speech act theory due to its inappli-
cability within one community of speakers, the Ilongot of the Philippines, where
speaker interpretations of sincerity and intentions are not central, yet "expectations due
to group membership, role structures, and situational constraints" (Brown and Levinson
1987: 15) measure more importantly. This is my point precisely. Some communities

may structure politeness differently, such that they *center* cultural expectations in motivations for and productions of politeness. I believe that there is an intrinsic relationship between socio-cultural expectations and a system of politeness within the AASC.

5.   Aspects of communicative practices

> the language, only the language. [...] It is the thing that black people love so
> much – the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with
> them, playing with them. It's a love, a passion.
>
> (Morrison cited in Rickford and Rickford 2000: 4)

Within the AASC, a number of shared speech practices persist that index a love relationship with language and language play, among them are rapping, signifying, narrativizing, reading dialect. (See Figure 2.)
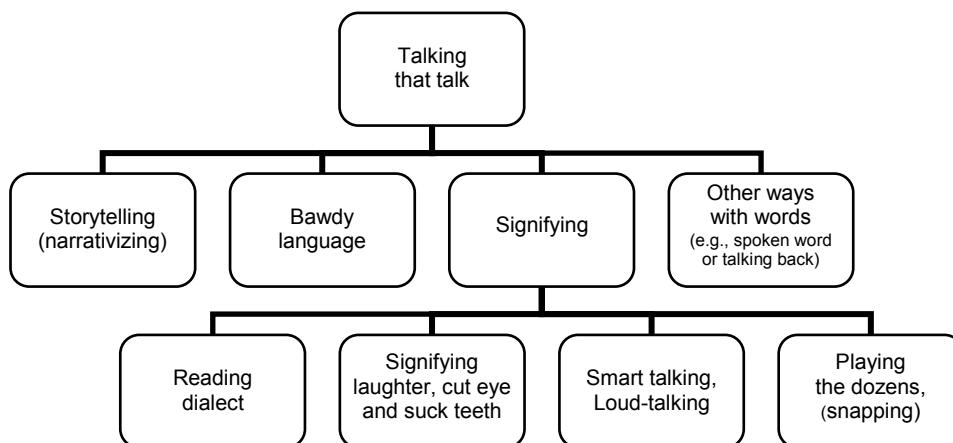

Figure 2. Some ways with words.

I have constructed the frame in Figure 2 to represent a host of communicative practices, as a whole, *talking that talk* (TTT) due to the meaning that that phrase signifies within the AASC. Mitchell-Kernan glosses the phrase as *Ole!* (1972: 324) while Major (1994: 466) defines it as a "commendation [possibly even given to ones' self] for having great and 'hip' verbal skill". TTT, then, represents one of the highest levels of linguistic dexterity and may encompass a combination of two or more of the communicative practices listed under it (see Troutman 2001, 2006).

Pough (2004) writes of speech acts often relegated to/performed by Black women,[5] which have not been represented widely in other literature. She refers to these as rhetorical or speech acts, used to "bring wreck". Contextualized for her purposes, "bringing wreck" is a means of displaying and accomplishing an act of resistance through speech, writing, or physical actions, specifically "talking back, going off, turning it out, having an niggerbitchfit, or being a diva" (Pough 2004: 78).

> Each of these actions has simultaneously been embraced by some Black women as a marker of unique Black womanhood and renounced as the stereotypical Black woman stance by others. For example, while most Black women would relish the fact that they can tell people off, put them in their place, and leave them speechless, they do not embrace the stereotype of the neck-moving, eye-rolling, loud, hand-on-hip, Sapphire-like Black woman throughout the popular and dominant cultures. Serious attention is beginning to be paid to this gift of gab that seems to represent Black women, and critics are coming up with descriptive names for talking that talk.
>
> (Pough 2004: 78)

I do not elaborate on these speech acts presently yet wish to bring attention to this set of speech acts that have not been broadly discussed yet that function as practices performed within AAWSC. Community members know the performance rules for these speech acts, as well as appropriate contexts, audiences, etc. for their use.

