

Perspectives: A View of the ‘N-Word’ from Sociolinguistics

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[Published at *Diverse Issues in Higher Education – Online*, July 13, 2006]

Recently, “Nick” Minucci, a rotund, 19-year-old White youth, took an aluminum baseball bat and fractured the skull of a 22-year-old Black man. This was after Nick issued a greeting to the Black youth that contained the word *nigger*. Or was it *nigga*? A key issue is whether Nick’s use of an N-word implies that what occurred was a hate crime.

I would like to report that language study is simple — it is sometimes, but not always. And some words have amazingly complex histories and patterns of use. This said, I’ll enter some basic points about the N-word, which I’ll henceforth use in its full form. Explanation requires exemplification. Those with delicate sensibilities should not read further.

First, there are indeed two N-words, with separate though closely related histories: *nigger* and *nigga*. This is not unusual with languages around the world. Consider *glamour* and *grammar*, which both come from the same word. *Nigger* and *nigga*, however, both have more than one pronunciation, and, in some cases, their pronunciations converge. The first can sound just like the second, especially in the South. The first one nowadays (the historical period and communities one speaks of are always important) is primarily a term of abuse leveled at those of African descent. It carries great psychological baggage, and its use can cause serious bodily harm. *Nigga*, spelled thus, to distinguish it, is highly versatile in terms of use, ranging from invective to term of endearment. “My nigga,” for many African-Americans, refers to a boyfriend or girlfriend or someone dear in other ways.

In many African-American neighborhoods, *nigga* is simply the most common term used to refer to any male, of any race or ethnicity. Increasingly, the term has been applied to any person, male or female. “Where y’all niggas goin?” is said with no self-consciousness or animosity to a group of women, for the routine purpose of obtaining information. The point: *Nigga* is evaluatively neutral in terms of its inherent meaning; it may express positive, neutral or negative attitudes. It’s just like the word *Republican*, which can range from an insult all the way to a term of praise.

Neutral evaluation, in this sense, also characterizes a series of controversial words, among them *muthafucka*, *bitch* and *ho*. I say this based on empirical observation of speech behavior. The feelings, wishes and opinions of individuals are NOT what determine speech use. Speech use in communities is out of the hands of social commentators, moral guardians and others. Some uses of language and of specific words develop in certain ways whether we like it or not. Moreover, we sometimes refuse to recognize the realities of language use around us, and that our use of language sometimes goes against what we advocate. Observe what was said by a church lady who routinely condemned the use of *nigga*: “Why niggas got to always be usin’ *nigga* so much?”

Educators from across the United States have reported that young people (not all of them), especially males, of all ethnicities and races use the term to refer to others — of all ethnicities and races. Young African-American students, for example, have been reported to refer to their White high school teacher (behind his back) as “that Irish nigga.”

This brings up the second point: *Nigga* has been generalized. It has gone from being race/ethnicity specific to being race/ethnicity neutral. Generalization, though, is not always complete. For example, in some parts of the English-speaking world, *Black* has been generalized to refer to anyone non-White. If completely generalized, it would refer to Whites, too.

To make a long story short, did Mr. Manucci commit a bias crime, based on his use of some N-word? Sociolinguistic analysis is required to answer such a difficult question. As an expert witness in other legal cases involving the N-word (both of them), I have had to seek answers to a number of questions. Among them: What is the language use in the peer group of the accused, or what can be inferred based on the neighborhood or race/ethnicity of the peer group? What was the context of the use of the word? What actions and in what sequence co-occurred with the use of what kind of language? What is the racial/ethnic identity of those involved? What is their age? What is the personal history of the accused? It was reported that Manucci had been charged previously with two bias crimes.

Most important to remember is that language changes continuously, as does culture in general. There are many microcultures within general American and even African-American culture. Willy-nilly, today's language use typically ignores past social conditions. Finally, in thinking about controversial words, we should remember that before the Civil Rights Movement, the worst thing that you could call an African-American was *Black*.

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