Another speech practice seldom mentioned or analyzed is referred to in the AASC as *talking with an attitude* (TWA). As it pertains in the present context, *attitude*, has special significance. I do not intend *attitude* as Preston has written with regard to folk-linguistics nor *attitude* as assessed in sociolinguistics, e.g., attitudes towards sociophonetic variation. In the AASC, *attitude* is indexed regularly. Major (1994: 12) classifies *attitude* as a noun with negative associations: (1970s–1980s) "a negative disposition; antisocial; unjustified anger". He ascribes it use as both Southern and Northern with a specific example of: "That guy has an attitude. I'd keep my distance" (Major 1994: 12). In the 1990s, Major claims that meaning shift occurred as illustrated below in Table 3.

Table 3. Definitions of *attitude* (Major 1994).

1970s–1980s	1990s
Antisocial	**Haughty disposition**
Unjustified anger	Nasty disposition
Negative disposition	
Stuck-up	
'dicty'	

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[5] Some people may find her designations as airing dirty laundry yet I find that they reflect aspects of social reality although not for all Black women.

Since the descriptors negative disposition and dicty are synonymous with nasty disposi-
tion, however, there may be less shift than Major claims. Negative disposition may
equate to nasty disposition although a negative disposition could include other types of
unfavorable dispositions; both negative disposition and nasty disposition could index
haughty disposition. Thus, there is some overlap for the time periods with regard to the
definition of attitude. Further, Major classifies "dicty" as 1890s–1920s usage, meaning
"snobbish or pretentious; high-class or snobbish-acting person or a way of acting
haughty" (Major 1994: 135). This latter denotation clearly connects dicty and haughty;
importantly, it may represent the longest standing and most consistent denotation over a
span of time, although there is no recording of each time period from 1920–present.
There seems to be some carry-over up to the 1990s in the reference. A person with an
attitude, then, may display a negative or nasty disposition, particularly acting snob-
bish/haughty, pretentious, or stuck-up, according to Major's 1890s–1920s and 1970s–
1990s classifications.

Morgan shares a personal experience of attitude in a discussion of social face:

> A verbal routine that I remember as a child resulted in my losing face when
> two of my very "best friends" were talking to each other. I innocently walked
> up to them, listened for a bit, and then offered my expert advice about their
> conversation. I knew I was in deep trouble when one of my girlfriends slowly
> began to turn her head. It was clearly a slow-burn kind of head turn. That's
> when I noticed that her eyes were also moving in my direction, but slightly
> (**with attitude**) slower than her head! Her eyelids cast a shadow over her pu-
> pils and they were slowly, coolly – and with just a hint of disgust – headed in
> my direction. I stood firm. In the midst of her eyes' journey to their target, I
> noticed that her lips slightly opened and turned up a bit as they said to me:
> "This is an A and B conversation so C your way out!" Fast forward to the new
> millennium and what has happened to this kind of verbal death blow? It has
> become even more lethal. The eyes and head still roll, but the lips say some-
> thing that requires insider youth membership. 'Girlfriend' now says something
> like: "You just AAAAALLL UP in the Kool Aid! – And don't EEEVEN know
> the flavor!" or "Stop dippin' in my Kool Aid".
>
> (Morgan 2002: 41, emphasis provided)

This is one possible execution and meaning of attitude and talking with an attitude.6 As
situated here, Morgan imbues negative associations with attitude and TWA. Yet integral
to the acts Morgan describes must be positive associations, especially from the lens of
the actor (Morgan's "best friend"), considering that her acts have been socially learned,
transferred, and sanctioned by specific communities of practice. Is that the case? Spe-

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6 The acronym TWA in U.S. contexts had been most widely associated with TransWorld Airlines; since that
airline is now defunct, some of my African American female students and I have appropriated it. I acknowl-
edge two undergraduate students enrolled in a linguistics course that I taught in spring 2008, who were the
first to pursue my insights in investigating talking with an attitude. They explored where no woman or man
dared to explore and began using the acronym TWA after my introduction of the concept in the course.

cifically, what does TWA mean for other Black women? What are their experiences? I have asked myself, as Gates (1988) queries, will describing the phenomena under study change the practice? Although reticent in disclosing some community practices, I wish to represent aspects of social reality from insider perspectives.

6.   Situating the research: a phenomenological study of TWA

As a result of my ruminations over the topic of LP in the AASC and as a result of teaching both graduate and undergraduate students on Black speech acts, my goal became to make explicit those tacit aspects of the theory of politeness already operative within the AASC and to generate aspects of a LP system, again, as a community-based, discourse level model that examines the multidimensional intersections of social factors, such as race, gender, class within specific contexts. Through classes that I taught with only Black women enrolled in them, the students and I mulled over LP intellectually and practically (Mills' 2003 intellectual meta-discourse and practical meta-discourse) based upon our membership in the AASC and upon lived experiences, ours and others. We became a cohort, a COP, engaged in analyses of LP at the discourse and meta-discourse levels (Mills 2003), since that seems to be one means of developing a socially real assessment of politeness. The words and thoughts of "everyday" Black women within communities of practice were central for our work due to those women's competences in assessing politeness. Mills (2003: 2) writes that participants in "specific communities of practice [are the ones] competent to judge whether a language item or phrase is polite for them or not".

Collins (1990) established an epistemological stance privileging an African American worldview; within this epistemology, she counters a Eurocentric masculinist knowledge validation system, centering African American "ways of knowing". One of the fundamental tenets in her Afrocentric feminist epistemology (AFE) is the stipulation that researchers use concrete, personal knowledge in assessing knowledge claims. Personal, concrete, subjective experience is valued and credible. Collins claims that those persons who have lived through the experiences that they claim to be experts in are more credible than those who have only thought or read about the experiences. She explains:

> Even after substantial mastery of white masculinist epistemologies, many black women scholars invoke their own concrete experiences and those of other black women in selecting topics for investigation and methodologies used. For example, Elsa Barkley Brown subtitles her essay on black women's history, "how my mother taught me to be a historian in spite of my academic training".
>
> (Collins 1990: 209)

Rather than defining politeness at the level of the utterance, I asked the small cohort of Black women, a COP, the following, modified from Mills (2003: 1):

How can we develop a complex, pragmatic model of interaction which can account for the way that ["race" and] gender [as composite aspects of social identity] in their interactions with other variables like [...] class, age, sexual orientation, contextual elements, and so on, [inflect] the production and interpretation of linguistic politeness and impoliteness?

6.1. Procedures

During meetings with the COP, I presented Table 4 to them with speech acts possible for their explorations, as shown in the rubric, which lists some linguistic and nonlinguistic practices available within the AASC.

Table 4. Some linguistic and non-linguistic practices – AAWSC.

Linguistic practices	Nonlinguistic practices
Culturally toned diminutives	Talk to the hand
Bawdy language	Cut-eye
Simultaneous speech	Side-eye
Signifying	Suck teeth
TWA	"Attitude"
Talking back, going off, turning it out, bulletproof diva	Others?

Students were required to conduct research following Collins' AFE, especially interviewing Black women in their COP within the AASC. After having studied Brown and Levinson's model of politeness as well as having read Holmes' (1995) and Mills' (2003) texts, the students were to gather participants' (a.k.a. co-researchers') assessments of politeness in relation to TWA. I also collected data using the same theoretical and methodological framing established for the classes: qualitative research, particularly phenomenology (see Creswell 2007) and AFE: analyses at the discourse and meta-discourse levels and the inclusion of voices of Black women within their COP. Focus group interviews became the preferred method of collecting data due to convenience and the potential for a "synergistic group effect"[7] (Berg 2004: 124), yet individual interviews were also conducted formally and informally. The data reflect interviews with fifteen African American women, ranging in age from 20–74, particularly their responses to three, key interview questions: (1) What does TWA mean? (2) Who TWA?

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[7] Berg defines a "synergistic group effect" as a synergy produced within a group of interactants, whereby group members feed off of or build on each other's comments.

(3) Is TWA polite behavior? This study represents a preliminary investigation into the lived experiences of some members of the AAWSC on the topic.

Following a phenomenological approach (Creswell 2007; see Orbe, Drummond, and Camara 2002 for a discussion on phenomenology and AFE intersections), I read through the interview data, recording co-researchers' significant statements, as shown below; these are their specific words.

What does TWA mean to you?

- •: Having a chip on your shoulder.
- •: Non-verbal expressions
  - – flipping of the head;
  - – flippant.
- •: Oh, it's like they use a certain tone in their words.
  It's not so much the words but it's the tone and the structure of the words to get the point across ... you know what I mean?
  It's not just the ghetto fabulous thing with finger popping.
- •: Confidence; I see it as a positive. Some people say, "Get rid of the 'tude". When I first think of attitude, I think of it as positive.
- •: Confidence, edge; in the workplace, women and men have to have edge.
  It's related to age too. When younger ones have attitude, it's negative; older ones see attitude as confidence. Models on a runway come out with attitude.
  Fashion director says, "Give me some attitude".
- •: Inflection in voice; sass, talking back but it's not disrespectful.
- •: Hand gestures, rolling eyes, tone of voice
- •: Speaking in a level that is not calm; have aggression or negativity behind your words. It's not yelling; you don't have to yell to talk with an attitude. It's which words are used to accent. It's sassy, fiery, alive; belittling a person. You might be mad so you talk with a 'tude.
- •: Talking disrespectfully. Tones are understood in a disrespectful way. It has a number of different meanings based on context.
- •: Exude confidence. It's confidence, self-esteem, command of self, command of language, being empowered. You also move in a certain way.
- •: I think on the outside looking in for people who are not black women they may think that its attitude but among black women we just see it as a way of communicating; all in all I don't think it is really an attitude it is just how we express ourselves.
- •: Has a number of different meanings based on context.

Additional information

- •: When you talk with an attitude, you have to know what you are talking about.

- •: Sometimes it can be defensive:
    - *Don't go dere.*
    - *I know you didn't go there.*
    - *Whatever.*
    - *Who died and made you king/queen.*
    - *Flipping the finger.*
- •: A co-researcher gave an example of attitude:
    During an alumni association mtg, one Black male wanted to insert his input yet was not recognized by one Black female presiding over the mtg. Co-researcher stood up for the Black male and invoked the legitimacy of his turn. During the interview, she condensed her position, "Carolyn Fromkin ain't nothing". [We all laughed due to her assertiveness, confidence, deciphering of the bottom-line in the situation.]
- •: Class has some factor in the way a person talks. Upper class Black women in the work setting try to fit in [with White males]. Lower class Black females may not have outside forces influencing her to talk like White males. They use more TWA. [...] My mother always told me to speak up. No one's walking over you. Stand up for yourself. Sometimes you have to be able to defend yourself.
- •: I guess we have always TWA. It's also walking with an attitude, being with an attitude. It's not unique to language.

Who talks w/ an attitude?

- •: Associated with teens and betweens.
- •: Associated with older and younger.
- •: Primarily women (.) Black women (.) but it can be all women.
- •: [Black] women more than men.
- •: Black women and men, 50–50. It's how the person was raised. Men raised in the hood; it's all they know.
- •: I know that I might TWA to someone. I try to be nice but I might use another tone, especially if I don't know you, if I'm not interested in a connection with a person. If I need to defend myself, if I feel uncomfortable, if a person tries to run over me, I ain't taking no stuff. [...] Language is used as a weapon. [...] I don't think that White women TWA. There are a select few. Black women are more aggressive, more willing to express how they really feel [TWA]. White women don't go that route; they avoid confrontation. Black women are not afraid to confront. [Gives personal example at work.] TWA is part of the Black woman.
- •: People say it to me all the time [that she TWAs].
- •: Black females usually.
- •: People who are self-assured, confident in status, in themselves, in their community, their work, their roles. Teachers may [TWA]; ministers may; leaders do it; males in their own way; females in their own way. It manifests in doing masculinity through conversation, through language, trying to be dominant, aggressive.

•: I use an attitude when I am talking to my boyfriend. Uhmm when we have arguments I feel like I have to have an attitude with him to get my point across majority of the time; sometimes with strangers I try to be polite because they're strangers but if they offend me then that's when the attitude comes out and they may see it as negative but that's just the best way I can express myself when I am trying to defend myself.

•: Black females from the 'hood.

•: All of us (can) do it sometimes; some out of habit; some based on background.

•: Not every Black female; more urban background; associated with class and income.

•: In urban settings, people TWA more; more prominent in lower class; environment plays a big role.

TWA = polite or impolite or neither?

•: Impolite.

•: Might be polite; prone to be more polite to young people.

•: We have to respect each other's conversations before speaking. It's the way you say something, not what you say.

•: You have to use contextual cues to know if it's positive or negative.

•: Not necessarily negative [impolite], not in all cases. It depends on who you are around. It's not a negative way of communicating within one's own social group. Someone who doesn't know me may think it's negative.

•: It's assumed to be negative but it's not always.

•: If we're [Black women] talking amongst ourselves then I don't see it as impolite because no one gets offended because that's how we are used to it that's the norm for us but outside of our circle if I was to use that attitude somewhere else it would definitely be viewed negative [...] if I seen black women acting that way no I would not view it as negative because I'm used to it, it's the norm for me [...] amongst themselves ((xxx)) but if I see them using that same attitude with strangers for no reason, then, I'll be like yea that's a little excessive. [...] you just have to know when and when not to use the attitude and how far.

•: I think its inappropriate like if I was at work in a professional atmosphere where the majority of my colleagues were not Black women because they would not understand. They would be like well how did she get this job; she shouldn't be working at a job like that with that type of attitude or [...] in the classroom but sometimes its necessary when you have to get with somebody a student who may not respect where you come from or how you view things like if you're having a class discussion then I might then I might have to get an attitude [...] but for the most part in settings I don't use it unless I am with friends and family.

•: Sometimes [polite] but we [Black women] are highly publicized of having an attitude; it's just an over-generalized stereotype.

•: In some ways, it's negative [impolite].

•:   Not all cases are impolite; use contextual cues to decipher.

•:   marks a co-researcher's words
(.)   short pause
[ ]   transcriber's notes
((xxx))   unintelligible

6.2. Findings

The co-researchers, generally, were very astute in their delineations of TWA, having never studied TWA overtly or having studied sociolinguistics, excluding one co-researcher. They spoke up readily, assuredly. This was a topic that they could speak about firsthand due to their experiences. Ebonically speaking, "They nevah [never] stuttered." From the co-researchers' words, I extracted core themes for each question surveyed, represented in Table 4.

Co-researchers, based on the data, construct TWA as consisting of both linguistic and non-linguistic components. As one co-researcher shared, " I guess we have always talked with an attitude. It's not unique to language. It's walking with an attitude, being with an attitude [...] moving in a certain way as you talk". Linguistically, these women categorize TWA as expressive language, a way of communicating: talking back/sassy, talking disrespectfully, speaking (grammatically) well/articulating ideas well, using witty or flippant comments; talk that exudes confidence. Non-linguistically, co-researchers construct TWA as acts of confidence, edge (verve, distinctness, sharpness; on the forefront; possibly sass) displayed in gestures, walk, tone of voice; other kinesic acts include cut-eye, suck-teeth, neck-rolling, finger popping, or having a chip on the shoulder. "It's also how you sit and the cock of the head", replied one respondent. "Have you heard of the side-eye? It's the side-eye,[8] too", chimed another.

Co-researchers characterize both linguistic and non-linguistic TWA as having multiple meanings: positive, neutral, or negative, depending on the communicative situations. As a positive social act, it may emerge as a desired display of strength, whether or not in the form of flippancy, witticism, sassiness, articulateness, or confidence. Some women shared that they intentionally engage in TWA moves as verbal and non-verbal play, e.g., talking back/flippantly or popping their fingers, as a function of verbal sparring or having fun within a network of intimates or insiders, female and/or male. *Talking back*, one manifestation of TWA within certain African American COP, may function to signal assertiveness, a willingness to take a stand when necessary. hooks (1989) indexed this practice in her book, Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black. The

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[8] The *side-eye* refers to a side glimpse of other people or things. Rather than executing a complete or partial turn of the head in order to view people/objects, individuals survey peripheral items through a side or peripheral glance.

Table 4. Core themes for TWA.

What does TWA mean to you?		
Linguistic signification		
Positive	Neutral	Negative
Witty comments	Way of communicating	Disrespectful talk
Flippant	How we express ourselves	Flippant
Sassy talk, talking back		Sassy talk, talking back
Confidence		Just an over-generalized
Command of language: ar-		stereotype
ticulate or speak language		Negative words
well, grammatically		Bawdy language
Expressive language		

Non-linguistic signification ("It's not unique to language.")		
Positive	Neutral	Negative
Confidence in walk, gestures	Finger-popping	Chip on shoulder
(extra) Edge	Neck-rolling	Finger-popping
Tone, inflection	Rolling eyes	Neck-rolling
Command of self	Cut-eye	Tone (not calm;
	Manner of sitting	aggressive)
	Suck-teeth	Flipping the finger
	Position of head	
	Side-eye	

Who talks w/ an attitude?
Primarily Black females
Older, younger (teens & betweens)
Others possibly
Black men; street boys (sexuality, dominance = indexed possibly for ♂)
Self-assured people
Whites that associate with Blacks, especially White females married to Black males

TWA = polite or impolite or neither?
Polite and impolite (age of participants, function of speech act, and context help to deter-
mine)
You have to use contextual cues to know if it's positive or negative
Outsiders may consider TWA impolite

practice has existed in AASC for centuries; the phrase alone holds a specific semantic resonance for community members. hooks situates the practice within her experience: growing up in a southern Black community with adults (including her parents, grand-parents, and great grandparents) that harbored "old school" thoughts and actions, where children are to be seen and not heard. Particularly, children are forbidden to *talk back* or *back talk*. hooks defines the act as "speaking as an equal to an authority figure [...], dar-

ing to disagree and sometimes it just meant having an opinion" (hooks 1989: 5). Despite understanding the social rules dictating compliant behavior, hooks yielded to the desire to speak, even questioning adult authority, yet suffering punishments from her parents as a result. Out of those experiences of *talking back*, hooks, nonetheless, gained courage and strength. For hooks, then, *talking back* during her growth years was a disrespectful act, functioning, partially, as a means of displaying resistance to "old school" norms.

In contradistinction to hooks' experience, one co-researcher reported that *talking back* is not disrespectful talk. Here, she privileges a variant (insider) meaning that aligns with Jones and Varner (2002), two Black women scholars, in their analysis of Pearl Cleage's plays. For Jones and Varner, *talking back* is synonymous to *sass*. They explain:

> Sass is a way of having voice when other means are not available. Because women have generally been socialized against defending themselves physically, verbal defense mechanisms become essential. Sass is "back talking", "smart mouthing", "womanish" commentary designed to attack an other, protect the self and/or demonstrate verbal agility. [...] Sass also has the capacity to foster bonding between women as sass can reveal or deepen intimacy. The closest of friends can say things to each other that would be off limits for others to express. In this way, sass does not protect one communicator from another, but instead it joins the communicators in a shared understanding.
>
> Jones and Varner (2002: 147–148)

Other Black women in the present study co-referenced TWA as *talking back* or *sass*, also. For them, as for Jones and Varner, this insider referentiality may index a positive meaning and function. In fact, two co-researchers shared that they bond through playful banter, including *back talk*, regularly as a part of their friendship. As one woman capsulized it, "TWA is not always negative. We have to sit in the driver's seat sometimes". That is, speakers have options in constructions of TWA.

There may have been historical changes in the construction and execution of the behavior due to evolving social and cultural norms/expectations and due to age-grading. hooks' experience (above) may capture possible erosion of "old school" norms to a degree since, in some families today within the AASC, children are given space to voice their opinions without adults considering it *back talk*. This area, nonetheless, is nebulous. Children, in many contexts within this speech community, still are not expected to act too "grown", daring to speak as the authority or dispute an adult. Some of the co-researchers "pulled my coat" on age-grading, noting, for example, "When younger ones have attitude, it's negative; older ones see attitude as confidence". Focus group members concurred. Thus, when this same co-researcher shared the example "The fashion director says, 'Give me some attitude'", she was indexing confidence. This position on age-grading resonates with many of the responses given, especially when considering age, yet not fully. Those between the ages of 40 and 65 (i.e. middle-age), overwhelm-

ingly, reported that TWA means confidence. Thus, one of these women stated that the expression *Get rid of the 'tude* did not make sense because when she thinks of *attitude* she thinks of it as a positive, specifically as confidence. "Why would you want to get rid of something that's good", she queried. *Attitude* as non-verbal confidence is sometimes conveyed, according to another co-researcher, in the statement, "She was wearing that dress". With this usage, speakers connote exuding of confidence even in the manner of wearing a dress. Three middle-aged respondents, though, couched TWA as a negative verbal and non-verbal act, expressed as *Don't go there* or *I know you didn't go there* or *whatEVer*; having a chip on your shoulder; flipping the finger; neck-rolling. Younger co-researchers, mostly college-age, typically, also reported that TWA may possibly emerge as disrespectful talk, aggressive tones, neck-rolling. They tended to classify *attitude* and TWA as negative acts linguistically and non-linguistically, yet this younger group also conveyed that other possible meanings exist. In the words of one co-researcher, "The word [attitude] has a lot of meanings".

A few co-researchers structured TWA neutrally. One group member stated, unequivocally, "It's a neutral word. The content determines if it is positive or negative". She appears to invest capital into the content market, i.e., meaning derives from words. An elderly respondent, though, expressed, "It's the way you say something, not what you say". A sociolinguistic approach would support the view that social context (including participants' construction of the situation and other social factors) influences language production. Thus, form alone is not sufficient in assessing the positive or negative weight of utterances. With the expression *Shut up!*, for example, the content or form does not adequately or accurately convey the meaning yet a combination of social contextual factors (audience, speaker intonation, race, etc.) aid in deconstructing its meaning. Within some AAWSC, *Shut up!* has served as a phatic expression used to convey disbelief in an interlocutor's communication. Although typically framed negatively within broader U.S. contexts, within some AAWSC or COP, the expression has functioned to convey encouragement. Another aspect of the neutrality was conveyed by another co-researcher's claim: "I think on the outside looking in, for people who are not black women, they may think that it's attitude but, among black women, we just see it as a way of communicating. All in all, I don't think it is really an attitude; it is just how we express ourselves".

For the non-linguistic manifestations of TWA, co-researchers clearly communicated its variant nature. Not only do community members identify TWA as moves or displays to be desired yet they may also function neutrally or function to convey a negative disposition on the part of the speaker, depending on context. As Pough (2004) mentions (see Section 4) about possible presentations of Black women's speech acts, some co-researchers, too, expressed, in this case with regard to non-linguistic displays of TWA,

that the "Sapphire"[9]-type characterizations are stereotypical (e.g. "ghetto fabulous"), thus negative portrayals of TWA.

When asked who talks with an attitude, some co-researchers indexed themselves ("I know that I might TWA to someone"), yet most identified Black women generally ("older and younger; teens and betweens"). Other respondents broadened the possible TWA users, particularly including Black males ("Men raised in the 'hood. It's all they know"). Two co-researchers reported that European American women may TWA under certain conditions: a result of being married to Black men or due to their associations with African Americans. Under the latter conditions, European American males may even TWA. For one co-researcher, who defined *attitude* as confidence, people who TWA are those that are "self-assured when in various situations. [...]Teachers may [TWA]; ministers may; leaders do it; males in their own way; females in their own way. They have something to say – not just empty yelling and screaming and others want to listen. They have wisdom and knowledge to share. [...] It's not primarily one gender or another". Whether or not this co-researcher constructed TWA along racialized lines is not clear. When I asked her for examples, she mentioned only African American women, including herself: "Nikki Giovanni; I do it all the time". As a whole, co-researchers indexed this act as a linguistic and non-linguistic practice performed primarily by Black women. Social class may impact the frequency of the practice with some women claiming higher occurrences in urban settings, especially among lower-class individuals.

Whether or not TWA was construed as a positive or negative act is not directly indexical of its politeness/impoliteness. The form, as mentioned above, does not convey the politeness/impoliteness function. Co-researchers communicated clearly that context helps in determining a polite or impolite act, sharing, for example, "You have to use contextual cues to know if it's positive or negative". Thus, *talking back*, bawdy language, flippancy may fulfill a polite or impolite function. Finger popping or eye rolling could be deemed appropriate or inappropriate behavior based on social context and participants' constructions of the context. Clearly, TWA does not fit into Brown and Levinson's model of politeness since TWA functions as both politeness and impoliteness or neither. In writing up their findings for the course research, two students summed up their TWA situatedness as follows, which echoes co-researchers' positions for the present study:

> As Black women conducting this research we hold our own ideas on talkin'
> with an attitude.[10] We see TWA as being synonymous with the linguistic prac-
> tices of sass, cut-eye and suck-teeth, and bawdy language. We make this claim

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[9] Within AAWSC, Sapphire represents one stereotype, the belligerent, aggressive, bellicose Black woman. See Collins (1990) for one discussion.

[10] The research conducted on TWA was originated from Dr. Troutman's LIN 491 class, spring of 2008. The idea of TWA initiated from Dr. Troutman's discussion of the speech acts during her linguistics course. Due to her encouragement, my co-researcher in the course and I focused this research project on TWA.

because we view sass, cut-eye and suck-teeth, and bawdy language as mainly being practiced by Black women when it comes to the following: [...] making a point/voicing our opinion, putting [people] in their place, showing disdain, expressing sisterhood/solidarity, letting someone know that "you cannot get under my skin", etc. All of these can be expressed under the umbrella of TWA. This how we view TWA, and we cannot speak for other black women without placing them at the center of our research.

–   Outsiders" those who are not within the African-American/ Black community do not fully understand TWA, so they view it as something negative.
    – Ghetto
    – Uneducated
    – Embarrassing
    – Stereotyped
    – Hostile
–   Some Black women think TWA should be more accepted in mainstream
    – It is an expression of Black women
    – Voicing our opinions
    – The norm
    – A form of communication

7.   Conclusions

Within many contexts in the U.S., *attitude* is a commonly indexed behavior and practice across cultural, economic, and linguistic lines. Beyond its commonly glossed denotation indicating an individual's behavior, psychological state, or feeling, *attitude* may encapsulate even more. For many African Americans that self-identify as members of the AASC, *attitude* holds another layer of meaning, including to the extent that *attitude* becomes manifested overtly, through language and kinesics, by a speaker's ability to ***talk*** *with an attitude,* ***walk*** *with an attitude,* ***act*** *with an attitude,* ***be*** *with an attitude.* In many instances within the AASC, then, *attitude* actions are marked distinctly and can be *read* by other group members. These are actions that are learned socio-culturally in socially real contexts, as in Morgan's case (Section 4). Outsiders may interpret TWA acts as hostile, inappropriate, arrogant, unnecessary, as well as some insiders, yet AAWSC insiders participating in the present research also situate TWA within the realm of polite, appropriate, necessary behavior, serving specific functions within the repertoire of speech practices that they draw upon; it fulfills various needs contextually. Some co-researchers relished in having access to *attitude* acts, especially since those acts may function as displays of confidence, fighting back (linguistically and non-linguistically), or assertiveness.

    Various practices performed by Black women (See Table 4) are invariably viewed as stereotypically impolite to outsiders; for example, there tend **not** to be complications of *sassiness* or *bawdy language.* Signifying on a friend, talking simultaneously beyond the level of a sentence, talking back, talking with an attitude within socially appropriate

contexts constitute both linguistically polite and linguistically impolite behavior. Critical in determinations of politeness or impoliteness, for the present work, were assessments by those individuals engaged in the practices.

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Address correspondence to:
Denise Troutman
Departments of Writing, Rhetoric and American Cultures and Linguistics
Michigan State University
282 Bessey Hall
East Lansing, MI 48824-1033
United States
troutma1@msu.edu